

Distant Dreams
Understanding the
aspirations of
Afghan returnees



Seefar produced this report for the Mixed Migration Centre Asia.

The Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) was established in February 2018. Following a change of name of existing entities in different regions, the MMC comprises MMC West Africa, MMC East Africa and Yemen, MMC Middle East, MMC North Africa, MMC Asia and soon MMC Europe. The coordination centre is MMC Geneva.

The MMC is a leading source of independent and high-quality data, information, research and analysis on mixed migration. Through the provision of credible evidence and expertise on mixed migration, the MMC supports agencies, policymakers and practitioners: to make well-informed decisions; to make a positive impact on global and regional migration policies; to contribute to protection and assistance responses for people on the move; and to stimulate forward thinking in the sector responding to mixed migration. The MMC's overarching focus is on human rights, protection and recommendations for assistance. The Mixed Migration Centre Asia provides quality mixed migration-related information analysis and information to enhance understanding and for policy, programming and advocacy from a regional perspective. For more information visit mixedmigration.org.

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Seefar is an international social enterprise with a mission to help vulnerable people build a better future. We specialise in migration, displacement and social inclusion and work across Asia, Africa and Europe. Our expertise is in strategic communications, research, counselling, consulting and monitoring and evaluation. Our research approach is fundamentally people-centred and impact-oriented. It focuses on understanding the micro-level perspectives of hard-to-reach groups and other influencers in key international migration, justice and security issues. For more information visit www.seefar.org.

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Seefar, March 2017

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Federal Foreign Office

Executive Summary

Millions of refugees and migrants have returned to Afghanistan since 2012. Most come from neighbouring countries, driven out by fears of deportation and uncertain legal status in the case of Pakistan and economic difficulty and integration concerns in the case of Iran. In the European Union (EU), asylum recognition rates for Afghans are falling and voluntary, quasi-voluntary, and forced returns are on the rise. In Turkey and the Western Balkans, expanded immigration enforcement and harsh conditions drive movements both onwards to the EU and back home.

Afghans return to a context characterised by conflict, violence, drought and economic hardship. While some initial reintegration experiences may be positive – particularly reunions with family members, there is ample evidence of widespread economic, social and psychosocial needs. National and international responses often lack resources and insight to adequately address these concerns. Some do not target returnees and others only target certain categories of returnees.

In October 2018, the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) Asia commissioned Seefar to address gaps in the evidence base on return and reintegration in Afghanistan. The study covered five research areas (Figure 1) and specifically aimed to:

- Understand the varied intentions and aspirations of returned Afghan refugees and migrants;
- Determine how challenges experienced during the migration, return and reintegration processes influence future plans (including interest in re-migration);
- Assess how humanitarian and development actors can better respond to support the needs of returnees and those embarking on re-migration journeys.

Seefar conducted a desk review followed by 56 in-person qualitative interviews with returnees in Kabul and Nangarhar in October and November 2018 to achieve these objectives.

Research areas



Figure 1: Research Areas

Key Findings

- **Reintegration is a process defined by poor psychosocial well-being.** Returnees share many humanitarian and development needs with other Afghans but approach these challenges in a fundamentally different manner. Traumatic experiences during migration and return can lead to depression, anxiety, sadness, isolation and even suicidal ideation in Afghanistan. These psychosocial challenges leave many returnees highly vulnerable and less self-sufficient than many other Afghans. Female returnees appeared particularly affected.
- **Perceived progress towards the realisation of future goals was highly dependent on psychosocial well-being.** Most returnees had the impression they were making no progress. While returnees confront similar challenges, those who looked at ‘intractable’ barriers with a sense of individual agency were better equipped to take action in the pursuit of personal goals.
- **Re-migration was not the preferred long-term plan for most returnees but was a fall-back for many.** Returnees held diverse and multiple future plans. They were willing to change plans in response to circumstances. Interest in re-migration was linked to poor psychosocial conditions after return, involuntary return and country from which he or she returned.
- **Family support helped returnees to feel better over time and its absence amplified reintegration challenges.** Returnees pointed to family as key facilitators of recovery and improved relationships with their communities of return. This suggests that qualitative measures of a returnee’s relationship to family and community may be better at identifying vulnerability and humanitarian needs than than economic indicators.
- **Major information gaps exist throughout reintegration experiences.** Some returnees based their return decision on flawed or incomplete information and later regretted doing so. Most returnees received conflicting information on available assistance during and after return. Many were unable to access aid. Returnees often felt that ‘no one helped’ them – even if they had actually received assistance.
- **Existing research on return and reintegration is skewed towards return.** The diversity of reintegration experiences and long-term aspirations has not been adequately explored; neither has the link between initial migration motivators and future plans (such as re-migration). Returnee voices, and especially those of women and girls, are largely absent.
- **Categorical approaches to return assistance do not align with returnee experiences.** Most humanitarian and development programmes categorise returnees with binary labels (i.e. “voluntary”, “assisted”, “documented”). However, approaches using a categorical approach can mismatch resources with needs. This suggests that funding and assistance should follow a need-based approach.

Recommendations

The research holds important implications for actors involved in the programmatic response. Specifically, the study recommends that humanitarian and development actors involved in the returnee response:

- **Prioritise psychosocial assistance in reintegration programming.** Reorienting reintegration around psychosocial interventions may be more cost-effective and impactful. This approach aims to change how returnees think about their environment by restoring a sense of agency. Support groups for female returnees may be particularly valuable.
- **Complement psychosocial assistance with access to information and livelihoods.** Key areas include access to credit or microfinance, information about legal migration options, access to land, improved housing and participation in job matching schemes that take advantage of existing returnee skill sets. Assistance to support entrepreneurship generally needs to be larger in value.
- **Build ‘reintegration pathways’ by linking short- and long-term aid programmes.** Better programmatic coordination and more consistent messaging to returnees will improve access to assistance.
- **Treat information provision as a vital form of assistance for returnees.** Trusted information on rights, legal status, available assistance and protection pathways is currently a major gap. Providing returnees with such information will increase knowledge, help returnees achieve their goals and protect those planning to re-migrate. Such ‘communications to protect’ could be implemented before, during, and after return.
- **Rethink categorical approaches to reintegration aid.** Donors funding reintegration programmes in Afghanistan should follow a vulnerability-based approach rather than exclusively targeting ‘documented’ (i.e. returnees with refugee status and accompanying documents) or ‘voluntary’ returnees. The humanitarian and development community should consider replacing returnee ‘categories’ with new organising principles to improve the response, which could include:
 - *Labels should not be a proxy for experience and corresponding reintegration needs;*
 - *Voluntariness should be viewed from the returnee perspective rather than the hosting state;*
 - *‘Assistance’ should be measured with a scale rather than a binary category.*
- **Conduct further research to fill operational gaps and better support returnee reintegration.** Reintegration continues to be an understudied area. Longitudinal studies and large-sample quantitative research would help fill existing knowledge gaps.

The report is divided into five sections. The background section introduces return dynamics in Afghanistan, highlights data gaps and describes the research approach. Next, the study discusses its results and key findings, which are divided into four sections: The first section examines factors that precede reintegration but hold substantial sway over reintegration outcomes. The second section describes the current reintegration experience and returnee needs. The third section discusses available systems to support returnee reintegration and describes assistance that returnees want. The fourth section explores how returnees think about their future goals and how reintegration actors can support them. The report ends by elaborating brief conclusions and recommendations for humanitarian and development actors.

Contents

1	Executive Summary	1
2	Definitions and Acronyms	7
	Background	10
3	Amplifying Returnee Voices	10
3.1	Addressing data gaps requires new research	12
3.2	Research approach.....	13
3.3	Returnee Profiles	15
	Findings	17
4	Experiences Before Return Influence Reintegration	17
4.1	Original migration drivers and the journey as precursors to return challenges	17
4.2	Delayed effects of trauma are widespread	20
4.3	The decision to return and mode of arrival	21
4.4	Returnee experiences challenge existing return categories.....	24
5	A Challenging Reintegration Experience	26
5.1	Psychosocial needs as a crosscutting challenge	27
5.2	Female returnees are particularly impacted by psychosocial challenges	28
5.3	Conflict, insecurity and violence drive protection concerns	29
5.4	Short-term economic stress hides long-term needs	31
5.5	Restricted access to services	32
5.6	Migration-related psychosocial needs differentiate returnees from other Afghans	34
6	Limited Reintegration Support Structures	36
6.1	Few returnees report receiving assistance	36
6.2	Overwhelming economic challenges lead many to feel unassisted	37
6.3	Family support is a critical reintegration facilitator	39
6.4	Community members as help or hindrance?	41
6.5	Returnees call for long-term assistance and better information	42
7	What Returnees Hope for their Futures	46
7.1	Re-migration is not the default aspiration	46
7.2	Most hoped to pursue good jobs and business ventures	47
7.3	Future plans linked to country from which respondents returned and voluntariness	50
7.4	Willingness to recalibrate plans and consider re-migration	53
7.5	Re-migration aspirations linked with where and when returnees experienced trauma	54
7.6	Reintegration programmes can address specific barriers to future plans	54
7.7	Despite facing the same circumstances, there were two perspectives on progress	56
8	Conclusion	59
9	Recommendations	61
10	Annex 1: Methodology	63
11	Annex 2: References	66

Definitions and Acronyms

In its publications and presentations, MMC adheres to the language used in the United Nations 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants. MMC therefore uses ‘refugees and migrants’ when referring to those in mixed migration flows, unless referring to a particular group of people with a defined status within these flows.

MMC works with the following understanding of mixed migration

Mixed migration refers to cross-border movements of people including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking and people seeking better lives and opportunities. People in mixed flows are motivated to move by a multiplicity of factors, have different legal statuses and a variety of vulnerabilities. Although entitled to protection under international human rights law, they are exposed to multiple rights violations along their journey. Those in mixed migration flows travel along similar routes, using similar means of travel – often travelling irregularly and wholly or partially assisted by migrant smugglers.

Who is a returnee

This report adopts a broad understanding of the term returnee. Any Afghan national who has lived abroad and repatriates to Afghanistan can be considered a returnee.¹ This definition encompasses returned Afghans including those who:

- Return voluntarily, under duress, or who are forced to return (i.e. deportees)
- Return with international assistance or without such assistance
- Lived abroad with documentation determining legal status and those who remained undocumented
- Those who had spent prolonged periods or were born abroad

While the definition of returnee is broad – and returnees span the breadth and diversity of Afghan society and diaspora – the study focused on returnees most likely to find themselves in a vulnerable position.² This includes those whose return has been coerced, have fewer ties to Afghanistan, are of lower socio-economic status and/or have spent longer periods away from Afghanistan or have never previously lived there. The report does not assume that all returnees did or should qualify for international protection while living abroad.

¹ The definition is therefore broader than the IOM requirement for returnees to have spent six months abroad before returning. Nearly all of the individuals interviewed for this research study had spent more than six months abroad but several could not recall their exact departure date.

² See Annex 1 for more information on the study’s sampling strategy.

Acronyms

AVR: Assisted Voluntary Return

AVRR: Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration

DoRR: Directorate of Refugees and Repatriation

DRC: Danish Refugee Council

ERW: Explosive remnants of war

EU: European Union

GBV: Gender-based violence

GoA: Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

IDP: Internally displaced person

IOM: International Organization for Migration

ISIS: Islamic State in Afghanistan

MMC: Mixed Migration Centre

MoRR: Ministry for Refugees and Repatriation

NFI: Non-food items assistance

NGO: Non-governmental Organisation

PoR: Proof of Registration

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



“My feelings have changed a lot since my return. While living abroad, there were many refugees living in fear of being deported or getting their cases rejected. They knew that if they got deported back to their country they wouldn’t have anywhere to live since their homes were destroyed during the war. It would cost a lot to rebuild their homes. If we were deported, what will I do for a living? What will be the future of my kids? We had the same fear as well, and we lost our hope for a better future.”

Male, Kabul, 28

Background

Amplifying Returnee Voices

Afghanistan has long been characterised by dynamic mixed migration flows. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that about 3 million Afghans are refugees or asylum-seekers. Most are hosted in neighbouring countries but many travel further abroad, often to European destinations.³ Afghanistan's mixed migration flows are driven by armed conflict, violence, poor economic conditions and other drivers.⁴

Though security and economic conditions remain difficult in Afghanistan, recent changes to the global political environment for Afghan migrants and refugees have led large numbers to return.⁵ Some countries have classified Afghanistan as a country of safe return, permitting the voluntary return or deportation of Afghans who were not found to qualify for international protection.⁶ Forced return, legal uncertainty, poor economic conditions and challenging integration experiences have influenced millions to return.

“Multi-directional forced and voluntary cross-border movements between Afghanistan and neighbouring countries blur the distinctions between refugees, IDPs and migrants, as people move back and forth across the borders, occupying different legal statuses at different times.”

Mixed Migration Review 2018, MMC⁷

Roughly 2.4 million Afghans have returned from abroad since 2016, including over 1.3 million from Pakistan, 1.1 million from Iran and thousands from non-neighbouring countries, though estimates vary.⁸

³ See UNHCR (2018) [Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2017](#); REACH and Mixed Migration Platform (2018) [Migration from Afghanistan to Europe \(2014-2017\): Drivers, Return and Reintegration](#); Mixed Migration Centre (2018) [Monthly Summary: Asia](#).

⁴ REACH and Mixed Migration Platform (2018) [Migration from Afghanistan to Europe \(2014-2017\): Drivers, Return and Reintegration](#); Seefar (2018) [Examining Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan: Why Psychosocial Interventions Matter](#).

⁵ UNAMA (2018) [Highest Recorded Civilian Deaths From Conflict At Mid-Year Point](#);

⁶ Tonassi, T. and Ziebarth, A. (2018) [Three Year Into The Refugee Displacement Crisis: Where Does Germany Stand?](#) The German Marshall Fund of the United States.

⁷ Mixed Migration Centre (2018) [Mixed Migration Review 2018](#).

⁸ Estimates on total return numbers vary by source and few aggregate different categories of returnees (for example, AVRR beneficiaries are normally not included in estimates). IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix estimated the total number of returnees at about 1.8 million in mid-2018. IOM DTM (2018) [Baseline Mobility Assessment Summary Results: April - June 2018](#); An independent study placed the total number at 2.4 million in early 2018. Kamminga, J. and Zaki, A. (2018) [Returning to Fragility: Exploring the link between conflict and returnees in Afghanistan](#), Oxfam; Official UNHCR and IOM returnee statistics current through mid-November add to about 2.4 million (sources cited Figure 2).

While the aggregate rate of return has declined since 2016, Afghans continue to return to their homeland in large numbers, especially those coming from Iran (Figure 2).⁹

Over 2.4 million Afghans have returned since 2016

Year	2016	2017	2018
Total returnees	1,071,260	623,527	738,264
Afghan refugee returnees**	372,577	58,817	15,232
Undocumented Afghan returnees*			
From Iran	443,527	462,361	691,637
From Pakistan	248,054	98,191	29,639
Assisted voluntary returns*	7,102	4,158	1,756

* Source: IOM

** Source: UNHCR

Figure 2: Statistics on Afghan returnees (2016-2018)¹⁰

Returnees arrive in a challenging context characterised by active armed conflict and insecurity, violence, drought, poverty, unemployment and widespread humanitarian needs. Many are part of an estimated 3.3 million people in Afghanistan who need support, including internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the urban poor.¹¹ Shrinking protection space for migrants and refugees suggests that returnees will become an increasingly important element in humanitarian and development plans.

Millions of Afghans have entered reintegration processes in recent years. However, underfunded budgets often constrain the ability of humanitarian organisations to adequately address returnee needs.¹² Longer-term reintegration programmes must negotiate structural factors that threaten their impact, such as shifting conflict dynamics and widespread needs among the host community.¹³ Large evidence gaps further complicate efforts to improve the returnee response.

At the policy level, the Displacement and Return Executive Committee (DiREC) aims to centralise decision-making on Afghan reintegration. The Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (2018 – 2019)

⁹ 2016 return flows were characterised by a spike in involuntary returns and the current return rate remains high.

¹⁰ Data aggregated from several official sources. UNHCR (2018) [Refugee returnees to Afghanistan in 2018 by province: Afghanistan](#); IOM (2018) [Return of Undocumented Afghans: Weekly Situation Report 11-17 Nov 2018](#); IOM (2018) [Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration](#); IOM (2017) [Return of Undocumented Afghans: Monthly Situation Report](#); IOM and UNHCR (2018) [Returns to Afghanistan in 2017](#); IOM (2017) [Return of Undocumented Afghans from Pakistan and Iran: 2016 Overview](#).

¹¹ 3.3 million is current as of December 2017. OCHA (2017) [2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Afghanistan](#).

¹² Financial Tracking System (2018) [Afghanistan 2018 \(Humanitarian response plan\)](#).

¹³ Samuel Hall and IOM (2017) [Setting standards for an integrated approach to reintegration: Summary Report](#), Commissioner by IOM and funded by DFID.; Koser, K. and Kuschminder, K. (2017) [Assisted voluntary return and reintegration of migrants: A comparative approach](#), in *A Long Way to Go: Irregular Migration Patterns, Processes, Drivers and Decision-making*.

between the Government of Afghanistan (GoA), Iran, Pakistan and UNHCR promotes “joint interventions aimed at facilitating voluntary return and sustainable reintegration”.¹⁴ Relevant GoA actors include the Office of the President, the Ministry for Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR), and province-level Directorates of Refugees and Repatriation (DoRR).

Addressing data gaps requires new research

The evidence base on Afghan returnee migration motivations, experiences abroad and the immediate experience of return is robust. However, there are gaps in the following areas:

- **The literature on reintegration and returnee aspirations is sparse.** Existing research has tended to be backward looking, focused on the experience of return and deportation with less attention given to what comes next.
- **Returnee voices, especially those of women, are rare, despite assertions around protection needs.**¹⁵ Some sources confuse basic needs with the long-term support required for reintegration. Few sources explore the return and reintegration experiences of female returnees. This leaves a major research gap: how do returnees articulate their own needs and what do returnees want?
- **Reintegration is often conceptualised as ‘meeting all needs’ rather than acclimating to the environment.**¹⁶ Many programmes equate reintegration with employment, access to services and physical protection. In an Afghan context marked with deep structural challenges such as poverty, insecurity and corruption, these needs are often unmet for both returnees and other Afghans.
- **Few longitudinal studies exist that link migration, reintegration and aspirations.** Among those that do exist, there is a lack of consensus. Some sources claim that nearly all returnees are interested in re-migration while others dispute this.
- **There are few quantitative empirical studies establishing trends in knowledge, attitudes and practices of returnees.** There is a need for research that draws on larger datasets and builds on existing literature.
- **Few sources examine how experiences of return and reintegration vary by gender, age and area of return.** Most relevant literature looks only at how experiences vary between deportees and ‘voluntary’ returnees (i.e. deportees may face unique challenges).

Reintegration cannot be understood in full without understanding the relationship between all previous phases of migration (including original migration motivations, experiences abroad and context of return) and future goals. This knowledge is essential to the design of reintegration programmes that empower returnees to take steps towards their long-term goals. But there is little comprehensive and nuanced research to understand these dynamics.

¹⁴ UNHCR (2018) [Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees \(2018 – 2019\)](#)

¹⁵ Dominguez, A. (2017) ‘[The hard journey back to Afghanistan](#)’, *Mixed Migration Centre*. See also a report on child returnees that notes “few girls who had returned from Europe were identified”. Save the Children and Samuel Hall (2018) [From Europe to Afghanistan: Experiences of Child Returnees](#).

¹⁶ For example, IOM “asserts that reintegration can be considered sustainable when returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities, and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re)migration drivers”. IOM (2017) [Towards an integrated approach to reintegration in the context of return](#).

Research approach

To address these gaps, MMC commissioned Seefar to conduct new research on return, reintegration experiences and long-term aspirations among Afghan returnees. The research focused on returnees' experiences and future goals with the aim of empowering their perspectives and voices to influence programmes and policies. The research had five research areas (Figure 3) and specifically aimed to:

- Understand the varied intentions and aspirations of returned Afghan refugees and migrants;
- Study how challenges experienced during the migration, return and reintegration processes influence future migration or local plans;
- Assess how the humanitarian and development community can respond to support the needs of returnees, in particular those who express a desire to re-migrate,

The research objectives were addressed through (1) a desk review and (2) qualitative interviews with returned refugees and migrants. See Annex 1 for a full description of the research methodology.

Desk review

A literature review ensured existing research on returned refugees and migrants informed the development of the primary data collection tool and the final report. A total of 115 sources were reviewed prior to primary data collection, of which 63 were high-quality and analysed in depth.

Qualitative interviews with returnees

Fifty-six in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted in person with returnees in Kabul and Nangarhar between October 27 and November 8. Respondents were identified using a purposive snowball sampling approach that relied on referrals from initial interview partners to identify others, as well as leveraging Seefar's in-country network. Targets were set to achieve diversity of respondent experience including the type (involuntary or voluntary) and recency of return (within the last 12 months or returning at an earlier time), destination abroad (Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and Europe), and sex.

These in-depth interviews focused primarily on reintegration experiences and future plans. They explored migration stories and motivations, life abroad and return experiences. Respondents also completed a visual activity exploring the factors that facilitate or inhibit progress towards their future goals (Figure 4).

Research areas



Figure 3: Research Areas

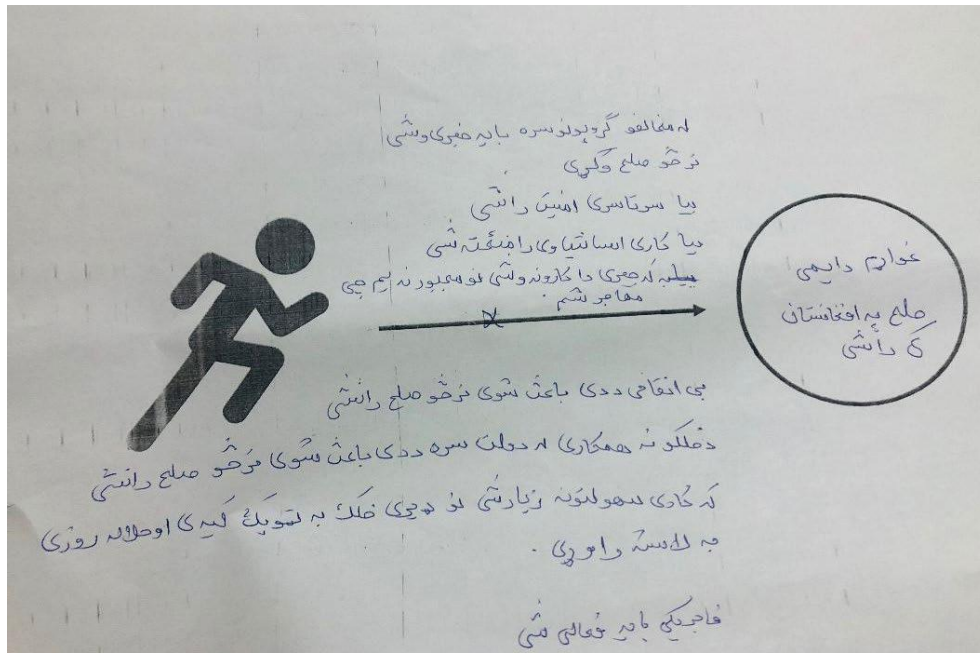
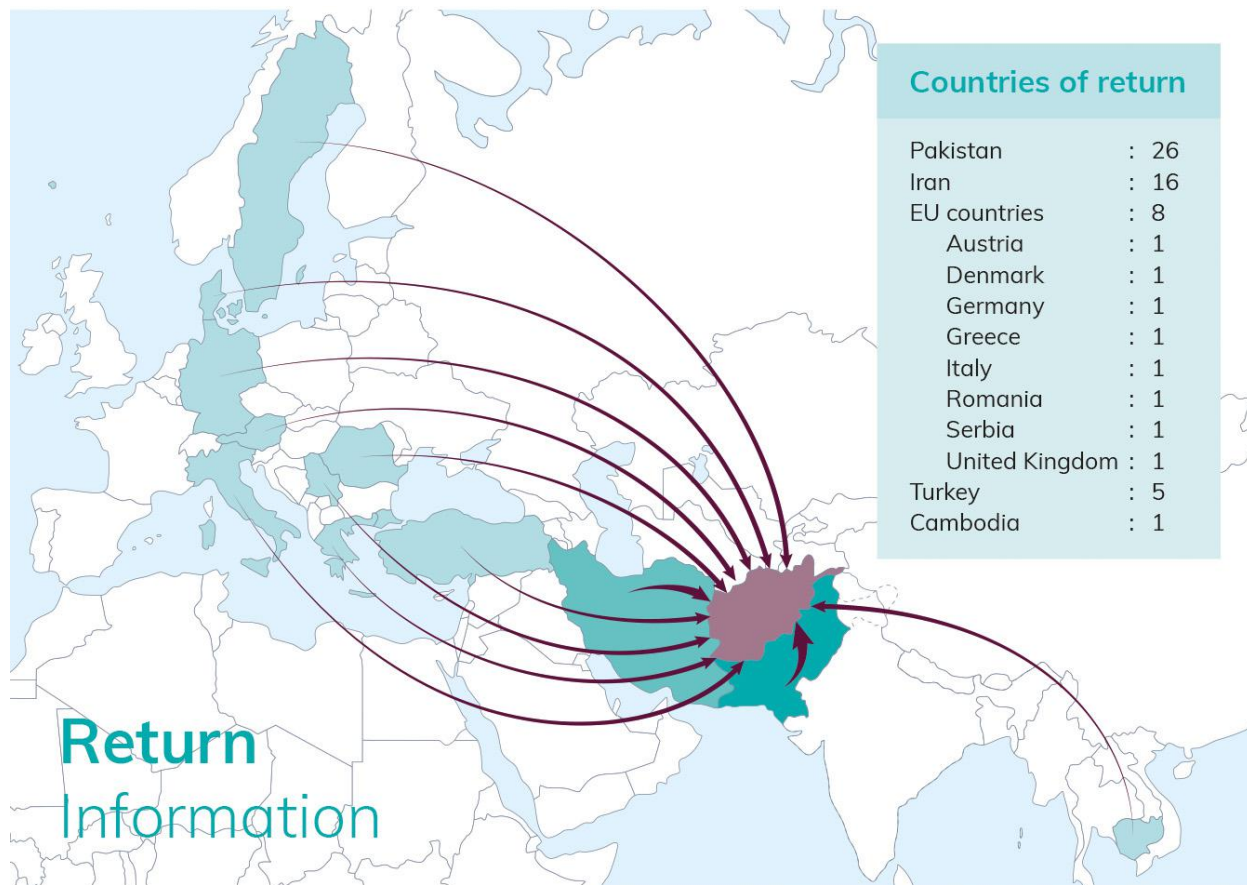


Figure 4: Response to interview activity on progress towards aspirations

Limitations

Findings are limited to returnees in Kabul and Nangahar and are not representative of all returnees in those provinces. Other provinces in Afghanistan that have high levels of returnees (particularly Herat and Nimruz) were not included in the research. The sampling approach was non-random and findings are not statistically significant or representative. Specific methodological limitations are footnoted where applicable.

Returnee Profiles



Dates of returns

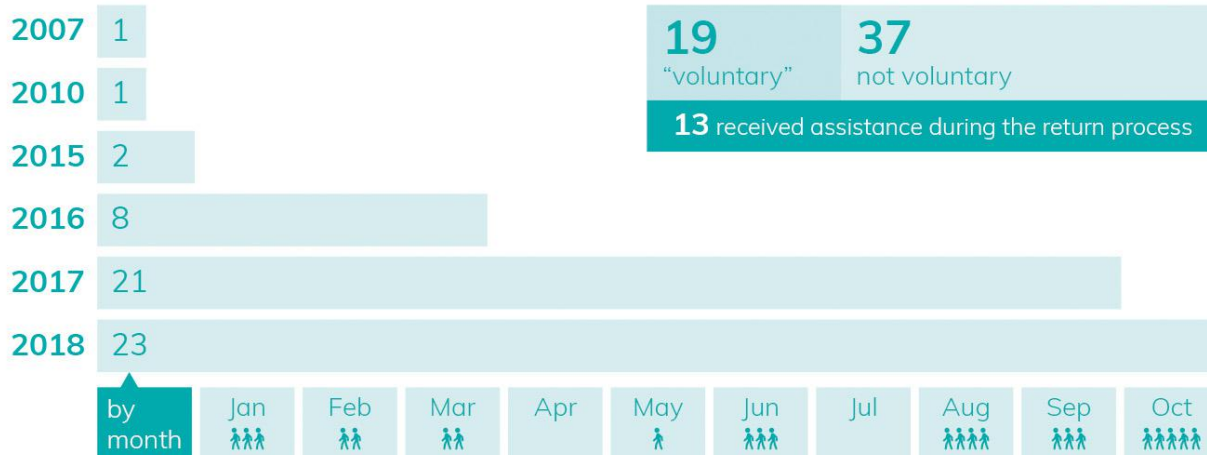


Figure 5: Countries of Return and Return Dates

Demographic Information

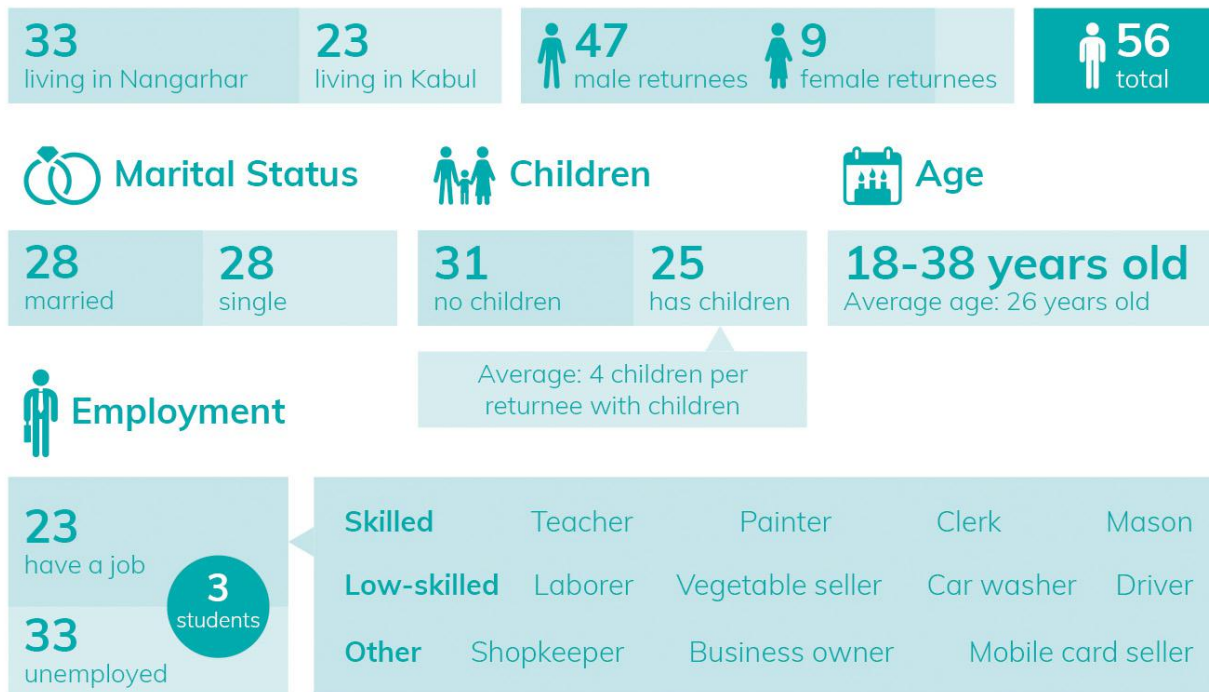


Figure 6: Demographic Information

Findings

Experiences Before Return Influence Reintegration

Section Summary

- Afghan returnees often return to face the same conditions that prompted their original migration;
- Traumatic experiences during the migration and return journeys can leave deep psychosocial effects and influence long-term decision-making;
- There is substantial pressure on Afghans to return from key destinations including Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and EU countries;
- Return journeys were often marked by rumours, confusion and imperfect information;
- Operational categories of return (such as ‘voluntary’ returnees) rarely align with returnee experiences.

Original migration drivers and the journey as precursors to return challenges

Armed conflict, violence and instability frequently influence the initial decision to migrate through irregular means. In 4Mi’s surveys with Afghans departing the country, most pointed to violence and general insecurity as principal motivating factors including 62.3% of those en route to Europe.¹⁷ Interviews with returnees found the same.¹⁸ Conflict accounts for nearly all of the 1.3 million IDPs in the country as of May 2018.¹⁹ Most returnees interviewed for this project cited conflict, security or targeted protection threats as reasons for their original migration.

¹⁷ Mixed Migration Centre (2018) *Drivers*. As of early 2018, 4Mi collects approximately 1,000-1,200 interviews with refugees and migrants every month. The data is collected by local 4Mi monitors that are strategically based in migration hubs and at border crossing. It uses a purposive sampling methodology and data is not statistically representative of migration flows. For detailed information on 4Mi’s methodology, see: Mixed Migration Centre (2018) [A summary of the Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative \(4Mi\) methodology and approach](#).

¹⁸ Dominguez, Alexandra (2017) [‘The hard journey back to Afghanistan’](#), Mixed Migration Centre.

¹⁹ Secondary factors including natural disasters are present. IDMC (2018) [Global Report on Internal Displacement 2018](#).

Insecurity and employment concerns often intersect.²⁰ A qualitative study of 28 Afghan returnees reported that violent conflict or lack of employment opportunities alone would not have pushed them to leave Afghanistan.²¹ Other studies report departures motivated by targeted persecution from the Taliban and other armed groups, to remedy a perceived lack of rights in Afghanistan, or to address personal, family or economic concerns.²²

Top factors influencing destination preferences include freedom from oppression, better living standards, personal freedom and access to education²³ – but the achievability of reaching the destination and presence of local networks in the destination plays into where Afghans actually go.²⁴ Most Afghans leaving the country travel to neighbouring Pakistan or Iran. Substantial numbers travel to Turkey, many with the aim of reaching Europe. Afghan nationals comprised 25% (6,902) of sea arrivals to Greece between January and October 2018.²⁵ Many Afghans also travel to South Asia or South East Asia (including India and Indonesia) via under-researched routes.²⁶

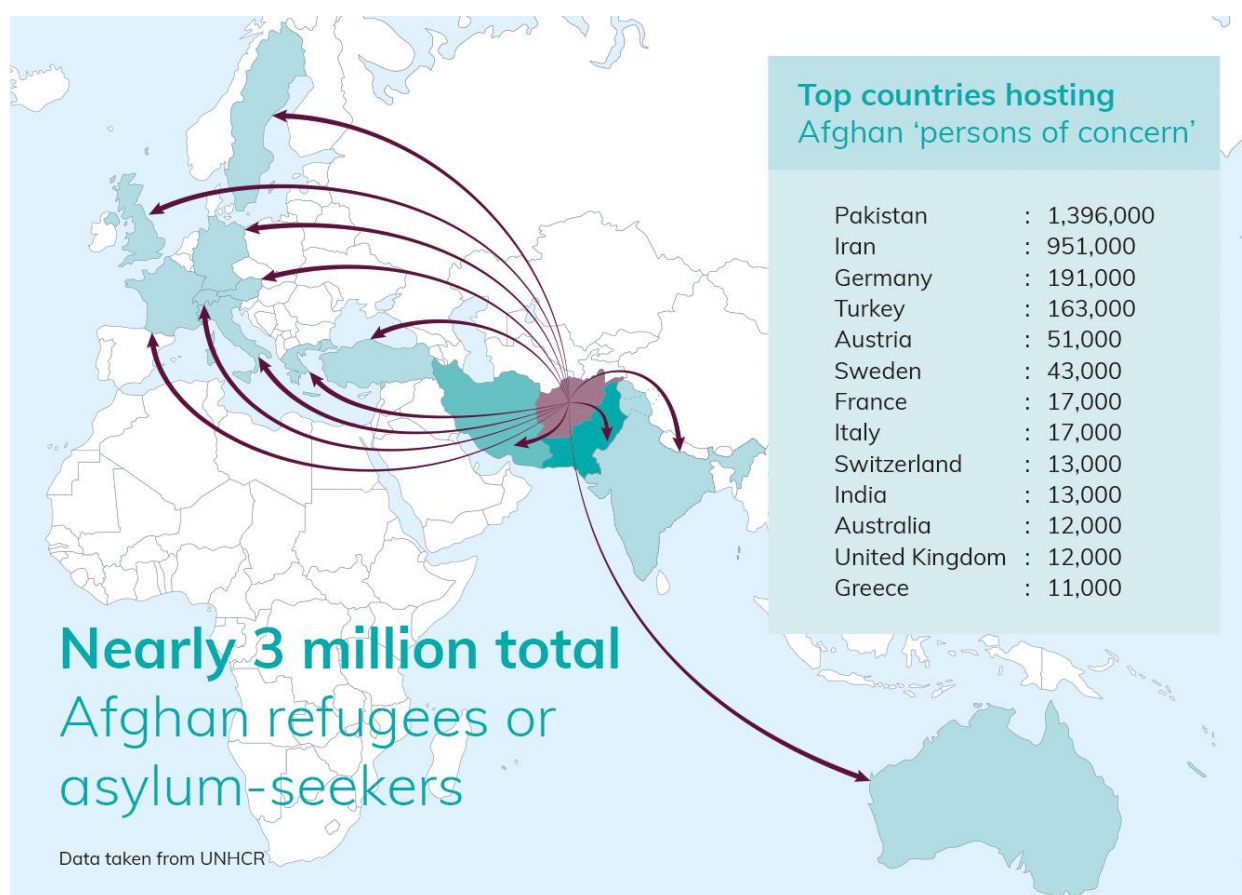


Figure 7: Map of Afghan asylum-seekers and refugees

²⁰ Seefar (2018) [Examining Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan: Why Psychosocial Interventions Matter](#).

²¹ REACH and Mixed Migration Platform (2018) [Migration from Afghanistan to Europe \(2014-2017\): Drivers, Return and Reintegration](#).

²² Mixed Migration Centre (2018) [Drivers](#).

²³ Mixed Migration Centre (2018) [Destinations](#).

²⁴ Seefar (2018) [Pushed Towards Migration: Understanding How Irregular Migration Dynamics and Attitudes Are Evolving in Afghanistan](#).

²⁵ UNHCR (2018) [Mediterranean Situation](#).

²⁶ Willner-Reid, M (2017) 'Afghanistan: Displacement Challenges in a Country on the Move,' *Migration Policy Institute*. Exceptions also exist. See for example the growing literature on (Afghan) urban refugees in India including: Field, Anubhav and Yamini (2017) [Urban Refugees in Delhi Identity, Entitlements and Well-Being](#).

Interviewed returnees shared multiple reasons for their initial migration that aligned with the robust research on migration motivations in Afghanistan. They reported escaping conflict or violence in Afghanistan, seeking better employment opportunities abroad, or a combination of the two factors. Some migration journeys were triggered by targeted threats from armed groups. Other returnees had spent most or all their lives abroad and recounted the migration stories of their parents.

“When I was an infant, my family escaped the civil war and moved to Peshawar. My father is a freelance journalist and he used to work for a foreign media firm... Even though we were living a good life, we always hoped that the situation in Afghanistan would become better and that we would be able to return to our homeland. But the civil war continued, and we spent almost two decades as refugees in Pakistan.”

Male, Kabul, 27

Most conditions that prompted the original decision to leave continued to be present in how returnees described their present life in Afghanistan. For example, returnees cited financial concerns (e.g. unemployment) and insecurity as key concerns upon return. However, individual reasons for migration (such as a specific threat from the Taliban) were not always present upon return. One returnee described his original migration motivation: “Because of insecurity and war in Afghanistan, we had to leave our homes and jobs and we decided to migrate.”²⁷ The returnee later described his present situation in similar terms: “The problems we are currently facing are economic issues, security issues, our poor education system – especially for girls – and a lack of shelter” (Male, Kabul, Age Unknown).

Faced with the same matrix of migration motivations, much of the literature on returnees indicates that Afghan returnees would again choose to leave. This is a cyclical model consistent with rational choice theory.²⁸ However, emerging return and reintegration literature indicates that reintegration experiences – and returnees’ corresponding aspirations and intentions – are a product of **original migration drivers, migratory experiences, reception in destination countries and experiences during return.**²⁹ While environmental factors in Afghanistan may look similar pre-departure and post-return, returnees themselves are frequently changed by their migration and return experiences. These experiences may change how returnees interact with their environment and make future decisions.

²⁷ Quotes have been drawn from a variety of primary and secondary sources. For ease of reading, spelling errors have been corrected and in some cases the flow of text has been slightly altered, while leaving the meaning of the quote intact and staying as close as possible to the authentic entry.

²⁸ Schuster, L. and Majidi, N. (2013) ‘[What happens post-deportation? The experience of deported Afghans](#)’, *Migration Studies*, 1(2), pp. 221–240; See also similar evidence of positive perceptions of migration among returnees regardless of personal migration experiences: REACH and Mixed Migration Platform (2018) [Migration from Afghanistan to Europe \(2014-2017\): Drivers, Return and Reintegration](#); The Asia Foundation (2017) [Afghanistan in 2017: A survey of the Afghan people](#).

²⁹ A variety of sources link some of these factors with reintegration experiences. Schuster, L. and Majidi, N. (2013) ‘[What happens post-deportation? The experience of deported Afghans](#)’, *Migration Studies*, 1(2), pp. 221–240; Scalettaris, G. and Gubert, F. (2018) ‘[Return Schemes from European Countries: Assessing the Challenges](#)’, *International Migration*; Gladwell et al. (2016) [After Return: Documenting the Experiences of Young People Forcibly Removed to Afghanistan](#), Refugee Support Network; Seefar (2018) [Examining Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan: Why Psychosocial Interventions Matter](#); IDMC (2017) [2017 Global Report on Internal Displacement](#).

Delayed effects of trauma are widespread

Returns are rarely planned and may present a shock for returnees.³⁰ Migration and return stories shared by returnees revealed traumatic experiences during migration. Many returnees associated these experiences with poor mental health at the time of their interviews.³¹ Each returnee had a unique perspective but a pattern of hardship and trauma was evidence across multiple contexts. Extended periods of fear, perceptions of imminent danger, and chronic anxiety were common throughout returnee narratives. Many also included physical violence and torture.

The nature of these traumatic experiences varied in relation to the country from which respondents returned but protection challenges were widespread. Some returnees focused their narratives on experiences of physical discomfort, thirst and violence experienced during migration journeys and immediately prior to return. One respondent recounted highly traumatic experiences: “Thieves stopped us and beat my husband. They took the 1,000 USD that we had. After that, we didn’t eat for two days. One man brought us some food. I was three months pregnant and had a miscarriage” (Female, Kabul, 22). Returnees also described being shot at, being afraid for their lives, experiencing torture, and witnessing violence. Two returnees were threatened with forced recruitment to armed groups in Syria.

Returnees from Pakistan reported fewer instances of violence and hardships during initial migration journeys. Many viewed their circumstances in Pakistan favourably and had close ties with their communities abroad. However, others reported chronic uncertainty due to a lack of documentation, hostile relations with hosts, anxiety and fear of the police, experiences of imprisonment and challenges during return. One returnee said, “We were always afraid of being arrested at any possible time. Where we were living, the police used to constantly arrest refugees, which eventually caused us to return” (Male, Nangarhar, 25). Some returnees from Pakistan reported feeling fear during their return journey.

“It’s really hard living in a refugee camp because as refugee you are not considered a citizen... A few people treat you badly and you cannot even respond. Otherwise you would be punished. They use bad words, as I experienced when living in Peshawar. They used to call me ‘Mahajer’ [immigrant]. When I heard that, I started crying, but I had no other option but staying there and listening because of the civil war that was going on in Afghanistan.”

Male, Kabul, 25

Returnees from Europe often felt positive emotions during their time abroad and particularly a sense of safety among those who successfully arrived at their destinations. Yet their narratives included loneliness integration issues, danger during European border crossings, periods of fatigue and hunger, experiences of violence and abrupt deportation. One returnee from a European country said, “I didn’t speak their language, I didn’t have permission to work, I lived in a refugee camp and I felt like my future was lost... I was away from family and friends, which were negative things about living abroad” (Male, Nangarhar, 24).

³⁰ Seefar (2018) [Examining Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan: Why Psychosocial Interventions Matter](#).

³¹ See, for example, The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2018), [Effects](#).

Returnees from Turkey cited challenges with host communities, poor local integration and loneliness. Respondents mentioned difficulty learning the Turkish language and finding work. One returnee said, “Finding a job [in Turkey] was a challenge itself, and when I found a job they would not pay my salary. I was working in a Kurdish bakery for 30 TL [5.45 USD] per day” (Male, Nangarhar, 29). Multiple returnees said they felt homesickness while abroad. Some described extended periods in difficult economic circumstances or detention, including one respondent who was in detention for eight months.



“I could no longer deal with the hardship and loneliness in Turkey. There was no hope, no matter how long I stayed. I earned very little money in exchange for my services at the car wash and I worked all day long”

Male, Nangarhar, 25

These kinds of traumatic migration and return experiences are frequently accompanied by ‘toxic stress’ and can have psychological consequences that remain long after return.³² Returnees may see still-present migration drivers in a new light after their traumatic experiences. This has a profound impact on reintegration and long-term decision-making.

The decision to return and mode of arrival

It is challenging to determine causal links between experiences abroad, the decision to return, and the action of returning. Negative experiences abroad motivate diverse migration behaviours. For example, discrimination, restrictions on internal movement and economic hardship motivate some Afghans to migrate onwards to Europe but encourage others to return.³³ Among those who have decided to return, social pressures to remain abroad may stop them from executing their decision.

While return rates have slightly decreased since 2016 (when fears and protection gaps led to a large spike in returns), there is still substantial pressure on Afghans to return from key destination countries:

- In the **European Union (EU)**, the recognition rate of first-instance asylum claims from Afghan nationals fell from 66% in 2015 (21,690 first-instance decisions issued)³⁴ to 44% in the second quarter of 2018 (6,290 positive decisions out of 14,395 decisions).³⁵ The removal of rejected asylum seekers has become a political priority – the 2016 Joint Way Forward agreement between the EU and GoA emphasises return while an increasing number of EU member states have designated parts of Afghanistan safe for return.³⁶
- In **Pakistan**, legal uncertainty over the expiration of Proof of Registration (PoR) cards (now extended to June 2019), rumours of mass deportation and integration challenges influenced many

³² ‘Toxic stress’ can be understood as “excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems in the body and brain”. Many migration and return experiences and accompanying emotions could be risk factors for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Center on the Developing Child (2018) [Toxic Stress](#), Harvard University.

³³ Seefar (2018) [Pushed Towards Migration: Understanding How Irregular Migration Dynamics and Attitudes Are Evolving in Afghanistan](#)

³⁴ EASO (2016) [Annual Report on the Situation of Asylum in the European Union 2015](#). In 2016, the first-instance recognition rate declined to 56%. Eurostat (2017) [EU Member States granted protection to more than 700 000 asylum seekers in 2016](#).

³⁵ Eurostat (2018) [Asylum quarterly report - Statistics Explained](#).

³⁶ European External Action Service (2017) [Joint Way Forward on Migration Issues between Afghanistan and the EU](#).

to return – including Afghans who had lived in Pakistan for decades. Permission to remain is often extended only for months at a time.³⁷

- In **Iran**, political and economic changes (such as currency devaluation) have hit vulnerable groups hardest, including children and women who are typically more marginalised. Worsening economic conditions and integration challenges often combine to make it difficult for Afghans to stay.³⁸
- In **Turkey**, not all Afghans seek to move onwards but there are no pathways to local integration. Fewer Afghans have been able to enter the EU since the 2016 EU-Turkey deal. Few benefit from resettlement programmes: of 6,433 departures for resettlement between January and September 2018, only 108 were Afghans.³⁹ Challenging living conditions and poor access to livelihoods and shelter motivate many to return while thousands are involuntarily returned.⁴⁰

The motivations for return, though diverse, tend to centre on crisis in transit or struggles to access legal status and jobs at destination.⁴¹ Crisis en route commonly includes blocked border crossings, depleted funds or emergencies back home.⁴² Threats include physical violence, exploitative labour conditions and psychological trauma.⁴³ Those living in camps or informal settlements in southeast Europe may experience poor treatment and lack access to adequate housing or food. Financial and emotional pressure can lead to isolation and depression. The transcripts affirm these findings, as return journeys were nearly always preceded by a crisis (e.g. family health problem, arrest by the police), an integration challenge, or an incident where the respondent felt afraid.



“The main reason for returning was my mother. I was informed about her severe illness and that she was not doing well, so I decided to return back home.

However, even if my mother had not gotten ill, I would have returned, as I had already planned. I could no longer deal with the hardship and loneliness.”

Male, Nangarhar, 25

At destination, migrants often face discrimination, fear of deportation, crime and violence.⁴⁴ Other challenges upon arrival include accessing employment, education and protection.⁴⁵ Many assume substantial debt to finance migration and cannot earn enough money abroad to pay back their creditors.⁴⁶ Some, especially younger Afghans, come to believe their quality of life would be better in Afghanistan in

³⁷ UNHCR Pakistan (2018) [UNHCR supports Pakistan. Afghanistan to secure sustainable solutions for Afghan refugees](#); See also a variety of news sources including: Barker, Memphis (2018) [“Pakistan’s Imran Khan Pledges Citizenship for 1.5m Afghan Refugees.”](#) *The Guardian*.

³⁸ IOM (2018) [Return of Undocumented Afghans: Weekly Situation Report 11-17 Nov 2018](#);

³⁹ UNHCR (2018) [Resettlement Data Finder](#).

⁴⁰ Pitonak, A. (2018) [‘Mass Deportations of Afghans from Turkey’](#) *Afghanistan Analysts Network*.

⁴¹ The Asia Foundation (2017) [Afghanistan in 2017: A survey of the Afghan people](#).

⁴² Ibid. See also: Dominguez, A. (2018) [‘The hard journey back to Afghanistan’](#), *Mixed Migration Centre*.

⁴³ Mixed Migration Centre (2018) [Experiences of Female Refugees & Migrants in Origin, Transit and Destination Countries: A Comparative Study of Women on the Move from Afghanistan, East and West Africa](#).

⁴⁴ Mixed Migration Platform (2017) [Life in Limbo: The Consequences of Thwarted Mobility for Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Other Migrants in Serbia](#).

⁴⁵ REACH and Mixed Migration Platform (2017) [Migration from Afghanistan to Europe \(2014-2017\): Drivers, Return and Reintegration](#).

⁴⁶ Scalettaris, G. and Gubert, F. (2018) [‘Return Schemes from European Countries: Assessing the Challenges’](#), *International Migration*.

light of their precarious position in foreign asylum systems.⁴⁷ Afghans living abroad who have struggled to integrate describe psychosocial factors including hopelessness, missing family, and marginalisation.⁴⁸

The extent of integration at destination offers a useful way of framing many of these issues. Those who integrate more deeply economically and socially tend to want to remain in their host country, as do those who have been abroad for longer periods of time.⁴⁹ Some returnees even feel more at home in their new country than in Afghanistan, having found work and achieved a sense of security.⁵⁰ One returnee said, “When I was one year old we immigrated to Babo camp of Pakistan during the civil war... I grew up there, got married and had children there. We were accustomed to Pakistani traditions, which are quite different from Afghanistan’s” (Female, Kabul, 30). The Afghan diaspora, especially in places where it is well established, often helps ease the transition to living abroad.⁵¹

Lack of information: a “soft” driver of return?

Information and its absence play critical roles in the return process. Most returnees expressed confusion or highlighted a lack of information at various points before and during return. Some returnees from Pakistan noted that word-of-mouth rumours, television, and social media led to fear of remaining abroad and encouraged return. One interviewed returnee said that his family returned because they were afraid for their lives, but later learned that the information they had heard was “fake news, and most of our relatives still live in Pakistan” (Male, Kabul, 22). In such circumstances, returnees often expressed feelings of regret about their return. They also tended to continue to view life abroad positively.



“There was not a lot of pressure by the government to return to Afghanistan, but we saw people posting on social media and encouraging other people to leave Pakistan and return to Afghanistan. We were impressed by those posts and finally we decided to return home.”

Male, Kabul, 24

Returnees who were forcibly removed from a country abroad often lacked access to information during their deportation or while detained by authorities. Some did not know how long legal proceedings would take and others were unclear how long they would remain in detention. Some returnees received conflicting information at the border on their rights, access to documentation and available assistance. One respondent said that they could not seek assistance during return because organisations “always asked us for our work permit and proper documentation, which we didn’t have with us. So that’s why I decided to return without letting anyone know about it” (Male, Nangarhar, 35).

The lack of information before and during return left many returnees feeling confused and betrayed. These feelings were linked with a broader lack of trust. Multiple respondents said variations of, “There is no one I turn to for advice or information to help plan the future” (e.g. Male, Nangarhar, 25). Another

⁴⁷ Carling, J. et al. (2016) *Possibilities and Realities of Return Migration*.

⁴⁸ Seefar (2018) *Reluctant Journeys: Why Afghans migrate irregularly to Europe*; Abbasi-Shavazi, M. J., Sadeghi, R. and Mohammadi, A. (2017) ‘Migrants’ Integration in Host Societies, and Return to Home Countries: The Case of the Middle East and South Asia’, in *Migration Research Leaders’ Syndicate*, IOM.

⁴⁹ In Iran, some Afghans felt highly integrated with the local population while those in Pakistan were more likely to live in Afghan-only environments. Abbasi-Shavazi, M. J., Sadeghi, R. and Mohammadi, A. (2017) ‘Migrants’ Integration in Host Societies, and Return to Home Countries: The Case of the Middle East and South Asia’, in *Migration Research Leaders’ Syndicate*, IOM.

⁵⁰ Geller, A. and Latek, M. M. (2014) ‘Returning from Iran’, *Forced Migration Review* (46).

⁵¹ Mixed Migration Centre (2017) *Split Loyalties: Mixed Migration and the Diaspora Connection*.

returnee said, “Believe me, I don’t have trust in anybody. Everyone we have trusted has mistreated us. My family is the only source of advice for me” (Male, Kabul, 26).

Returnee experiences challenge existing return categories

The literature commonly categorises returnees in a series of binary conditions:⁵²

- Some returnees voluntarily return to Afghanistan, while others involuntarily return;
- Some receive assistance during or after the return process, while others are unassisted;
- Some returnees have documentation of their legal status abroad, while others are undocumented.

Such labels help divide operational mandates in a resource-scarce humanitarian context. For example, IOM assists “undocumented returnees” while UNHCR assists “documented returnees.”⁵³ But this approach risks placing institutional considerations ahead of those of beneficiaries. Donors may assume that involuntary returnees require more assistance than voluntary returnees or that “assisted” returnees are better-off than “unassisted” returnees. However, return experiences are complex in practice and rarely fit neatly into these categories.⁵⁴

Are voluntary returns really

‘voluntary’? Those who return to Afghanistan of his or her free will are generally categorised as ‘voluntary’ returnees.⁵⁵ In contrast, those who are forcibly removed from their host country are labelled ‘involuntary’ or ‘forced’ returnees (e.g. deportees). The literature highlights increased scepticism of the label ‘voluntary’, as many voluntary returnees perceive a degree of coercion in their return.⁵⁶ The line between voluntary and non-voluntary returnees is blurred.⁵⁷



“I returned to Afghanistan with my family and it was completely voluntary. Although we had good business going on there, suddenly there was some information raised by the media stating that the Pakistan government will deport all Afghan refugees to Afghanistan. So we decided to voluntarily return before we would be forced to leave Pakistan.”

Male, Kabul, 28

Returnees themselves are frequently confused by the concept of voluntary return. Many returnees claimed that their return was “their own decision” but also mentioned fear and violence in their location abroad, poor living conditions and a lack of legal permission to remain abroad as influences to return. One respondent summarised this dynamic: “Our return... was neither voluntary nor involuntary. We were not told to leave, but at the same time, we were afraid that our homes would be destroyed by the military. So, you could say it was involuntarily and forced by fear” (Male, Nangarhar, 19).

⁵² See, for example: Kuschminder, K. (2017) [Taking Stock of Assisted Voluntary Return from Europe: Decision Making, Reintegration and Sustainable Return – Time for a Paradigm Shift](#), Social Science Research Network; IOM (2018) [Return of Undocumented Afghans: Weekly Situation Report 11-17 Nov 2018](#).

⁵³ IOM and UNHCR (2018) [Returns to Afghanistan in 2017](#).

⁵⁴ Geller, A. and Latek, M. M. (2014) ‘Returning from Iran’, *Forced Migration Review* (46); Seefar (2018) [Examining Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan: Why Psychosocial Interventions Matter](#).

⁵⁵ IOM and UNHCR (2018) [Returns to Afghanistan in 2017](#).

⁵⁶ Kuschminder, K. (2017) [Taking Stock of Assisted Voluntary Return from Europe: Decision Making, Reintegration and Sustainable Return – Time for a Paradigm Shift](#), Social Science Research Network; Seefar (2018) [Examining Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan: Why Psychosocial Interventions Matter](#).

⁵⁷ REACH and Mixed Migration Platform (2018) [Migration from Afghanistan to Europe \(2014-2017\): Drivers, Return and Reintegration](#).

This definition is particularly controversial when applied to programmes aimed at supporting safe and ‘voluntary’ return, which are generally funded by hosting countries.⁵⁸ Participants in Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) programmes receive logistical or financial assistance to support their return (e.g. airfare, cash aid). Yet returnees often have a lack of agency in such situations. Some beneficiaries perceive no alternative other than remaining in detention facilities or living without access to the destination country’s formal labour market and welfare systems, but officially their returns were categorised as ‘voluntary’.⁵⁹

Does documentation abroad change the need for assistance? Returnee transcripts suggest documentation status was not a major factor shaping the experiences of Afghans in Iran or Pakistan. Those with documented refugee status, like their undocumented counterparts, reported facing threats from the police. They had documentation forcibly taken from them and exhibited many of the same characteristics of chronic anxiety related to legal status as those without documentation.⁶⁰

‘Documented’ and ‘undocumented’ returnees shared similar narratives of challenges in Pakistan. One ‘undocumented’ returnee said, “We had no legal documents or permission to live in Pakistan, which is why we use to get constant harassment. So eventually we decided to return back to Afghanistan” (Male, Nangarhar, 32). Similarly, a ‘documented’ returnee said, “[the Pakistani police] used to ask us for legal documents. We had Afghan refugee cards with us, but they were almost expired. For this reason, they kept harassing us and were asking us for money, too. We decided to return back to Afghanistan because such behaviour was no longer acceptable for us” (Male, Nangarhar, 18).

⁵⁸ Kuschminder, K. (2017) [Taking Stock of Assisted Voluntary Return from Europe: Decision Making, Reintegration and Sustainable Return – Time for a Paradigm Shift](#), Social Science Research Network

⁵⁹ REACH and Mixed Migration Platform (2017) [Migration from Afghanistan to Europe \(2014-2017\): Drivers, Return and Reintegration](#).

⁶⁰ See evidence from returnee transcripts later in the report. IOM (2018) [Joint efforts to Strengthen Collaboration in Afghanistan on Returns and Reintegration](#); Kamminga, J. and Zaki, A. (2018) [Returning to Fragility: Exploring the link between conflict and returnees in Afghanistan](#), Oxfam.

A Challenging Reintegration Experience

Section Summary

- Returnees highlighted psychosocial needs as primary reintegration barriers;
- Female returnees discussed unique psychosocial challenges from earlier traumatic experiences;
- Afghan returnees often face acute short-term needs (e.g. winterisation and shelter) and longer-term needs (e.g. livelihoods and access to education);
- Returnees share many needs with other Afghans but are particularly vulnerable based on migration-related psychosocial needs.

The physical, emotional and financial well-being of returnees is of intrinsic value and is fundamental to community cohesion. This is especially true in regions where displacement, migration and return have become the norm. The reintegration of returnees can bring development gains to local communities via the skills and connections they have acquired abroad.⁶¹

Conversely, barriers to long-term planning, such as fear of violence or ongoing psychosocial challenges, can leave returnees isolated, vulnerable and more likely to pursue high-risk strategies.⁶² Returnees who are able to find decent work, pursue education, start a business or access arable land in Afghanistan may be more financially and emotionally invested in their community of return. They may feel better able to pursue long-term aspirations. Reintegration is important for the GoA and the international community because it may mitigate the drivers of forced migration and lessen the draw of crime or militancy.⁶³

Available data on life post-return in Afghanistan is lacking but there are widespread and unmet needs. Initially, reuniting with family, returning to a familiar cultural context or escaping traumatic situations abroad may be positive for returning Afghans. Yet they also face significant challenges including psychosocial needs, protection risks, immediate winterisation concerns, lack of services and inability to support long-term economic needs.⁶⁴ While return experiences are diverse, many of these negative experiences are common across return categories.⁶⁵

⁶¹ There is a lack of recent research on the subject but see the following for an insightful discussion of the topic: Altai Consulting (2006) '[Integration of Returnees in the Afghan Labor Market](#),' *International Labour Office*.

⁶² Majidi, N. (2017). [From Forced Migration to Forced Returns in Afghanistan](#), Migration Policy Institute.

⁶³ There is little evidence to suggest that returnees are either susceptible or immune from these trends. Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre (2017) '[Afghanistan: Recruitment to Taliban](#)'; Samuel Hall (2014) '[Afghan Refugees and Returnees: Challenges and Opportunities: The Region's First Coordination Workshop](#)', Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development (ACBAR).

⁶⁴ Seefar (2018) [Examining Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan: Why Psychosocial Interventions Matter](#).

⁶⁵ REACH and Mixed Migration Platform (2017) [Migration from Afghanistan to Europe \(2014-2017\): Drivers, Return and Reintegration](#).

Psychosocial needs as a crosscutting challenge

Negative psychosocial factors relating to mental health are common after return.⁶⁶ The act of return can be extremely jarring, particularly when the return was not (completely) voluntary. The migration experience and life abroad can cause depression, anxiety, loneliness, trauma and psychological distress – indicators that worsen over time if not addressed.⁶⁷

“I have newly returned, and there is no doubt I went through severe mental issues and depression during my first week after return. Problems that I encountered [abroad] are simply unforgettable, and every time I am left alone, all those horrible memories go through my mind. I saw death several times from a very close distance. Frankly, I am still suffering from mental and psychological issues; however, as each day passes, I do sense minor changes in my emotions and feelings.”

Male, Nangarhar, 22

Some returnees report feelings of shame and failure. They feel guilty about using family funds on failed migration efforts.⁶⁸ Deterioration of mental health and emotional well-being among returnees (children in particular) is common.⁶⁹ Child returnees face real and perceived stigma and discrimination, creating feelings of loneliness and isolation.⁷⁰ Child returnees in Afghanistan also display indicators of poor mental health including anger and sadness.⁷¹

Such feelings are not necessarily universal. Returnees often highlight family reunification and return to a familiar cultural context as reasons for feeling happy after returning, particularly when they had stayed in close contact with family or friends.⁷² However, returnee narratives consistently reveal a sense of hopelessness in relation to poor conditions as well as more specific needs. The terms “problem” and “need” are two of the most common words in the transcripts and are often used in relation to mental health.

Acute psychosocial needs stemming from traumas experienced in migration and return journeys set returnees apart from other Afghans. Community members may share psychosocial needs arising from traumatic experiences in-country. Returnees linked their negative psychosocial well-being post-return with traumatic experiences endured during their migration and return journeys. They described how these experiences interact with conditions upon return to amplify and worsen mental health challenges. Returnees mentioned feeling stress, anxiety, depression, sadness, shame, and loneliness after their

⁶⁶ Samuel Hall (2016) [Urban Displaced Youth in Kabul Part One: Mental Health Matters](#).

⁶⁷ Seefar (2018) [Examining Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan: Why Psychosocial Interventions Matter](#).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Gladwell et al. (2016) [After Return: Documenting the Experiences of Young People Forcibly Removed to Afghanistan](#), Refugee Support Network; Samuel Hall and IOM (2017) [Setting standards for an integrated approach to reintegration: Summary Report](#), Commissioner by IOM and funded by DFID.

⁷⁰ Bowerman, E. (2017) [‘Risks encountered after forced removal: the return experiences of young Afghans’](#), *Forced Migration Review* (54).

⁷¹ Save the Children and Samuel Hall (2018) [From Europe to Afghanistan: Experiences of Child Returnees](#).

⁷² This dynamic will be discussed in more detail in the next section. Seefar (2018) [Examining Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan: Why Psychosocial Interventions Matter](#).

return. Several even mentioned suicidal ideation. Some respondents linked mental health with health problems stemming from tension and stress.⁷³

Returnees highlighted security, economic and social concerns as amplifiers of psychosocial needs after return. Interviewed returnees described anxiety and nervousness about their children's safety (Female, Kabul, 34).⁷⁴ Other aspects of life post-return appear affected by psychosocial needs. For example, some returnees attributed their inability to find a job or to move forward with their future plans to their poor mental health. Evidence from the transcripts suggests that psychosocial needs may be the largest reintegration challenges for returnees. Yet few returnees reported access to psychosocial support.

“On top of not feeling like part of my society, I got sick on my way back home and I am still not feeling well. I was suffering from both physical and psychological illnesses. That caused me to lose my job and lose some skills. Before my departure, I was able to stitch clothes and was a good tailor, but due to my psychological illness, I am not able to stitch clothes anymore. In addition to losing my job, I also incurred some unnecessary expenses before I left. Now my financial situation is bad.”

Male, Nangarhar, 18

Female returnees are particularly impacted by psychosocial challenges

Traumatic experiences and indicators of poor mental health were particularly present among female respondents (including eight out of nine female respondents). Multiple respondents were victims of child marriage (two reported marrying at age 12). Several returnees alluded to instances of gender-based violence (GBV) during migration journeys. Just one female respondent was working at the time of the interview. Each narrative shared a different experience that reflects unique mental health challenges facing female returnees, including feelings of abandonment. These narratives align with emerging literature on GBV and sexual violence among female returnees, particularly girls.⁷⁵

“My husband lives outside the country. On the Eid or New Year's Day, my children ask me when their father would return home. I tell them he will come home this Eid or this New Year's Day. Every year I tell them their father will return in the upcoming Eid. I spend my life making excuses for my husband. I feel very depressed because a woman alone cannot do anything, especially in Afghanistan.”

Female, Kabul, 30

⁷³ For example, one respondent experienced “heart problems” (i.e. arrhythmia) that he attributed to his mental health (Male, Nangarhar, 32). Multiple respondents said that they had difficulty sleeping.

⁷⁴ These ‘amplifiers’ of existing traumas will be described in more detail in the following sections.

⁷⁵ Save the Children and Samuel Hall (2018) [From Europe to Afghanistan: Experiences of Child Returnees](#).

Female returnees also displayed feelings of frustration based on what they describe as “culture” or “tradition” that limits female agency in Afghanistan. Such views may be informed by expectations set while living abroad. These sentiments were often associated with pursuing education for themselves or their daughters. For example, one respondent said, “My husband’s brother doesn’t let my daughters go to school because they say that we are Kochi people and our daughters shall not go to school” (Female, Kabul, 30).⁷⁶

Female child returnees face steep barriers to access to education and have also cited social pressure, harassment and violence after return.⁷⁷ One returnee said, “One of my daughters who is in eighth grade wants to study law. Her brother tells her to just study up to 12th grade, he says that no matter how much she studies her place will be in the kitchen. But I motivate my daughters to study and I want her to be a judge” (Female, Kabul, 34).

Conflict, insecurity and violence drive protection concerns

Returnees come back to an Afghanistan that displays many of the same security, economic and political conditions that led to the initial migration decision. Returnees described Afghanistan’s conflict context as a primary driver of their ongoing needs. Terms related to security or safety appeared over 180 times in the transcripts and are frequently referenced as primary concerns in secondary literature.⁷⁸

Returnees face concerns related to armed conflict, such as recruitment to armed groups and contamination by explosive remnants of war (ERW).⁷⁹ Nine interview subjects specifically mentioned parties to the conflict, including the Taliban and the Islamic State in Afghanistan (ISIS). Returnees also may face violence upon return including difficulty resolving civil disputes, intimidation, and petty crime.⁸⁰ Secondary research suggests that both male and female returnees are vulnerable to domestic and sexual violence.⁸¹

Many are unable to return home

Few returnees are able to return to the homes they originally left. Some areas that were safe when Afghans first left their country may have since become unsafe due to evolving conflict and violence, particularly in rural areas. These types of returnees are known as returnee-IDPs or de facto IDPs.⁸² Some of these returnees were IDPs before they left and returnees contribute to the growing number of IDPs in Afghanistan.⁸³ Others return to places of origin initially but over time risk secondary displacement, as described in Case Study 1.⁸⁴



“My own village is far from Jalalabad. The security situation there is not stable. The Taliban and ISIS have strong influences in our village, but in my current city, I can generate some sort of income for myself.”

Male, Nangarhar, 35

⁷⁶ Kochis are historically one of Afghanistan’s nomadic populations.

⁷⁷ Save the Children and Samuel Hall (2018) [From Europe to Afghanistan: Experiences of Child Returnees](#).

⁷⁸ Seefar (2018) [Examining Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan: Why Psychosocial Interventions Matter](#).

⁷⁹ Samuel Hall (2014) [‘Afghan Refugees and Returnees: Challenges and Opportunities: The Region’s First Coordination Workshop’](#), Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development (ACBAR).

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ OCHA (2017) [2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Afghanistan](#).

⁸² IDMC, Samuel Hall and NRC (2017) [Going ‘home’ to displacement: Afghanistan’s returnee IDPs](#).

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Samuel Hall, NRC and IDMC (2018) [Escaping War: Where to Next?](#)



Returnee case study 1



Behsood, Nangarhar



Male



32 years old



Married



5 children



Lived in Pakistan.

Returned due to lack of legal permission to remain in Pakistan.

Returned in June 2018.

Displaced from village on the first night of his return.

Currently unemployed.



Future aspirations:

Open a convenience store, return to his village if security improves.



Quote:

"My actual paternal village is Bati Kot, but I live here because I was compelled and had no other option.

I am satisfied from this decision and have no other option besides it, either, since I cannot go back and live in my own village. People around here are nice, but it is hard to find sympathy in them."

We had no legal documents or permission to live in Pakistan, which is why we used to get harassed constantly. So eventually we decided to return back to Afghanistan. When we returned, we went to our paternal village. But on the very first night we witnessed a horrific and unforgettable moment of our lives. Everything we owned, including our house, was set on fire, leaving us in a state of mental and physical panic.

On that night, our house was surrounded by the Taliban. My brothers were in the government military, and for that particular reason we witnessed the most tragic moment of our lives. They threw us out of our own house. They set it on fire, including my Dad's shop, which happened to be located in front of our house. They also stole our car. Our life was ruined in front of our own bare eyes. We turned to our neighbours that night for sanctuary, and by tomorrow we left that village and moved to the city. I settled at my father-in-law's house and the rest of my family members went and settled with relatives.

My brothers were not there. They were on duty that night, and even if they were there, they might have been killed. It is quite obvious that the government cannot do anything about it.

More than half the people displaced by conflict in Afghanistan in 2017 had experienced multiple displacements; this figure was just 7% in 2012.⁸⁵ Returnees now constitute 44% of the 2.1 million with “little choice but to occupy the vast and growing number of informal settlements” in urban environments.⁸⁶ Conditions in such settlements include food insecurity, poor access to adequate drinking water and inadequate housing.⁸⁷ Available research indicates that those who do not return to their region of origin are worse-off with less access to short- and long-term support systems, such as family and land.⁸⁸

Afghans who were born or lived mostly abroad may not have a home to return to in Afghanistan. Arriving in a new or unfamiliar location can mean a lack of local networks, knowledge, and lack of familiarity with cultural norms.⁸⁹ These returnees may feel less connected to Afghanistan.⁹⁰ They may have migrated young and spent formative years in foreign cultures. They may appear to other Afghans as outsiders or even foreigners.⁹¹

Evidence on the reintegration experiences of Afghans who were born abroad is thin. Roughly 25% of those entering Europe via Greece in early 2016 were “first- or second-generation refugees who had never lived in Afghanistan”.⁹² Such returnees appear to return involuntarily more often.⁹³ Many choose to return to urban centres such as Kabul rather than communities of origin because of better economic opportunities and prospects of social acceptance.⁹⁴

“We don’t have a home to live in. We are just moving around Kabul city. Sometimes we are in one place and sometimes in another place. We can’t live in any of the villages because of threats from the Taliban or other armed groups.”

Male, Kabul, 22

Short-term economic stress hides long-term needs

Most returnees said that immediate financial needs were a primary source of stress. They linked a short-term lack of money with psychosocial challenges, food insecurity, inability to access healthcare and the ability to prepare for the winter. Multiple respondents said that adjusting to winter was one of their most challenging post-return experiences revealed fears about the upcoming cold season. Several male respondents said that they could not find work during the winter, while several female respondents pointed to the need for firewood and warm clothing. One female returnee said, “I really need money and a home. I am pregnant, I need to go to the doctor, and I need to buy wood for winter” (Female, Kabul, 22).

⁸⁵ IDMC (2018) [Global Report on Internal Displacement 2018](#).

⁸⁶ OCHA (2017) [2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Afghanistan](#).

⁸⁷ OCHA (2017) [2018-2021 Humanitarian Response Plan](#).

⁸⁸ Kamminga, J. and Zaki, A. (2018) [Returning to Fragility: Exploring the link between conflict and returnees in Afghanistan](#), Oxfam.

⁸⁹ Scalettaris, G. and Gubert, F. (2018) ‘Return Schemes from European Countries: Assessing the Challenges’, *International Migration*

⁹⁰ Seefar (2018) [Examining Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan: Why Psychosocial Interventions Matter](#).

⁹¹ Schuster, L. and Majidi, N. (2013) ‘What happens post-deportation? The experience of deported Afghans’, *Migration Studies*, 1(2), pp. 221–240

⁹² IDMC (2017) [2017 Global Report on Internal Displacement](#).

⁹³ Scalettaris, G. and Gubert, F. (2018) ‘Return Schemes from European Countries: Assessing the Challenges’, *International Migration*

⁹⁴ Asylos (2017) [Afghanistan: Situation of Young Male ‘Westernised’ Returnees to Kabul](#).

While short-term needs were a source of stress, long-term economic well-being was more strongly reflected in the transcripts. Returnees said that their inability to access sustainable livelihoods was a top concern along with underemployment and debt. Over half of the returnees interviewed were unemployed. High levels of joblessness upon return are also commonly cited by returnees in secondary sources.⁹⁵ Economic struggles directly relate to food and water insecurity. For example, a 2017 profiling exercise found that 25% of returnees had insufficient access to drinking water (out of 940 returnees).⁹⁶

Among those who were employed, many interviewed returnees were working temporary or low-paying jobs. There was often a mismatch between a returnee's current form of work (e.g. low-skill labour) and their existing skill sets (e.g. masonry). One returnee said, "I didn't want to return because I used to hear all the time from my friends and relatives about the bad security conditions and a lack of job opportunities. I used to earn 800 PKR [5.75 USD] per day in Pakistan, and now that I am here, I wish I had never returned" (Male, Nangarhar, 30; bricklayer by trade but currently unemployed). Economic challenges post-return also relate to negative coping mechanisms such as child labour or high levels of debt.⁹⁷ Family health challenges and unexpected expenses can pose a financial crisis for returnees.

"Due to our financial challenges, my siblings and I couldn't go to school. Even my 11-year-old brother works at a bakery. They say that bad days show us the faces of our true friends. Since our financial condition is very bad, none of our relatives are in touch with us. Even when my sister was ill no one lent me money. Our relatives are financially secure but will not help us. My sister's illness was the biggest challenge I have faced after my return to Afghanistan. We spent all our money on her treatment. We even borrowed money for her treatment."

Male, Nangarhar, 19

Restricted access to services

Little or no documentation: Returnees often lack documentation of their former refugee status, particularly female-headed returnee households. Failure to obtain identity papers (tazkira) is a major problem for returnees and IDPs alike in Afghanistan.⁹⁸ The influx of returnees has been credited with supporting movement to the e-tazkira (an electronic identification card) but the rollout of the programme has been slow and uneven.⁹⁹ Without appropriate documentation, returnees' "ability to claim assistance, enrol in education or seek employment" and access justice is reduced.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ See, for example: Abbasi-Shavazi, M. J., Sadeghi, R. and Mohammadi, A. (2017) '[Migrants' Integration in Host Societies, and Return to Home Countries: The Case of the Middle East and South Asia](#)', in *Migration Research Leaders' Syndicate*, IOM; Samuel Hall and IOM (2017) '[Setting standards for an integrated approach to reintegration: Summary Report](#)', Commissioned by IOM and funded by DFID.

⁹⁶ REACH (2017) '[Afghanistan: Multi-Cluster Needs Assessment: Food Security in Informal Settlements](#)'.

⁹⁷ Kamminga, J. and Zaki, A. (2018) '[Returning to Fragility: Exploring the link between conflict and returnees in Afghanistan](#)', Oxfam; IDMC, Samuel Hall and NRC (2017) '[Going 'home' to displacement: Afghanistan's returnee IDPs](#)'.

⁹⁸ The tazkira is the primary form of national identification in Afghanistan but not all returnees have (or are able to access) this document. See for example: Samuel Hall and NRC (2016) '[Access to Tazkira and other civil documentation in Afghanistan](#)'; Samuel Hall (2014) '[Afghan Refugees and Returnees: Challenges and Opportunities: The Region's First Coordination Workshop](#)', Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief and Development (ACBAR).

⁹⁹ Seese, H. and Kandival, W. M. (2017) '[Migration Governance](#)', *Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit*.

¹⁰⁰ REACH (2017) '[Afghanistan: Multi-Cluster Needs Assessment: Food Security in Informal Settlements](#)'.

Limited access to education: Returnees often cannot enrol their children in school due to cost, overcrowding or documentation. Many instead prioritise “earning money for survival.”¹⁰¹ When successful, their children find themselves in crowded schools that risk “undermining the already fragile state of the formal education system”.¹⁰² Returnees from Iran report that their children face challenges integrating in Afghan schools due to differences in curricula.¹⁰³ Several respondents said that their children were not enrolled in school due to poor education quality.

Access to healthcare: Multiple respondents mentioned longer-term health needs, though few cited emergency access to healthcare as a challenge. For some, poor health posed a barrier to livelihoods. Several female returnees said that they could not access prenatal healthcare or see a doctor to address their children’s health. Healthcare was not seen as accessible in Afghanistan, and instead respondents viewed travel to Pakistan as necessary to access quality healthcare. One returnee said, “Even if I was offered a job I wouldn’t be able to do it. I’m sick and I am not able to work... My husband was working as a mason last year, but due to an eye problem, he is not able to work anymore. His eyesight has become very poor, and he has lost his eyesight almost completely” (Female, Kabul, 35).

Challenges accessing land and housing: Several respondents pointed to temporary, insufficient or expensive housing as a key problem. Others viewed land and housing as unmet longer-term needs and often a top priority.¹⁰⁴ Several respondents pointed to the lack of electricity or running water as an explanation for poor housing.

It was common for returnees to stay with family upon their return, but this dynamic was viewed as challenging for many. For example, one respondent said that her siblings mocked her when she lived with them but has found more happiness living with her parents (Female, Kabul, 22). Several female respondents expressed frustration at restriction from male relatives, such as disapproval about access to education. Such sentiments may be a result of a mismatch between expectations developed while living abroad and the reality of living in Afghanistan.

Returnees who cannot go home struggle to secure safe and dignified housing or shelter. Ancestral land may be in an unsafe area and efforts to allocate land to returnees have been marked by corruption and slow progress.¹⁰⁵ Many end up in informal settlements and are vulnerable to eviction, particularly female headed households.¹⁰⁶ Returnees accustomed to destination country housing norms, such as privacy, may struggle to reintegrate with families who have not lived abroad.¹⁰⁷ Returnees lacking local



“Here in Afghanistan, though, the government schools are not good, and my children don’t like to study here. The teachers beat the students so my children aren’t enrolled in school right now.”

Female, Kabul, 30

¹⁰¹ Bowerman, E. (2017) ‘[Risks encountered after forced removal: the return experiences of young Afghans](#)’, *Forced Migration Review* (54).

¹⁰² OCHA (2017) [2018-2021 Humanitarian Response Plan](#).

¹⁰³ Kamminga, J. and Zaki, A. (2018) [Returning to Fragility: Exploring the link between conflict and returnees in Afghanistan](#), Oxfam.

¹⁰⁴ IDMC, Samuel Hall and NRC (2017) [Going ‘home’ to displacement: Afghanistan’s returnee IDPs](#).

¹⁰⁵ Sanchez, D. (2018) ‘[Managed Labor Migration in Afghanistan](#)’, *World Bank*.

¹⁰⁶ Kandiwai, W. M. (2018) [Homeland, but no land for Home: A Case Study of Refugees in Towns](#). Feinstein International Center, Tufts University.

¹⁰⁷ Carling, J. et al. (2016) [Possibilities and Realities of Return Migration](#).

connections may end up paying higher rent¹⁰⁸ as prices are on the rise due to the influx of returnees and IDPs.¹⁰⁹

Legal assistance schemes have had some success but have struggled to target the most vulnerable.¹¹⁰ Land allocation has been criticised for placing returnees far from jobs, justice, basic services and social networks.¹¹¹ A 2018 Presidential Decree and the GoA City for All initiative, which aims to register informal properties and distribute title deeds to owners, may reduce eviction vulnerability.¹¹²

Migration-related psychosocial needs differentiate returnees from other Afghans

The areas of need described in this section are not always unique to returnees. Many people in Afghanistan face similar short- and long-term economic insecurity, lack access to services and have unmet psychosocial needs. Many Afghans have health, WASH and education needs.¹¹³ They also face the consequences of armed conflict and generalised violence. More than half of the Afghan population lives below the poverty line.¹¹⁴ Return likely reinforces many of these needs, as large numbers of returnees can place economic strain on already-struggling communities, particularly in rural areas.¹¹⁵

However, evidence from returnee interviews makes clear that the primary difference between returnees and other Afghans is in psychosocial needs stemming from migration- and return-related trauma (Figure 8). Such experiences may leave returnees to interact with the same set of needs in fundamentally different ways from other Afghans. Existing support systems – described in the following section – can help set returnees on the path to reintegration but available support is often limited.

Returnees are also particularly vulnerable to other challenges in Afghanistan.¹¹⁶ The lack of informal networks or family in the location of return may make it challenging for returnees to obtain reliable or fairly-paid work. Returnee children may not be able to easily integrate (or even attend) Afghan schools. Lack of documentation holds implications for access to justice and land ownership.¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁸ IDMC, Samuel Hall and NRC (2017) [Going 'home' to displacement: Afghanistan's returnee IDPs](#).

¹⁰⁹ Kamminga, J. and Zaki, A. (2018) [Returning to Fragility: Exploring the link between conflict and returnees in Afghanistan](#), Oxfam.

¹¹⁰ Maastricht University and Samuel Hall (2015) [Evaluation of the UNHCR Shelter Assistance Programme](#).

¹¹¹ Government of Afghanistan (2015) [The State of Afghan Cities 2015: Volume 1](#).

¹¹² UNHABITAT (2018) [Afghanistan Launches an Innovative Land Management Initiative: – UN-Habitat](#); see also Presidential Decree on the Registration of Properties in Urban Informal Settlement (link unavailable).

¹¹³ OCHA (2017) [2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Afghanistan](#).

¹¹⁴ Chaudhuri, S. (2018) [The latest poverty numbers for Afghanistan: a call to action, not a reason for despair](#), World Bank.

¹¹⁵ The Asia Foundation (2017) [Afghanistan in 2017: A survey of the Afghan people](#).

¹¹⁶ REACH (2017) [Afghanistan: Multi-Cluster Needs Assessment: Food Security in Informal Settlements](#).

¹¹⁷ A number of additional sources note particular returnee vulnerabilities. See, for example: Leao, I., Ahmed, M., and Kar, A (2018) [Jobs from Agriculture in Afghanistan](#), World Bank; The Asia Foundation (2017) [Afghanistan in 2017: A survey of the Afghan people](#); Scalettaris, G. and Gubert, F. (2018) [Return Schemes from European Countries: Assessing the Challenges](#), International Migration; Kamminga, J. and Zaki, A. (2018) [Returning to Fragility: Exploring the link between conflict and returnees in Afghanistan](#), Oxfam.

Needs upon return



Figure 8: Returnees and other Afghans share many needs, but returnees may face unique challenges¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Other Afghans in need (including IDPs and the urban poor) may also require food, shelter and winterization support.

Limited Reintegration Support Structures

Section Summary

- Few returnees in the study received aid and most felt like “no one helped them” during return – even if they received assistance;
- Returnees generally did not understand the purpose of the aid they received or how to access long-term support, highlighting key information gaps;
- Family support was seen as integral to moderating the effects of traumatic experience and also associated with better dynamics with their local communities;
- Returnees called for long-term assistance and trusted information with important implications for actors involved in the response.

Few returnees report receiving assistance

Official sources suggest that many returnees receive assistance. Most available assistance includes cash-based aid, generally intended to finance transportation from the border region to a different part of the country or meet immediate food needs.¹¹⁹ Such assistance is also intended to decrease dependence on negative coping mechanisms during transit.

Other available assistance includes transportation arrangement (such as flights for those returning from farther away), food aid, health screenings, non-food items (NFI) assistance and sanitation kits.¹²⁰ Longer-term reintegration assistance for returnees is less systematised and reaches far fewer beneficiaries.¹²¹

IOM reported in their November 11-17 weekly report that 84% of undocumented returnees from Pakistan (24,897 out of 29,639) received



“Aside from the check-in we did at the border, no other organisations have helped us. I want the government to give us a house and find my sons and my husband a job in industry so that they will be free of doing small odd jobs. Now it’s winter and we need wood to burn”

Female, Kabul, 34

¹¹⁹ IOM (2017) [Return of Undocumented Afghans: Monthly Situation Report](#)

¹²⁰ IOM (2018) [Return of Undocumented Afghans: Weekly Situation Report 11-17 Nov 2018](#);

¹²¹ Seefar (2018) [Examining Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan: Why Psychosocial Interventions Matter](#); REACH (2017) [Afghanistan: Multi-Cluster Needs Assessment: Food Security in Informal Settlements](#).

assistance in 2018.¹²² This figure does not include those who returned unnoticed or returnees from other countries. Returnees from other locations receive assistance at a far lower rate. For example, IOM further reported in their November 11-17 weekly report that 3.5% of undocumented returnees from Iran (24,211 out of 691,637) received assistance in 2018 as of mid-November.¹²³

Experiences reported by returnees suggest that there are significant challenges in receiving assistance. Thirteen out of 56 returnees interviewed for the research project reported receiving assistance (generally small amounts of cash-based aid). Their experiences included difficulties accessing aid at the border (see below), receiving money with no explanation, and receiving relatively small sums of money. While several returnees had received assistance in their community of return, none of the interviewed returnees reported benefiting from long-term assistance.

“I was told that the government helps returnees. However, when I entered Afghanistan, I went into a reintegration support centre in Torkham border and asked them to provide me with the transportation fee. They rejected me and when I asked them again, they shamelessly told me to sell out my children which was the worst moment I had ever encountered in my entire life.”

Male, Nangarhar, 30

Overwhelming economic challenges lead many to feel unassisted

Returnees in both categories of assistance (‘assisted’ and ‘unassisted’) claimed that they did not receive help during or after their return to Afghanistan. However, these sentiments did not consistently align with their narratives where they reported receiving cash-based assistance. One returnee described his lack of assistance: “No one actually helped me, just one organisation. I think its name is IOM, which just gave us 50 euros and that’s it. I didn’t receive any assistance whatsoever from the government or any other organisation” (Male, Nangarhar, 21). This disconnect implies that short-term assistance was not seen as meaningful help by returnees.

This pattern was found in multiple transcripts and illustrated below:

Assistance received: “We had immigration cards, but when we returned to Afghanistan we registered with the UNHCR. They paid us some money.”

Feelings of assistance: “We returned to Afghanistan 14 months ago. No organisation or government agency has helped us.”

Female, Kabul, 30

¹²² IOM (2018) [Return of Undocumented Afghans: Weekly Situation Report 11-17 Nov 2018](#).

¹²³ Ibid.

This disconnect appears to be caused by economic factors and amplified by a lack of information. Economic pressure stemming from migration costs, debt and unemployment created a sense of urgency among returnees that was not met by short-term cash-based assistance. Returnees who view their return from the prism of traumatic experiences could also feel a sense of helplessness.

Returnees may position how they feel about aid received in the context of their migration debt. Small amounts of financial assistance pale in comparison to high migration costs (Figure 9). Respondents often spent thousands or tens of thousands of dollars financing migration journeys. In contrast, assistance received ranged from \$40 to \$390 per person. Faced with such high economic costs, it is easy to understand how short-term aid is not viewed as meaningful or “real” (Female, Kabul, 35) by many returnees.

Migration costs vs. self-reported aid received

Examples of high migration costs cited by respondents

Examples of aid received by respondents

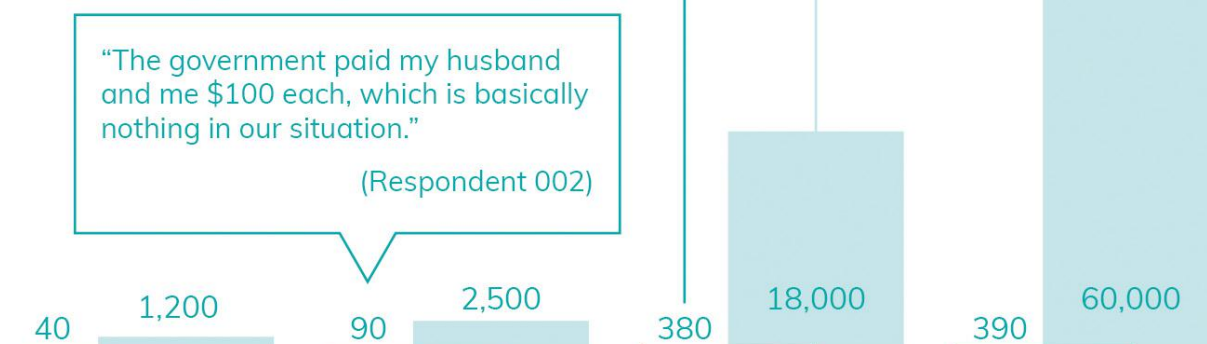


Figure 9: Self-reported assistance received compared to reported migration costs. All figures are in USD.¹²⁴

Evidence from returnee transcripts indicates that returnees may not understand the purpose of return or reintegration assistance. Returnees highlighted a lack of information as well as receiving inaccurate information during and after return. Some returnees expected to receive substantially greater sums of money or land based on communications during return and were disappointed when aid did not materialise. Several returnees used the word “promised” or “told” to convey their expectations of available assistance. One respondent said, “The refugee directorate in Torkham gave us papers [in August 2017] that show we will receive land for our home, but we haven’t received anything yet” (Male, Nangarhar, 35).

¹²⁴ Assistance and migration costs in Figure 9 are self-reported figures from a selection of interviewed returnees. Self-reported assistance includes a variety of types of assistance (e.g. return, humanitarian, reintegration).

There was no evidence of long-term aid in the 56 returnee transcripts. Most respondents were unaware of how to obtain such assistance. The transcripts consistently showed how lack of information was a barrier to assistance. For example, one respondent said that though she “asked many people” for help on how to obtain assistance, “no one knew any information” (Female, Kabul, 35). Such experiences highlight the lack of coordination between humanitarian and development actors to send consistent messages on assistance. Without such information, returnees displayed feelings of disappointment and abandonment. One respondent said that “no one listened to us” in reference to her interaction with Afghan government officials (Female, Kabul, 34). Some said that the only way to obtain support was through bribery.

“I have heard that some families who return from Pakistan or Iran were aided in terms of land, food items, and cash. I know that returnees from Pakistan are aided by the United Nations and the government also has a stake in this matter. However, I don’t have authentic information in this regard. No individual or organisation helped me to return. Even if there is this aid for returnees, they aren’t provided based on one’s needs. You need to know someone in the reintegration support centre, otherwise, they are provided based on reference and bribe. Each and everything in this country is corrupted.”

Male, Nangarhar, 36

Family support is a critical reintegration facilitator

Family plays an important role in Afghan society and many returnees viewed family as key to their reintegration. Variants of the word “family” appear in every transcript and over 300 times across the transcripts, emphasizing the fundamental role of family to the reintegration experience. For many, family was the most positive aspect of return. Time spent with family was frequently linked with positive words and emotions including optimism, happiness and celebration.

Family reunification represented an important healing source for those who felt loneliness and homesickness while abroad. One returnee said, “Now that I am living with my family, it makes me feel better” (Male, Nangarhar, 23). Some said that their experiences abroad taught them the importance of family. One returnee said, “I am trying my best to erase all the negative memories in my head by having quality time with my friends and family” (Male, Nangarhar, 19).



“When we first returned home, it was really hard for me to be in Afghanistan. We were going through some hard financial times. It was really painful for me. At the same time, I was happy to be here because our relatives live here as well and we see each other on a regular basis. When we celebrate together, I feel so happy. It’s wonderful being with my relatives and celebrating happy moments together.”

Female, Kabul, 35

However, familial support does not alleviate the need for formal psychosocial aid.¹²⁵ As one returnee said, “During my travels abroad, I saw many dead bodies of Afghan refugees” and this experience “destroyed my mental health” (Male, Nangarhar, 19). But returnees said that family helped to moderate the effects of traumatic experiences after return, a finding consistent with literature on the role of family.¹²⁶ That same returnee went on to say “The warm welcome of my family and relatives has helped me recover from my mental disorder. Now I hope for a better future” (Male, Nangarhar, 19).

For many, family was the only source of economic support they had received post-return. Family was viewed as a critical source of housing and financial support. Some said that their family would help them find a job or identify work for their children. Others were completely financially dependent on family members. Several respondents said that they have “no financial issues” because other family members are supporting them (Male, Nangarhar, 22). One returnee said that he was “total satisfied” with his decision to live with family and “has no intention of moving elsewhere” (Male, Nangarhar, 19).

Strong family ties upon return tended to coincide with returning to a familiar community. Returnees who reported returning to family also tended to report positive relationships with the community. One respondent said “I have no concerns in my social life since I am living with my family”, though he held job-related worries (Male, Nangarhar, 23). These returnees cited shared language and culture as positive aspects of return and tended to think positively of those around them. Those with stronger family relationships tended to also describe their communities with phrases like “very good people” (Female, Kabul, 30).

Family was not a universally positive influence on returnee reintegration and a minority of respondents associated family with negative psychosocial wellbeing. One respondent hinted at challenges in depending on family: “Though I am jobless, my two brothers have jobs and they provide the necessities for our family. But still, they can’t satisfy all of our needs” (Male, Nangarhar, 32). Tensions can grow as returnees stay with or depend on family for an extended period. One respondent described her challenging relationship with her family upon return: “When we first moved to Kabul, we lived with my husband’s brother, but he ended up separating from us and actually took everything we had. He took the rugs, the dishes and everything else... My relatives laugh at me and say, ‘her husband lives abroad and look at her life.’” (Female, Kabul, 30).



“I feel happy and grateful about living in my own country with my family and friends. They make me feel like I’m exactly where I am supposed to be. They are very supportive and helpful and are always there for me when I need anything. Moreover, I like being around people who speak the same language and have the same traditions and culture as me.”

Male, Nangarhar, 29

Not all interviewed returnees could turn to family for assistance or support recovering from traumatic experiences. Some lived in isolation and several were de facto IDPs (as described earlier). Others were separated from family living abroad and hoped to reunite with them in the future. Returnees with poor family relationships or who did not return to a community they were familiar with tended to report greater

¹²⁵ For example, one respondent said, “After returning to Afghanistan, I saw a psychologist because I wasn’t able to confess everything to everyone, not even to my mother” (Female, Kabul, 22).

¹²⁶ The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2018), *Families and Trauma*; Kamminga, J. and Zaki, A. (2018) *Returning to Fragility: Exploring the link between conflict and returnees in Afghanistan*, Oxfam.

psychosocial challenges and worse relationships with their communities. One respondent who did not report good relationships with her family said, “Our neighbours are not good people. They have evil intentions in their minds. They are not social at all. They are not helpful and their behaviour is rude.” (Female, Kabul, 35). Others reported being mocked or that people “will try to harm” them (Male, Kabul, 27).

Returnees mentioned family at different rates depending on their interview location and the nature of their return. Returnees in Kabul mentioned family less frequently (2.8 mentions per transcript) than returnees in Nangarhar (4.7 mentions per transcript). One respondent near Kabul said, “People who live around us are uneducated and rude. They start fighting over small issues. Even when the kids fight, they come outside with guns and it sounds like it is going to start a war.” (Male, Kabul, 26)

“I chose to live here because it is our own house. My other relatives live around here, which made it easier to move. We were newcomers, so we decided to stay here. Our other neighbours here are good people, too. They helped us when we returned and I am happy with them. I worry about those returnees who don’t have a shelter when they arrive back in Afghanistan. If they rent a house, one year of rent is required in advance. How can they afford all these obstacles?”

Male, Kabul, 28

Community members as help or hindrance?

Certain humanitarian and development needs are not necessarily different for returnees in comparison to other Afghans, many of whom also experience widespread economic and security challenges. Many communities receiving large numbers of returnees are overstretched – not only by returnees but also by large numbers of drought-induced or conflict-affected IDPs.¹²⁷

Yet some of these needs disproportionately impact returnees or pose a challenge to returnees in a way that other Afghans do not experience. Returnees often lack local networks essential to finding work and viewed their lack of connections as a barrier to economic well-being. While Afghanistan has a highly mobile population, returnees often face similar challenges to IDPs in identifying adequate housing, particularly when they are in an unfamiliar area. Sending children to school can be challenging for returnees due to language barriers, lack of educational documentation, or curricular differences (e.g. a Pakistani curriculum may not be immediately transferable to the Afghan educational system).

1. ¹²⁷ IOM and UNHCR (2018) [Returns to Afghanistan in 2017](#); OCHA (2018) [Humanitarian Bulletin Afghanistan: Issue 78 | 1 July – 30 September 2018](#).

Returnees may also have to overcome barriers in local or host communities such as cultural distance and language barriers.¹²⁸ They may be disproportionately targeted in intercommunal violence and robbery because of a lack of local connections. While direct family tend to be welcoming, there is evidence that deportees are viewed negatively in their communities and there is stigma around those who migrated irregularly to Europe.¹²⁹ Some Afghans believe that deportees are associated with crime abroad and view them with suspicion or animosity.¹³⁰ For example, one returnee said, “Additionally, some people mistreat returnees because they think that they have done something bad by leaving the country.” (Male, Nangarhar, 29). Occasionally returnees are seen to saturate job markets – one study uses the example of an oversupply of rickshaws.¹³¹



“I have my own problems at school and people consider me an irresponsible person since they all think that I didn’t do a good thing by leaving my country. Likewise, I also try to hide from the people of my society, since I feel guilty and everyone asks me questions.”

Male, Nangarhar, 18

However, discrimination is a lesser challenge for many returnees.¹³² Most Afghans know at least one returnee and are often sympathetic to their situation.¹³³ The majority (58%) of returnees in to a 2017 UNHCR survey reported problems with their communities relating to jobs and the cost of living (rather than discrimination).¹³⁴ Skilled returnees may be seen positively if they promote business or employment.¹³⁵

Returnees call for long-term assistance and better information

Returnees focused more on long-term assistance than short-term or immediate aid. There was widespread need for psychosocial support among the transcripts. Many called for financial support at a meaningful level that would permit them to start and sustain a business, repay a debt or buy a home (Figure 10). Few returnees asked for help with short-term needs, such as specific healthcare treatments or cash-based assistance. Returnees looked for assistance from many sources – the GoA, international donors, UN organisations and NGOs were each mentioned by respondents.

¹²⁸ REACH and Mixed Migration Platform (2017) [Migration from Afghanistan to Europe \(2014-2017\): Drivers, Return and Reintegration](#).

¹²⁹ Seefar (2018) [Examining Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan: Why Psychosocial Interventions Matter](#).

¹³⁰ Koser, K. and Kuschminder, K. (2015) [Comparative Research on the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration of Migrants](#), IOM.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Kamminga, J. and Zaki, A. (2018) [Returning to Fragility: Exploring the link between conflict and returnees in Afghanistan](#), Oxfam.

¹³³ The Asia Foundation (2017) [Afghanistan in 2017: A survey of the Afghan people](#).

¹³⁴ UNHCR, Orange Door Research, and Viamo (2018) [Returnee and Internally Displaced Persons Monitoring Report](#)

¹³⁵ Kamminga, J. and Zaki, A. (2018) [Returning to Fragility: Exploring the link between conflict and returnees in Afghanistan](#), Oxfam.

Returnee-driven programming

Returnees prioritised the following types of assistance to support their reintegration and future plans:



This assistance requires **accurate information** and **robust communications** to ensure it is directed to the most vulnerable returnees.

Figure 10: Assistance desired by returnees

Returnees who hoped to start businesses generally needed sizable sums of money to ensure that their business would be successful. At the lower end, returnees looking to start small businesses sought funding in the range of \$2,500 – \$5,000 (such as buying a rickshaw or opening a plumbing business). However, business plans cited by returnees could be substantially greater in cost – one returnee said that he needed \$50,000 to successfully launch his desired money exchange business. Returnees were generally not looking for grants in this size but rather access to capital, credit, or microfinance (at smaller levels).

“Since I returned to Afghanistan, I have not received any help, not from government nor from any organisation. I have submitted my documents to IOM to see what kind of help they will offer. From what I have heard, people who are deported receive \$5,000 cash as help. If I were able to receive \$10,000 in cash, I would be able to open my own shop of clothes for women and children.”

Male, Nangarhar, 24

Many returnees hoped to find jobs that would take advantage of their skill sets. The sample included returnees with skills in plumbing, painting, masonry, tailoring and other skills. They generally could not find employment in their area of expertise. The general lack of livelihoods likely contributes to this labour market mismatch, but it is also possible that actors can better capitalise on potential economic benefits of return. Skill mapping exercises among returnees would likely be valuable as a preliminary step in this process. Job placement services would likely be in high demand, as returnees may lack the local networks to understand how best to put their skills to use.

Other returnees highlighted strong interest in accessing land and better housing. None were able to access land allocation schemes or other housing assistance. One respondent said, “It is important for every returnee to have shelter and a good job. If the returnee is jobless, it is hard to afford daily needs, their children’s education, and health care. This is why most people start doing illegal things to support their families. The government should help provide shelter and jobs to returnees” (Male, Kabul, 28).



“I wish to open up a paint shop because painting is my profession and I am very good at it. But now I don’t have enough capital to fulfil my dream.”

Male, Nangarhar, 25

Those who hoped to re-migrate said that they need support navigating legal migration channels that are often challenging to comprehend and access. They wanted help obtaining visas, scholarship opportunities and assistance financing migration. One respondent said, “I see myself with my family living in a foreign country like the US or France. Somewhere with a stable economy and a better security situation. But it is really hard for Afghan people to live in a foreign country legally. Organisations should help returnees to get visas, because if not people will be forced to pursue illegal alternatives” (Male, Kabul, 27).

Transcripts from returnees also highlighted the need for accurate and trusted information. Most returnees turned to friends, family, and international networks for information (Case Study 2). For example, one respondent said, “I frequently talk to people living abroad and ask them about life in other countries. I ask them about jobs, education and security.” (Male, Nangarhar, 29). Others looked at social media or news outlets, but often did not trust the information they saw there. One respondent said, “I follow social media like Facebook and get information from it, but most of the time the information is not reliable or trustworthily” (Male, Kabul, 27). Many returnees said that they had no one to turn to for advice or guidance about their future, indicating a large information gap.



Returnee case study 2



Kabul City, Kabul



Male



27 years old



Single



Lived in Turkey.
Arrested by Turkish police.
Deported in May 2017.
Currently unemployed.



Future aspirations:

Living abroad in Europe.



Quote:

"I was born and raised here, so I am more familiar with this place compared to other parts of Kabul. At the same time, most of my relatives live here, so that's why I chose to come here. I spend a lot of time with these people. Most of them are my relatives. They have been really helpful whenever I needed them. However, some of my friends make jokes about me because I was deported. I don't show any reaction, though. I have to be calm in order to stop them from talking more about me."

To be honest, it wasn't my decision to leave Afghanistan. The situation was getting worse. There were no jobs and no security. That forced me to leave the country. The journey was very intense, but I didn't reach my destination. I got stuck in Turkey.

It wasn't easy at all to have a normal life in the way that other citizens were having it. For migrants, it was more difficult. It was especially difficult for me because I was unable to speak Turkish. Moreover, I was illegally in the country because we weren't provided with any documents. Therefore, we earned very little money as we weren't eligible to work freely.

I didn't return voluntarily. We were so many living in Turkey. We were about to sleep but suddenly, the police arrested us and took us to the prison where we stayed for 8 months. After a long wait, we thought they might release us and let us start working. But it was completely different – they decided to deport us. We were 84 people when we were caught by the police and they deported half of us. I asked why they didn't deport the rest and they said that their cases were under administrative review and therefore could take slightly longer.

Personally, I would have needed more financial assistance when I returned to Afghanistan because I spend more than 5,000 USD to reach Turkey. I still want to live abroad legally. Then I would have the same advantages as others. That's why I am still planning to migrate, but this time I am exploring more legal options rather than going illegally, which would be more costly. I have already spoken to many people who provide European visas in Afghanistan. They are slightly expensive, but I am dealing with them. I convinced them to lower the price. At the same time, I always talk to my relatives living in Europe. They advise me about my options. I also do my research on social media and I am following some consulting firms to show me more legal alternatives for migration.

What Returnees Hope for their Futures

Section Summary

- Most long-term returnee goals consisted of good jobs, starting a small business, education or re-migration;
- Re-migration was not the preferred long-term plan for most returnees but was frequently highlighted as a fall-back plan to attain these goals;
- Interest in re-migration was often linked to poor post-return psychosocial conditions and involuntary return;
- Key factors inhibiting or facilitating progress towards meeting goals include psychosocial, economic, migration, security and informational conditions;
- Psychosocial dynamics shape how returnees think about their circumstances and long-term plans.

Re-migration is not the default aspiration

The limited literature on returnees' aspirations tends to focus on re-migration interest.¹³⁶ If conditions upon return are unchanged from the conditions in Afghanistan that influenced the initial migration decision (such as persecution or unemployment), returnees may attempt to leave again, even if returnees experienced hardship the first time.¹³⁷ They may first need to build resources to attempt it again.¹³⁸

Yet re-migration cannot be assumed to be the default aspiration. Many returnees are interested in building or rebuilding their lives in Afghanistan.¹³⁹ For some it is because they are pessimistic about the probability of success in migrating or hold negative views of migration based on hardship or trauma from previous migration.¹⁴⁰ Or they point to an overall lack of agency in their long-term decision-making, indicating that they have "nowhere else to go".¹⁴¹ These returnees instead hope to borrow money, start businesses, pursue education, build other livelihood skills and own their own homes.

¹³⁶ Scalettaris, G. and Gubert, F. (2018) '[Return Schemes from European Countries: Assessing the Challenges](#)', *International Migration*

¹³⁷ Schuster, L. and Majidi, N. (2013) '[What happens post-deportation? The experience of deported Afghans](#)', *Migration Studies*, 1(2), pp. 221–240; REACH and Mixed Migration Platform (2017) '[Migration from Afghanistan to Europe \(2014-2017\): Drivers, Return and Reintegration](#)'.

¹³⁸ Dominguez, A. (2017) '[The hard journey back to Afghanistan](#)', *Mixed Migration Centre*.

¹³⁹ Abbasi-Shavazi, M. J., Sadeghi, R. and Mohammadi, A. (2017) '[Migrants' Integration in Host Societies, and Return to Home Countries: The Case of the Middle East and South Asia](#)', in *Migration Research Leaders' Syndicate*, IOM.

¹⁴⁰ IDMC, Samuel Hall and NRC (2017) '[Going 'home' to displacement: Afghanistan's returnee IDPs](#)'.

¹⁴¹ REACH and Mixed Migration Platform (2017) '[Migration from Afghanistan to Europe \(2014-2017\): Drivers, Return and Reintegration](#)'.

Re-migration aspirations were the second-most commonly cited goal among respondents but listed by a minority of respondents overall (Figure 11). Further, only several respondents identified re-migration as a primary future goal – a pattern that contrasted with the literature’s emphasis on re-migration as the dominant aspiration. **Instead, re-migration plans generally intersected with other goals, such as livelihoods, safety or family reunification.**

Those planning to re-migrate generally phrased their goals with language such as “go back” or “return to”. Pakistan and Europe were the preferred destinations while Iran and Turkey were not listed.¹⁴² One respondent said “In Germany, my other two sons are there without their parents and I want to go very soon.... My sons in Germany miss their parents, and we miss our sons. Legally or illegally, I want to live with my sons. It may take me years to go through UNHCR, but hopefully, I will get there sooner rather than later.” (Female, Kabul, 35)



“The risk of going to school, insecurity, unemployment and lower salaries [in Afghanistan] make our desire and future planning difficult. We want to go back to Pakistan. Going to Pakistan is easier than any other country. I know their language and some of my relatives and friends are there to assist me in finding the job. Learning a foreign language and finding the job are usually the hardest parts of moving to another country. I plan to go back to Pakistan within a few months.”

Male, Nangarhar, 36

Most hoped to pursue good jobs and business ventures

Most respondents listed economic or livelihood-related goals as their top long-term goal (Figure 11). Female respondents viewed this from the lens of financial independence. Some returnees cited interest in leveraging their existing skills to start small businesses such as tailoring stores or paint shops. For example, one returnee who was a mechanic by trade hoped to start an auto spare parts store. Another respondent said, “I am an expert in plumbing, so if I receive some assistance in form of cash, I can open my own shop. I don’t think that other work has the same profit margin” (Male, Nangarhar, 35). Other specific interests included buying a rickshaw, owning a convenience store, working for the government and more. Some simply said that they wanted a better job, or any job.

In addition to general economic improvement, several returnees also hoped to own a home. A home was seen as a symbol of financial success as well as being able to live alone instead of with other people. Home ownership was also seen as a mark of permanence and possibly an end to a life of transience. One respondent said, “One of the things that I really want in the future is to have our own house. My family and I discussed this but unfortunately, we cannot afford it” (Female, Kabul, 35).

Other returnees said that education-related goals were important to them. These goals included personal educational attainment as well as children’s education. Some respondents wanted to pursue higher education, either in Afghanistan or abroad. One respondent highlighted his academic aspirations: “I’m currently registered in a private university that I am planning to attend. My father is helping me pay for

¹⁴² The absence of Iran and Turkey as preferred re-migration destinations could be due to the geographic scope of the project (interviews were held in Kabul and Nangarhar). See Annex 1 for more information on the sampling strategy.

school. I'd like to take English language classes, computer classes, and some science subjects" (Male, Nangarhar, 19).

Future aspirations

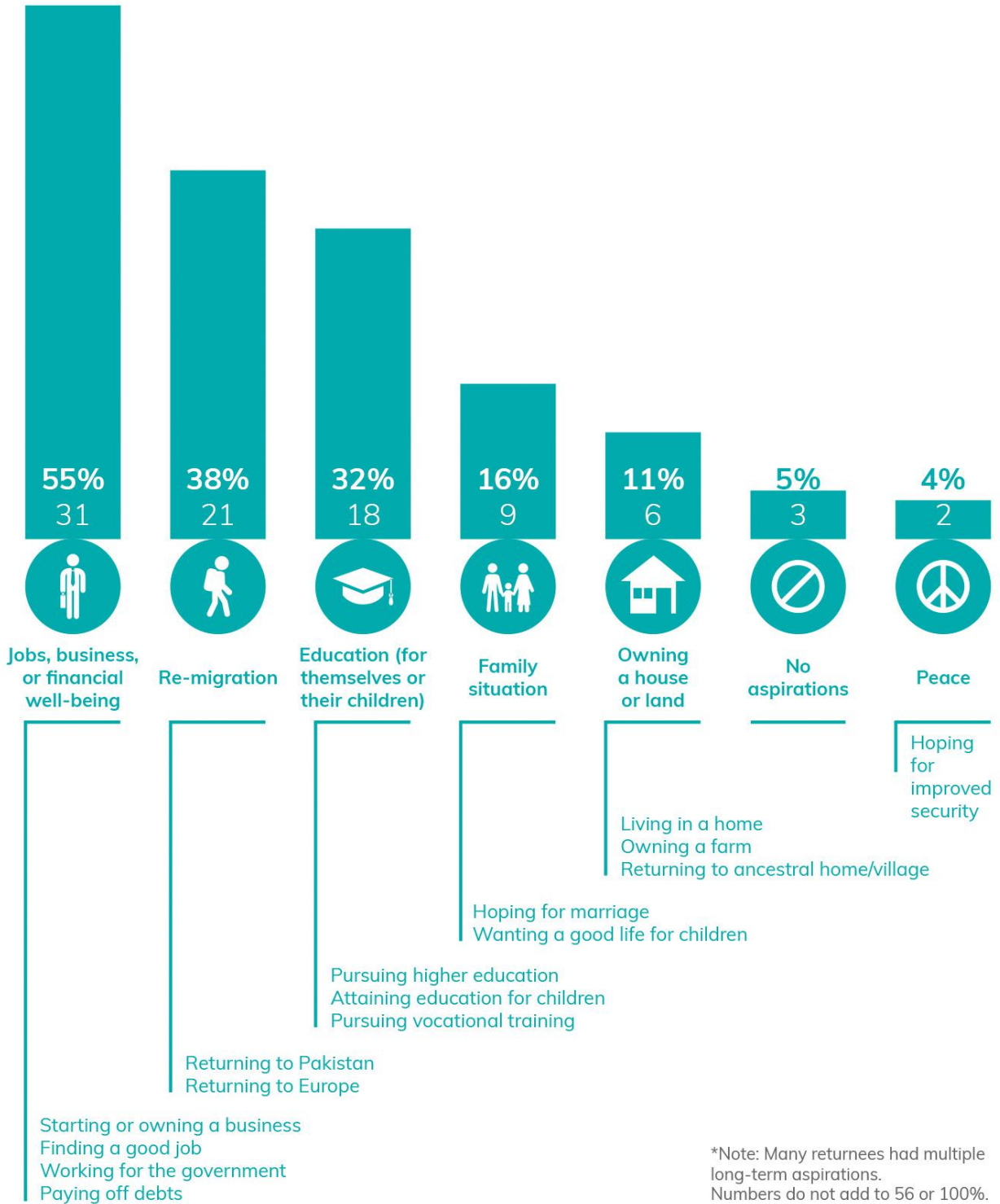


Figure 11: Long-term aspirations expressed by returnees

Aspirations related to personal or family happiness were also common. Mothers and fathers held dreams for their children's well-being; young people hoped to get married and be successful. Goals for a better life for children were often viewed through the lens of avoiding the hardships that parents had experienced. As one respondent said, "In the future, I want my children to have better lives here. I don't want my children to go through all the hardship I have been through in my life. Where is there to go? Where is secure? I won't take any more chances moving again to migrate abroad" (Male, Nangarhar, 37).



"I want to have a bright future for my children. I want them to have a good life ahead of them. I hope every one of them is able to have their own houses. Since my husband and I suffered a lot, I don't want them to suffer and experience life the way we did."

Female, Kabul, 35

While few respondents overtly mentioned security as a goal by itself, most noted it as an ongoing challenge and barrier to future plans. Several returnees did mention their hope for a peace deal between the parties to the conflict as a specific long-term aspiration. Others were less optimistic. Two respondents lacked goals altogether. In the face of acute psychosocial needs, they often said variants of "How can I set a goal for my life?" or "How can I set a goal for my future?" (Male, Nangarhar, 18). This was not the case for most respondents, though, clearly demonstrating returnee agency in their long-term aspirations.

Future plans linked to country from which respondents returned and voluntariness

Patterns in reported future plans suggest that country from which respondents returned, the voluntary nature of return, returnee location and sex may be relevant to future plans. While the data does not permit quantitative approaches, future research based on the patterns observed below could be valuable.

Does the country from which respondents returned affect re-migration interest?

- **Most EU returnees had re-migration aspirations** (6 out of 8 returnees from the EU). Returnees from the EU did not express long-term plans related to family or home ownership. This may point to a lack of investment in Afghanistan and sense of hopelessness among returnees from EU countries.
- **Few returnees from Iran expressed interest in re-migration** (3 out of 16 returnees from Iran). They often cited the challenges of their journeys abroad as justification for their lack of interest in re-migration.
- **Returnees from Pakistan had more interest in home ownership and re-migration**, generally to return to Pakistan. They tended to hold strong desires for a place to call home. 5 of the 6 returnees whose future plans involved their desire for their own house or land were returnees from Pakistan.
- **Returnees from Turkey were strongly interested in employment in Afghanistan.** Just one returnee from Turkey hoped to re-migrate.

Consistent with the literature, qualitative patterns in the data indicate that Afghans who returned involuntarily may hold more interest in re-migration than those whose return was more by choice. 17 out of the 21 respondents who held re-migration aspirations had returned involuntarily. Involuntary return often means returning to the exact same conditions that motivated the original journey. Voluntary returnees assess that conditions have changed; involuntary returnees have not. Case Study 3 highlights how individual persecution remained and incentivizes leaving again. Others who left to seek safety or work abroad return to the same context lacking security and economic opportunities.

Facing high levels of debt, family pressure and other psychosocial drivers (e.g. feelings of failure), involuntary returnees often have powerful incentives to re-migrate.¹⁴³ They face a myriad of circumstances upon return that can present a crisis and incentivize return. For example, one respondent said that he borrowed heavily to finance his migration. Though he hoped to remain in the country long-term, he planned to re-migrate to Pakistan because “I am not in the position to pay [my creditors] back, which makes me very scared” (Male, Nangarhar, 30). Another respondent said, “I was upset to have to return to Afghanistan because I not only lost our decent life but everything we owned” (Male, Nangarhar, 26).

Returnees who returned involuntarily may view their return as a “journey interrupted”.¹⁴⁴ Returnees interested in re-migration may decide to “rest and recuperate” (generally for a period of three-six months) following deportation before beginning to plan a new irregular journey.¹⁴⁵ For example, one respondent said, “Going back to abroad is not that easy now. However, I have made some plans, I will leave my family in the care of some relatives. I already saved around \$2,000 and will save more until the Spring. In the Spring I will start my trip to Europe. Now it is very cold and there will be more difficulties on the way due to rain and snow, so I will wait until the Spring” (Male, Kabul, 26).



“Life in Afghanistan is not good and my future life here is more uncertain. The government is weak and it can’t guarantee its own future. There is nothing here. I’m just wasting my time here. I want to go back to London and continue my life there as I had before.”

Male, Kabul, 26

Home ownership factored more into the future plans of voluntary returnees, who comprised 4 out of 6 respondents who wanted to own a home as an aspiration. Security-related aspirations also appeared to factor more into the future planning of voluntary returnees. All of those who said that they had no future goals were involuntary returnees.

Female returnees displayed different patterns in future planning than male returnees (though figures are not statistically significant or representative). The top long-term priorities for women were education (7 out of 9 respondents) and re-migration (6 out of 9 respondents). Family-related goals also featured prominently (4 out of 9). As these figures suggest, female respondents tended to express more long-term aspirations than men – 2.8 goals per respondent, on average (25 goals for 9 interviews). Men, on the other hand, generally expressed just 1.4 goals per person, on average (66 goal for 47 interview).¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Schuster, L. and Majidi, N. (2013) ‘[What happens post-deportation? The experience of deported Afghans](#)’, *Migration Studies*, 1(2), pp. 221–240.

¹⁴⁴ Dominguez, A. (2017) ‘[The hard journey back to Afghanistan](#)’, *Mixed Migration Centre*.

¹⁴⁵ Schuster, L. and Majidi, N. (2013) ‘[What happens post-deportation? The experience of deported Afghans](#)’, *Migration Studies*, 1(2), pp. 221–240.

¹⁴⁶ Each transcript was coded for mentioned of specific future aspirations (‘goal codes’). ‘Goal codes’ were created following an inductive analytical process rather than preselecting categories of goals. Multiple goals were common in the transcripts. A returnee



Returnee case study 3



Jalalabad, Nangarhar



Male



18 years old



Single



Deported in June 2018.
Currently unemployed.



Future aspirations:

Go back to Denmark.



Quote:

"I am not in touch with anyone in my society because I don't want anyone to know that I am a deportee from Denmark. It has been very bad and there have been negative effects on my life. I can't fall asleep properly, and when I do fall asleep I have bad nightmares. It is really hard for me to change my feelings unless I am able to go back to Denmark."

Due to security challenges that we had to face we decided to leave Afghanistan and were seeking asylum in Denmark. When we lived in Afghanistan, my father had lots of connections in the government. His friends would come to our home for dinner and networking. After a while my father was kidnapped. The kidnappers called my uncle and asked an amount of \$100,000... When my uncle talked to my father he told him the kidnappers will kill him if he sent the money or not. That was that last time we talked to my father. We don't have any information about my father and we were not able to contact him. After this incident, our house was targeted by unknown people and we were receiving threatening messages. That's when we decided to leave Afghanistan and head towards Denmark.

During my travels, I have learned the language and I can easily speak Danish. We lived in different cities and camps. But we stayed longer in the city of Alborg. I didn't have that much success abroad since our asylum was rejected and we got deported. When in Denmark, I felt better and secure. We didn't have that many expenses when we were living in Denmark. We'd hardly ever go to the cities. We were living in a camp where the Danish government used to give us 1,140 crown and it easily covered all our daily expenses.

My return to Afghanistan was not voluntarily. Our asylum request was rejected and we were deported. My three family members and I were the only Afghans on the plane. Our case was rejected, and when we appealed the court asked us for the supporting documents that show how our life was in danger in Afghanistan. We had one month to come up with the documents. I asked my cousin to send me the documents. But we were deported while waiting for the paperwork from Afghanistan. The night after we were deported the paperwork was delivered to Denmark.

I didn't receive any help after or during my return from any organisation or government. When we reached Kabul airport, the representative from the Danish embassy was there and he handed us over to the person in charge. We were promised that we would receive assistance, but we didn't receive anything... The representative had to look at our documents and paperwork. He told us that we would receive help, but we haven't received anything yet. He also gave us his phone number. We tried to call him a number of times.

Due to my security concerns, I didn't want to live anywhere else but at my aunt's home. No one knows that I live with my aunt. I live the life of a prisoner here. I feel like I am under house arrest. That is why I am not able to go out and meet or socialise with my society. I can't return to my own village because we have our rivalry and enemies there. Therefore I am not able to go there. I don't feel safe here either. I don't want anyone to be informed of our return back to Afghanistan...

For my future, I want to go back to Denmark, so that I can have a peaceful and stable life there. My life in Afghanistan is not safe. I want the government of Denmark to help us out and consider us to be eligible for Danish citizenship. They can take us from Afghanistan to Denmark and help us. I don't have anyone to turn for advice, sometimes I just consult with my aunt, but that's it.

There appeared to be greater interest in employment aspirations among returnees in Nangarhar than in Kabul; conversely, there was stronger interest in re-migration among returnees in Kabul. However, the differing migratory patterns in these locations (such as family presence or displacement status) could influence this pattern.

Those who received return assistance were largely concerned with aspirations related to livelihoods (9 out of 13) and few mentioned re-migration (2 out of 13). In contrast, migration and employment were fairly evenly mentioned by unassisted returnees. There were no discernible patterns in future plans based on recency of return, and interest in education and employment did not appear to be related to other factors.

Willingness to recalibrate plans and consider re-migration

Most respondents defined their primary long-term goal as either pursuing livelihood opportunities in Afghanistan or attempting to re-migrate.¹⁴⁷ However, most respondents also indicated secondary aspirations in their transcripts. Many recognised that their primary goal (such as starting a business) may not be achievable or realistic in the current Afghan context. In such cases, they often reported a willingness to pursue different plans (e.g. trading livelihood goals for re-migration) and used language like “might” or “maybe” to explain their thinking.

Re-migration was a common secondary or “fall-back” option for many returnees. Migration was often seen as an undesirable or reluctant fall-back option. One respondent said that he hoped to “avoid” the need to go abroad again and highlighted his desire to work in Afghanistan (Male, Nangarhar, 32). Others were more ambivalent about staying in Afghanistan. One respondent said, “I do not have plans for migrating again, but if I do get a good chance then I might migrate.” (Male, Nangarhar, 18)



“In the future, I would love to stay in my home country in the community I’m living in right now. However, I only want to do that if there are more job opportunities and the safety and education level increases. If this does not happen, I would like to migrate to one of the European countries.”

Male. Kabul. 23

While some respondents viewed re-migration as their preferred future plan for the sake of migration (i.e. living somewhere better), most actually viewed it as the mechanism through which to achieve other goals. For example, respondents that could not obtain find work in Afghanistan wanted to migrate to find them. In pursuit of the primary goal, respondents were willing to migrate through both legal or irregular means. One respondent said, “I want my kids to study in private schools, but I cannot afford to pay the fees right now. Therefore, I want to travel to Europe” (Male, Nangarhar, 30).

¹⁴⁷ The visual activity asked respondents to write their long-term goal or goals, but most respondents only wrote one long-term goal that they were working towards.

Re-migration aspirations linked with where and when returnees experienced trauma

Most respondents had traumatic experiences in their past and particularly during migration and return journeys. Where and when returnees experienced trauma influenced their re-migration interest. Those who planned to re-migrate were characterised by traumas experienced specifically during return rather than earlier in the migration journey. For example, they reported largely positive experiences abroad but traumatic encounters with the police and during their involuntary return. They also tended to be jobless post-return with little access to income. They often reported feelings of shame and bad relations with their communities (e.g. not liking/trusting people). This group often felt like no one helped them and that they had no one to turn to for advice.



“I want to leave Afghanistan as soon as possible because my mother and I are becoming depressed... Sometimes we feel like committing suicide, but then we get afraid of God. I try to be strong, but I want positive changes in the future.”

Female, Kabul, 19

In contrast, many of those who were not interested in re-migration had experienced traumatic experiences earlier in the migratory process. They were characterised by negative perceptions of migration and migration actors prior to return. This group also tended to have the support of their family and stronger relationships with their communities. They often had a livelihood skill (even if it wasn't being used) and at least some access to work. Some had accessed formal psychosocial assistance. For example, one respondent said, “I have the bad experience of [attempting to] travel to Europe, and because of the problems that I have faced during my journey, I will never think of travelling again” (Male, Nangarhar, 18). Their experiences abroad included fighting with the local population; feeling ostracised or discriminated against; not being paid by employer; not trusting smuggler. Last, this group felt like they had people in their lives they could turn to for trusted advice, such as family members.

These patterns indicate that it is not traumatic experiences by themselves that foster interest in re-migration, but rather what phase of the migration journey the traumas were experienced and how those traumas are amplified or mollified by conditions upon return.

Reintegration programmes can address specific barriers to future plans

When asked about their future plans, most returnees cited multiple factors that inhibited progress towards their goals. They also noted that there are multiple factors that facilitated progress towards their long-term goals (Figure 12). These factors provide a roadmap to interventions that can make a tangible difference in the lives of returnees. For example, respondents pointed to a lack of knowledge, inability to access capital or credit, unemployment, lack of relevant job or business experience, inability to access visas or lack of job training programmes as specific barriers making it more difficult to achieve their goals.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ The local or host community was notably absent from returnee responses, suggesting that they are not perceived as a facilitator or inhibitor of long-term planning.

Factors that inhibit or facilitate progress towards long-term plans

Inhibit progress		Facilitate progress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health challenges • Disapproval of family • Discrimination 	 <p>Psychosocial factors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to counselling • Family support • Support from friends and the community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debt • Lack of access to credit or capital • Nepotism or "jobs by reference" • Lack of job opportunities • Lack of assistance • High cost of living 	 <p>Economic factors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to credit • Money, capital or savings • Local connections to help with job search • Job opportunities • Assistance from the Government or international organisations • Good business opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of education • Lack of vocational training programs • Poor quality of education 	 <p>Access to education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scholarship opportunities • Registration in university • Existing education or work experience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of information • Lack of trusted guidance 	 <p>Access to information</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trusted advice • Advice from family • Guidance from academics or professionals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insecurity and violence • Fear • Threats from others 	 <p>Security conditions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved security • Feeling safe • Peace
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to get a visa or documentation • Political challenges abroad • Border closings • Risk of being deported • Language and cultural barriers abroad • Living conditions abroad 	 <p>Migration factors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smugglers • Friends abroad • UNHCR • Visas and documentation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of electricity/power • Cultural restrictions (cited by female respondents) • Drugs abuse • Dedicated time needed for planning 	 <p>Other factors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a place to live • Hard work • Hope for a better future • Clarity on future plans

Figure 12: Factors that facilitate or inhibit progress toward future plans

For some, barriers to future plans were large, structural and intractable. For example, nearly all respondents intending to remain in Afghanistan cited security concerns as a barrier to their ability to achieve progress on their plan. Several respondents mentioned corruption as a challenge. Yet not all respondents viewed these factors as barriers to long-term planning. While most respondents shared similar concerns about insecurity, unemployment and corruption in the transcripts, not all respondents listed these factors as barriers to long-term planning. This suggests that respondents engage with structural factors in different ways. Some were overwhelmed by seemingly-intractable challenges in Afghanistan and felt that they could not move forward with their plans, while others did not view these factors as barriers.

“There are a lot of barriers which we face in our daily life that make our dreams stay dreams. For example, the lack of security is one the biggest barriers alongside the lack of good educational system in the country. There is a lot of corruption in the government itself which is the worst thing I will face for my dreams to come true.”

Male, Kabul, 28

Despite facing the same circumstances, there were two perspectives on progress

Most respondents felt that they had not made significant progress in moving towards their goals. Respondents were asked to visualise their progress towards their future plans on a line. Most marked an “x” near the left of the line, symbolising a significant distance from their objective. These “progress markers” were aggregated and revealed a two-cluster pattern (Figure 13).¹⁴⁹ There is one highly concentrated cluster on the far left of the line and one smaller cluster slightly right of centre. Returnees in both clusters generally listed similar facilitators and barriers to their future plans but reported their perceived sense of progress differently. These “progress markers” did not appear linked to the recency of return.

¹⁴⁹ Several respondents chose not to mark their progress in the visual aid and were consequently excluded from the progress perception analysis.

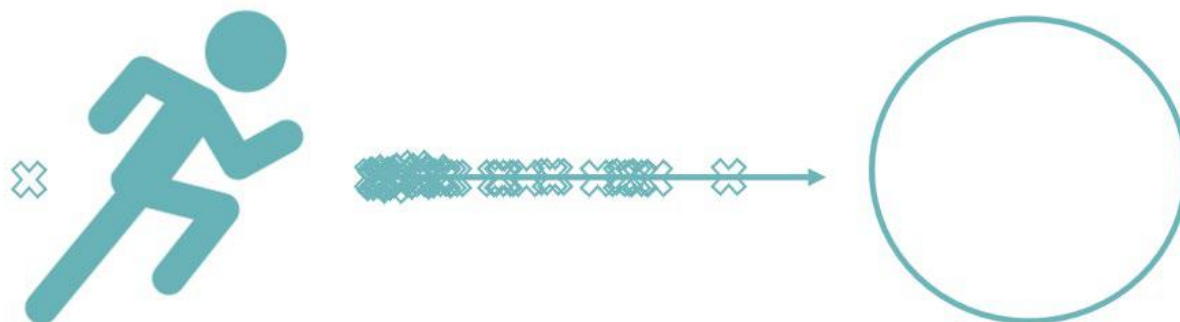


Figure 13: Cluster analysis of returnee perceptions of progress

Those who placed their “progress marker” in the cluster on the left tended to view their future in more black and white terms and could not see past immediate needs. All barriers tended to be viewed as insurmountable, such as a lack of access to capital. One respondent said, “At times of extreme financial scarcity, I cannot set future goals” (Male, Nangarhar, 36). Short-term and low-cost facilitators of progress, such as conversations with friends or receiving accurate information were often missing. Individual agency in future plans were rarely present, with more emphasis placed on external forces. Immediate, short-term needs outweighed any ability to move forward. For example, the need to work to support family prevented progress on non-financial long-term goals, such as education. One respondent said he had to “choose” between these two options, suggesting that he viewed them as mutually exclusive. (Male, Nangarhar, 25)



“I have no capital and therefore cannot pursue my goal”

Male, Nangarhar, 25

Some of those who placed their “progress marker” in the cluster on the left also did not recognise that they had taken steps towards their goal. For example, one respondent said that he had spoken to a local politician who had promised him a job working in a government office in Jalalabad. Yet this respondent indicated that he had made no progress towards his goal of finding a job (Male, Nangarhar, 19). Another returnee was currently enrolled in school and said that there were no obstacles ahead of him to finishing his degree but still marked his sense of progress on the far-left side of the line (Male, Nangarhar, 18).

In contrast, the cluster in the middle tended to associate perceptions of progress with specific actions that they had taken. Though they frequently noted the same barriers to their future plans as those in the left-hand cluster they tended to frame their future in terms of individual agency and optimism. For example, one respondent cited “planning and developing strategies before start-up” as a facilitator of his future plan to start a business (Male, Kabul, 23). They tended to use words like “confidence” and “committed” to characterise their future plans, even if they lacked necessary components of those plans such as capital. One respondent talked about being proactive and motivating his family members to pursue their goals, saying, “We are trying to learn English fluently so that it could help us to settle in a foreign country. And

I'm trying to learn computer skills and taking other small courses that could be helpful. I'm also pressuring my younger siblings to learn as much as they can" (Male, Kabul, 27).¹⁵⁰

"I am more willing to learn a profession so I can start my own business. It does not matter if I make more or less, but I will have a much better life. It is my dream to start my own business. However, I don't have the financial resources and at the same time no job. So, I didn't take any step forward, but I am committed to this. I am sure that one day I will start my business."

Male, Kabul, 25

These competing perspectives on progress towards future goals indicates the key role of psychosocial care in the reintegration process. Despite deep structural factors that are difficult to change, counselling and psychosocial support can help returnees reframe how they think about and engage with these conditions and to recognise their own decision-making agency. This in turn supports reintegration and long-term planning by helping returnees to lead full lives in pursuit of long-term ambitions.

A returnee's type of future aspirations may also be linked with their perception of progress. Those who held educational aspirations tended to perceive a sense of progress and sometimes communicated enthusiasm about their plans, though this sentiment was not universally held. One respondent who wanted to pursue education said "I have no obstacle ahead of me and want to embark as soon as I can" (Male, Nangarhar, 30).

Respondents sometimes viewed goals involving legal migration channels pessimistically. Those planning to migrate irregularly tended to report more progress, citing information from friends and family abroad and the knowledge of a job waiting for them as facilitators of their plans. Still, others were not so optimistic. One viewed the "risk of being deported" as a major barrier to his goal of living abroad (Male, Kabul, 27). There was little sense of progress from those seeking houses or land. Progress on livelihood-related goals were varied: some respondents were stymied by "jobs by reference", while others reported more progress in building a business.

¹⁵⁰ Respondent sex or location did not appear to influence how respondents placed their "progress markers". Other patterns were challenging to identify due to the disparity in cluster frequency (more respondents clustered on the left). There was some indication that voluntary returnees may have reported more progress towards their future goals.

Conclusion

This study aimed to amplify the voices of returned Afghan refugees and migrants to fill data gaps and understand how humanitarian and development actors can better support the needs of returnees. Evidence from 56 returnee interviews added to the existing literature on return and reintegration. The study first examined the link between migration experiences, return, and reintegration. It found that returnees face significant pressure abroad to return, original migration drivers often persist after return, and traumatic migration and return experiences leave deep impacts affecting reintegration.

Next, the study examined Afghanistan's challenging reintegration landscape defined by widespread needs among both returnees and other Afghans. Returnees are disproportionately vulnerable due to psychosocial needs and female returnees appeared particularly in need of support. In the following section, few returnees reported receiving assistance and almost all returnees felt unassisted. Returnees emphasised the powerful role of the family in alleviating the effects of traumatic experiences and improving dynamics with their communities. Returnees appeared to prioritise long-term assistance and trusted information over short-term support.

Last, the study analysed long-term aspirations and identified key factors (e.g. psychosocial, economic, security) inhibiting or facilitating progress towards those goals. Most returnees hoped to find good jobs, start businesses that used their existing skill set, or pursue education for themselves or their children. Less than half of returnees planned to re-migrate but re-migration was frequently mentioned as a fall-back plan. Poor psychosocial well-being and involuntary return appeared to encourage re-migration interest.

There are four main conclusions from this study:

First, available evidence suggests that Afghan returnee reintegration should be approached primarily from a psychosocial perspective. This report echoes current literature in finding that return and reintegration processes involve extensive needs among Afghan returnees. However, in an Afghan context defined by widespread needs, returnees display unique psychosocial needs stemming from traumatic experiences during migration and return. Conditions upon return may exacerbate the consequences of these traumatic experiences and are linked with depression, anxiety, isolation and even suicidal ideation.

Short-term needs must continue to be met by a strong humanitarian response. Simultaneously, reintegration-specific programming may benefit from a broader approach that prioritises psychosocial support. Returnees who receive psychosocial support may feel more empowered to take steps towards their future goals. Such an approach should be empirically based on psychological best practices and a 'do no harm' principle. Where possible, humanitarian and development actors can complement counselling with returnee empowerment programming aimed at lessening concrete barriers to their well-being and long-term plans, such as access to credit, decent work and affordable housing.

Second, information gaps at every stage of return and reintegration undermine efforts to support returnees. Rumours can motivate hasty, unwanted or dangerous return journeys and leave returnees feeling regretful. A lack of information upon arrival can decrease the reach of return assistance and pose a barrier to receiving longer-term aid. This suggests the need for comprehensive 'reintegration pathways'

that clearly link pre-departure and return assistance with longer-term reintegration programmes. These pathways need to be transparently communicated with returnees and accountability measures put in place for returnees who have no one else to call.

Information presents a critical way to support returnees in achieving progress towards their future goals. While re-migration was not the preferred long-term aspiration of most returnees interviewed for this research, those who did hope to leave faced large information barriers. Providing returnees with trusted information on complex migration procedures and key risks (e.g. trafficking in persons, Mine Risk Education and other protection challenges) will increase knowledge and likely lead to safer migration journeys. This requires building on existing strategic communications research to identify trusted information channels among returnees, such as specific word of mouth sources.¹⁵¹ Targeted informational campaigns may even lead to fewer instances of traumatic experiences during migration journeys.

Third, classifying returnees in a categorical manner risks mistaking labels for vulnerabilities.

Evidence suggests that broad reintegration needs are evident among all types of returnees and there may not be systematic differences between returnees of different ‘categories.’ While operational mandates often depend on dividing populations by category, programmes that profile based on need may be more effective. For example, available evidence suggests that returnees who lack family to return to or move to a new part of the country may be worse-off, regardless of their status as ‘assisted’, ‘documented’ or ‘voluntary’ returnees.

Fourth, re-migration is one of many long-term goals highlighted by returnees and is not the preferred option for many.

In contrast to existing research that focused solely on re-migration interest, evidence from returnee interviews suggested that jobs, businesses, educational attainment and homes are also long-term aspirations. Many returnees viewed re-migration as a means of securing their primary goal if they could not make progress towards it in Afghanistan. However, involuntary return and certain psychosocial indicators appeared related to re-migration interest along with other characteristics (e.g. country from which individuals returned) that require further research.

¹⁵¹ Communities of returnees that share certain migration experiences (such as women who have all lived in a certain destination country) could be effective platforms for sharing trusted information. Mixed Migration Centre (2018) [Experiences of Female Refugees & Migrants in Origin, Transit and Destination Countries: A Comparative Study of Women on the Move from Afghanistan, East and West Africa](#). Other word of mouth sources are highly trusted by Afghans and by returnees and should be integrated into a strategic communications plan. Seefar (2018) [Pushed Towards Migration: Understanding How Irregular Migration Dynamics and Attitudes Are Evolving in Afghanistan](#).

Recommendations

This report aimed to provide a platform for returnees to directly voice their needs and aspirations to humanitarian and development actors. Based on their narratives and existing literature, the report recommends that humanitarian and development actors involved in the returnee response:

- **Prioritise psychosocial assistance in reintegration programming.** Reorienting reintegration around psychosocial interventions may be more cost-effective and impactful than short-term assistance programs that many returnees do not view as “real” aid. This approach aims to change how returnees think about their environment and support them to take steps towards their future goals. Where humanitarian principles permit, trauma-related services before deportation could provide much-needed assistance. Support groups for female returnees may be particularly valuable.
- **Complement psychosocial assistance by empowering returnees to take steps towards their future.** Key tools include access to credit or microfinance, information about legal migration options, access to land and sustainable housing and job matching schemes taking advantage of existing returnee skill sets. Assistance to support business expenses generally needs to be larger in value to be effective.
- **Build ‘reintegration pathways’ by linking short- and long-term aid programmes.** This entails better coordination on disparate reintegration schemes and messaging consistent information from the moment a returnee interacts with aid systems. This approach will help returnees understand the assistance they receive and be better able to access longer-term aid programmes.
- **Treat information provision as a form of much-needed assistance for returnees.** Inaccurate information led to return decisions and upon return many returnees did not have access to trusted information. Humanitarian and development organisations can change this paradigm by delivering trusted information on rights, legal status, available assistance and protection pathways. This requires building on existing information on information sources that are trusted by returnees, such as word of mouth and community sources. Such information can be delivered in Afghanistan, transit and destination countries. In Afghanistan, such efforts will help returnees navigate complex aid structures.
- **Rethink categorical approaches to aid provision.** While many programmes may be funded by donors targeting a certain ‘type’ of returnee, humanitarian and development organisations should advocate for programmes that can target the most vulnerable rather than only ‘documented’ or ‘voluntary’ returnees. Possible organising principles to explore could include:
 - *Labels are not a proxy for experience and corresponding reintegration needs.* Documentation status, nature of return or receipt of assistance should not define operational mandates or value of assistance.
 - *Voluntariness should be viewed from the perspective of the returnee rather than the hosting state.* The current approach minimises the voice of the returnee in the definition of voluntary return – if an Afghan living abroad was not forcibly removed from the country or the host country can produce a signed document where the Afghan agreed to return, he or she will likely be considered a ‘voluntary’ returnee. Instead, ‘voluntariness’ should require the enthusiastic or

proactive consent of the prospective returnee – a dimension that is currently missing. Under this approach, returnees who ‘choose’ to return under coercive, fearful, traumatized or misinformed circumstances would not be considered as ‘voluntary’ returnees. This approach empowers returnees and provides a more accurate picture of the migration and return landscape.

- *‘Assistance’ should be measured with a scale rather than a binary category.* Returnees are often defined as ‘assisted’ but there is little nuance to this label. Those who receive transportation aid at the border and those who receive more comprehensive assistance packages may have different reintegration needs and experiences.
- **Conduct more research to fill important operational gaps and better support returnee reintegration.** Specifically, the following research questions remain unanswered:
 - What are the key moments or experiences during returnee reintegration processes that influence long-term decision-making? Available evidence is cross-sectional, indicating the need for longitudinal research.
 - Can qualitative measures of a returnee’s relationship with family and the community help identify those in greatest need of support?
 - How should host and origin countries categorise and measure ‘voluntariness’?
 - What are the most effective and scalable approaches to psychosocial support in Afghanistan?
 - How can reintegration programmes direct assistance to those who need it most?
 - What are the conditions under which the host community facilitates reintegration, and how can community-based approaches foster such conditions?
 - How do future plans vary based on experiences? Evidence from this research is qualitative, suggesting that emerging relationships (such as how returnees from Pakistan may have a stronger desire for land ownership or owning a home) requires further and larger-sample research.

Annex 1: Methodology

The aim of the research was to conduct a qualitative study that placed the returnee's future at its centre.

The project had the following objectives:

- 1) Understanding the future intentions and aspirations of returned Afghan refugees and migrants;
- 2) Studying how challenges experienced during the migration and return processes influences future plans, interest in re-migration and the ability to pursue reintegration or other plans; and
- 3) Understanding how humanitarian and development actors can better support the needs of returnees, in particular those who express a desire to re-migrate.

Research questions

Research area	Key questions
1 Migration motivation	-What was the motivation to migrate in the first place? -Where did you go and why did you choose that location?
2 Life abroad	-How did the experience of being abroad compare with life at home? -What were the most rewarding and challenging parts of travelling away from Afghanistan?
3 Return to Afghanistan	-How did you return, as part of a voluntary return programme or were you forced? -What are the reasons for your return and from where did you return? -When did the return take place and how? -Did you come back home or to a different province? -Did you receive any assistance during and/or after the return (and if so from which actor(s))? -What kind of assistance would you have liked to receive?
4 (Re)integration with host communities	-How has life been since return (economic, social, psychosocial)? -To what extent do you feel accepted in the community of return? -Are hosts barriers to or enablers of (re)integration? -How do you perceive the present and future of your current community?
5 Future Plans	-What are your aspirations for the future? -What steps are you taking to prepare for the future? -What obstacles make these plans more challenging and what support makes them more achievable? -What sources of information influence your decision-making about the future?

Approach

The research objectives were addressed through (1) a desk review and (2) qualitative interviews with returned refugees and migrants.

Desk review

A thorough literature review was conducted to ensure that existing research on returned refugees and migrants informed the final report and development of the primary data collection tool. This was achieved through a tailored desk review methodology that scored sources for quality. Each source achieving minimum quality was systematically analysed for relevant information.

Qualitative interviews with returnees

A total of 56 in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with returnees in Kabul and Nangarhar using a semi-structured research tool. The initial research design considered including other provinces in Afghanistan hosting returnees, such as Herat and Nimruz. However, western provinces were not included in the final sampling strategy because local researchers effectively identified a diverse range of respondents living in Kabul and Nangarhar.

Respondents were identified using a purposive snowball sampling approach that relied on referrals from initial interview partners to identify others as well as leveraging Seefar's in-country network. All interviews were conducted face-to-face.

Minimum sample representation was set in key dimensions to achieve maximum diversity of respondent experience including the type of return (forced or voluntary), the recency of return (within the last 12 months or at an earlier time), destination abroad (Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and Europe) and other characteristics including gender.

The study focused on returnees most likely to find themselves in a vulnerable position upon return. As a result, narratives of wealthier returnees are likely underrepresented in the qualitative sample along with those with few or no short- or long-term needs. Enumerators did not use a specific definition of vulnerability to achieve this focus but instead were instructed to prioritise diversity of return and reintegration experiences. Sampling priorities included a focus on:

- those whose return had not been entirely voluntary;
- those with fewer ties to Afghanistan;
- those in lower socio-economic status;
- those who were more unfamiliar with Afghanistan (had spent more time abroad or had never lived in Afghanistan).

The case study instrument contained probing and open-ended questions to generate insights on the research questions. Based on the desk review, interviews focused primarily on reintegration experiences and future plans, though they also explored migration stories and motivations, life abroad and to a lesser extent return experiences. The research tool included two additional components: respondent observation and a visual activity. The visual activity allowed respondents to clearly define their aspirations and share factors that facilitate or inhibit progress towards their future goals (Figure 16). As respondents often struggle to articulate motivations, visual aids are valuable to ensure that their own words guide the analysis. The tool was reviewed by Seefar's local staff for cultural sensitivity, translated into Dari and Pashto and piloted in Kabul before fieldwork began.



Figure 14: Visual activity

Fieldwork

A comprehensive enumerator training was held from October 23 to 25 in Kabul. Research tools were piloted in Kabul on October 25 and 26. Fieldwork formally began on October 27 and ran through November 8. Translation and data cleaning were conducted on a rolling basis throughout the fieldwork. Transcripts were lightly edited for clarity and English grammar. All transcripts were finalised on Thursday, 22 November 2018.

Limitations

As qualitative research adopting a non-random sampling approach, findings are not statistically significant or representative. The research was limited by geographic constraints (specific areas in Kabul and Nangarhar) and the absence of western provinces in Afghanistan is worth noting, as both Herat and Nimruz host large numbers of returnees from Iran. References to 4mi data should not be interpreted as representative of the Afghan migrant and refugee population.

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Millions of refugees and migrants have returned to Afghanistan in recent years. Afghans from Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Europe and elsewhere return to a context characterised by conflict, drought and economic hardship. While some initial reintegration experiences may be positive – particularly reunions with family members, there is ample evidence of widespread economic, social and psychosocial needs.

In October 2018, the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) Asia commissioned Seefar to address gaps in the evidence base on return and reintegration in Afghanistan. Focusing on returnees' experiences and aspirations, the research aimed to empowering their voices to influence programmes and policies.

Distant Dreams: Understanding the aspirations of Afghan returnees draws on a comprehensive desk review and 56 in-person qualitative interviews with returnees in Kabul and Nangarhar. The study found that reintegration is a process defined by poor psychosocial well-being. Traumatic experiences during migration and return foster vulnerability and prevent returnees from achieving their future plans, particularly for female returnees. The study also found that re-migration was not the preferred long-term plan for most returnees but was a fall-back for many. Information gaps are significant barriers to reintegration.

The research holds important implications for actors involved in the programmatic response. Recommendations include prioritising psychosocial assistance to returnees, communicating accurate information on aid pathways and shifting away from categorical approaches to return assistance. For more information and a full electronic copy of **Distant Dreams: Understanding the aspirations of Afghan returnees**, visit our website at:

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