DANISH REFUGEE COUNCIL

FORCED BACK AND LEFT BEHIND

Conditions for urban returnees and the urgent need for local integration in Afghanistan

Acknowledgements

This report produced by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and authored by Corinne Linnecar, Advocacy and Communications Advisor for Afghanistan. The research was conducted in February and March 2026.

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Afghanistan is facing a large-scale returns crisis, with 5.7 million people forced to return from Pakistan and Iran since October 2023. In a country already experiencing widespread poverty, malnutrition, and displacement, this scale of return is placing severe pressure on communities, services, and labor markets.

This report is not representative of all forced returnees but instead provides a snapshot of the lived experiences of selected households in urban areas. It examines their situation and argues for a shift in policy and operational focus to also prioritize local integration as a credible pathway to durable solutions, as current approaches remain heavily centered on return to areas of origin.

Drawing on data from 389 returnees across six cities, the findings show a consistent pattern: the trajectory is not one of reintegration, but of deepening and prolonged hardship. As savings are depleted, income opportunities remain scarce, and support is limited, families struggle to meet even their most basic needs. Debt accumulates, reliance on host communities becomes unsustainable, and risks to health and wellbeing increase.

Despite these challenges, local integration is the preference of some forced returnees. International standards set out three durable solutions, return to area of origin, local integration, and resettlement, and affirm the right of individuals to choose where they rebuild their lives. However, in practice, local integration remains largely out of reach without sustained and targeted support, particularly for livelihoods, housing, and basic services.

The findings also have direct relevance for international policy discussions. Conditions on the ground raise serious concerns regarding the sustainability and safety of any returns to Afghanistan, particularly where people are unable to meet their most basic needs over sustained periods.

Recommendations

The de facto authorities exercise effective control over the population of Afghanistan and are therefore the primary duty bearers towards the Afghan people. They are in a position to implement a range of measures, and to reverse existing restrictions, to rapidly improve conditions for some of the most vulnerable Afghans, regardless of displacement status. This includes expanding livelihoods through public works and support to small businesses, enabling women's economic participation by lifting restrictions, strengthening urban capacity through investment in affordable housing and protection against forced evictions, increasing access to basic services in high-return areas, and reversing the ban on girls' education beyond grade six.

Iran and Pakistan:

- **Suspend all forced returns:** States must adhere to their obligations under international law, including the principle of non-refoulement. Given current conditions in Afghanistan, returns should be suspended, as proceeding risks exposing individuals to serious harm and undermining their ability to rebuild their lives sustainably.
- **Ensure voluntariness:** Guarantee that any returns are informed, voluntary, and carried out in dignity, and halt violent and coercive measures used to pressure returns.
- **Maintain access to services:** Ensure Afghan nationals retain access to documentation, healthcare, education, and livelihoods while in host countries.

Donor States:

- **Align funding with durable solutions frameworks:** Ensure that all funding for durable solutions programming in Afghanistan is aligned with the IASC Framework, supporting all three pathways, return to areas of origin, local integration, and relocation within Afghanistan, based on informed and voluntary choice.
- **Prioritize and increase funding for Afghanistan:** recognizing that without sustained support for communities and basic services, the country's overlapping crises could worsen, deepening vulnerability and risking systemic collapse.
- **Adopt protection-based return policies:** Ensure that any decisions on returns are grounded in evidence that individuals can meet their basic needs and access essential services, and that returns would not breach international legal obligations. Refrain from policy changes that enable or accelerate returns under current conditions, which are neither safe nor sustainable.
- **Prioritize livelihoods and economic recovery:** Expand livelihoods funding, focusing on market-based approaches and large-scale job creation recognizing livelihoods as the central pillar of successful reintegration.
- **Support all communities:** Provide inclusive support to host communities, internally displaced people, and returnees to strengthen social cohesion, reduce tensions, and ensure equitable access to assistance regardless of displacement status.

UN and NGOs:

- **Coordinate sector-wide durable solutions programming:** Strategize jointly to ensure a coherent, cross-sectoral approach that prioritizes all three durable solutions, return to area of origin, local integration, and relocation within Afghanistan, rather than fragmented or isolated interventions.
- **Support all communities:** Ensure programming addresses the needs of returnees, IDPs, and host communities alike, strengthening social cohesion and preventing tensions or exclusion in contexts of repeated crises.
- **Strengthen planning and implementation:** Revise the durable solutions roadmap and accompany it with a concrete action plan, with clear responsibilities, timelines, and measurable indicators.
- **Enhance information provision:** Ensure returnees and host communities have timely, accurate, and accessible information on available support, rights, and services to enable informed decision-making.
- **Advocate for protection:** Use evidence from the field to consistently advocate with authorities, donors, and other stakeholders for adherence to international protection standards.
- **Community consultation:** Consult directly with returnees, IDP, and host communities to ensure programming aligns with their needs and aspirations, recognizing that they are experts in their own lives and solutions.

Introduction

Afghanistan is facing an unprecedented, forced returns crisis. Since October 2023, an estimated 5.7 million people have been forced to return from neighboring Pakistan and Iran. The scale is immense, equivalent to the entire population of Norway. Few countries could withstand such a demographic shock. In Afghanistan, where a protection crisis, pervasive poverty, and severe malnutrition are already entrenched, the consequences have been devastating, affecting communities across the country.

Host communities, many already struggling to survive, now face increased competition for limited resources and housing, which has inevitably driven up prices. IDP communities experiencing protracted displacement in Afghanistan, many of whom have been displaced for decades, continue to face acute needs. Yet they are often deprioritized within humanitarian and basic human needs programming due to funding constraints, which force actors to focus limited resources on the most at-risk communities. Meanwhile, many forced returnees are unable to meet even their most basic needs and are left without viable plans to facilitate sustainable reintegration.

In displacement contexts, the aim is for returnees to gradually progress towards durable solutions. However, in Afghanistan, many experience a backwards trajectory, with their situation deteriorating rather than improving as reliance on host communities becomes untenable, they struggle to find a steady income, debts accumulate and risks to health heighten.

Drawing on qualitative data, this report offers a focused snapshot of the experiences, aspirations and challenges of people forced to return from Pakistan and Iran. It seeks to move beyond headline figures and needs assessments, while recognizing its scope as indicative rather than comprehensive. It examines the situation of forced returnees in key cities across Afghanistan who, without adequate support, are struggling to integrate locally and rebuild their lives.

Background

Returns Crisis

For decades, Pakistan and Iran have provided refuge to the majority of Afghans displaced by war, disaster, and economic collapse. They remain among the world's largest hosting countries for displaced people, despite facing significant domestic challenges. As of December 2025, Iran still sheltered 4.4 million Afghan nationals[1], including registered refugees, undocumented people, residence permit holders and people with working visas, whilst Pakistan still shelters 1.9 million Afghans including registered refugees, Afghan Citizen Card holders and undocumented people as of February 2026[2]. In recent years, both governments have intensified measures to remove Afghan nationals, largely framing them as undocumented or "illegal" migrants subject to domestic enforcement measures. In doing so, they have implicitly treated Afghanistan as safe for return following the withdrawal of international forces and the political takeover in August 2021, despite ongoing protection concerns.

In September 2023, Pakistan announced the Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan, requiring undocumented migrants to leave or face detention and deportation. The government subsequently confirmed the resumption of the plan to include the deportation of all Afghan Citizenship Card (ACC) holders from April 2025[3]. In parallel, Iran approved measures to deport undocumented Afghans in late 2024 and, following the expiry of Headcount slips (temporary identification documents) in March 2025, launched a return scheme affecting around two million Afghans, with most anticipated to return to Afghanistan by 6 July 2025 or face deportation[4]. More than half a million people (585,000) returned from Iran in July 2025 alone[5].

UNHCR sets the normative framework used to assess whether returns are consistent with international protection obligations, including the principle of non-refoulement. Despite concerns raised by UNHCR, most recently within the 2025 Guidance [ii] which reconfirms that States should allow access to their territory, uphold non-refoulement, and ensure that any return is voluntary, informed, safe, and based on a careful individual assessment of protection needs given the ongoing risks in the country. UNHCR continues to emphasize that many Afghans, regardless of legal status, face serious protection risks within Afghanistan, particularly women and girls, due to the prevailing human rights environment[6].

EU policy development

Recent policy developments in several European states indicate a gradual shift towards expanding the use of forced returns. In August 2024, Germany became the first EU country to carry out returns to Afghanistan, facilitated by Qatar[7], since the political takeover in 2021. The German government stated that the individuals concerned had been returned on the basis of security considerations and prior criminal convictions[8].

This approach is not isolated. In a number of European states, political debate has increasingly focused on expanding returns of Afghan nationals who are assessed as not holding legal residence status[9]. While framed as migration management measures, these proposals raise serious concerns about compliance with the EU's asylum acquis and international protection obligations, including the principle of non-refoulement, also enshrined in the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Conflict

This returns crisis is unfolding amid escalating conflict on multiple fronts. Since late February 2026, Afghanistan has experienced renewed hostilities with Pakistan to the east, while to the west the US–Israel military campaign against Iran, has contributed to increased regional instability across the region, leaving Afghan communities effectively caught between conflicts on both sides.

Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict

Rising tensions along the Durand Line in late February escalated into airstrikes and border clashes between Afghanistan and Pakistan. In late February, Pakistan's Defence Minister declared a state of "open war" with Afghanistan[10]. Hostilities have continued since, with no ceasefire established. Pakistan's military operations have affected at least ten Afghan provinces, with airstrikes, drone strikes, shelling, and cross-border clashes reported in Khost, Kunar, Nangarhar, Paktia, Paktika, Kandahar, Laghman, Nuristan, Parwan, and Kabul[11]. These strikes have affected both military targets and civilian and humanitarian infrastructure, including health facilities, IDP camps, and transport infrastructure. Essential humanitarian infrastructure was also hit, with the transit and reception centres that welcome and assist forced returnees in Torkham and Spin Boldak crossing points both having to close during increased conflict.

The conflict has resulted in more than 300 civilian deaths and more than 200 injuries[12]. On 17 March an airstrike carried out by Pakistan military forces hit a drug rehabilitation hospital in Kabul, with UNAMA confirming at least 143 deaths[13] and the de facto authorities reporting over 400 deaths. Afghan de facto forces have carried out border attacks and drone strikes into Pakistan, including in urban centers and towns such as Quetta, Kohat, Rawalpindi, Abbottabad, Bannu and Nowshera. At least seven people, including two children, have been injured by these attacks[14]. In addition, the conflict has resulted in the displacement of 94,000 people in Afghanistan[15].

US-Israel and Iran conflict

The US–Israel military campaign against Iran, is driving a rapidly deteriorating humanitarian and economic situation across the region. In Iran, reported civilian casualties have reached 2,000 according to Iranian authorities, with more than three million people internally displaced as of 30 March 2026[16]. These figures point not only to the scale of harm to civilians but to mounting pressures on already strained humanitarian systems.

Disruptions to regional trade and supply chains are compounding these impacts. The effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz has reduced tanker traffic by approximately 90% in March[17], contributing to a sharp rise in global oil prices. At the same time, the suspension of operations at the Dubai humanitarian hub is constraining the delivery of assistance, affecting supply pipelines intended to reach an estimated 1.5 million people across 25 countries, including Afghanistan[18].

Border closures

For Afghan communities one of the most widespread impacts of the conflicts has been border closures and disruptions to cross-border movement and trade. The border between Pakistan and Afghanistan (the Durand Line) was closed on 11 October 2025 and has remained shut since, except for the passage of forced returnees from Pakistan into Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has historically depended on neighboring countries, predominantly Pakistan, for essential imports due to its landlocked geography and limited domestic production capacity, with the Durand Line being particularly critical to Afghanistan's trade. The Durand Line stretches roughly 2,640 km, accounting for nearly 45 percent of Afghanistan's land borders, making it by far the country's longest border. Of the around 20 official crossings for trade and movement along Afghanistan's borders, the Durand Line hosts 7, including the main commercial points at Torkham and Spin Boldak.

Afghanistan's reliance on Pakistan as a primary source of essential goods, including staple foods, medicines, agricultural inputs, and construction materials, leaves domestic markets highly exposed to external disruption. The border closure has translated into reduced availability and rising prices of basic commodities, with significant increases for key food items, including imported rice (up 40 per cent) and vegetable oil (up 20 per cent) since December 2025[19].

Following Pakistan's border closure in October 2025, Afghanistan has increasingly relied on imports via Iran to meet domestic needs. Iran's temporary closure of its border on 2 March, alongside the suspension of exports of essential goods such as food and medicines, underscores the fragility of cross-border reliance. Although the border with Iran has since reopened, the episode highlights Afghanistan's exposure to external shocks and the risk of sudden disruptions to vital imports, with potentially critical consequences for food security and access to basic necessities. Escalating hostilities in Iran and across the region have heightened uncertainty along transit corridors, effectively limiting the viability of routes through Iran and further narrowing options for the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Humanitarian context

Afghanistan continues to face a humanitarian crisis. The 2026 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan estimates that 21.9 million people, nearly half the population, require assistance. This figure is likely an underestimate, as it does not fully capture the scale of anticipated returns and reflects a methodological shift by OCHA towards higher severity thresholds and prioritized needs, aligning caseloads more closely with expected funding[20].

Although the last major macroeconomic shock was in 2021 with the political takeover, the cumulative effects of nearly fifty years of conflict and instability have left critical infrastructure degraded, institutions weakened and private sector development constrained. Agricultural productivity remains persistently low due to outdated practices, climate shocks, water scarcity, and land degradation, undermining rural livelihoods[21]. The population remains heavily reliant on subsistence agriculture and external assistance, with limited integration into regional and global markets following the 2021 political transition[22] and the imposition of extensive international sanctions that include asset freezes, travel bans and an arms embargo[23].

An estimated 65 per cent of the population lives in acute poverty, while 39 per cent experiences severe multidimensional deprivation, rising to 75 per cent in rural areas[24]. Livelihoods are largely concentrated in daily wage labor, subsistence farming and informal micro-enterprises, leaving households highly exposed to price volatility, seasonal fluctuations and economic shocks. Food insecurity is acute and worsening with 17.4 million people projected to face crisis or worse food insecurity (phase 3+)[25] in the 2025-2026 lean period, compared with 14.8 million people in 2025[26]. Climate change and natural disasters act as a threat multiplier: drought affects millions across multiple provinces, while floods, earthquakes, and disease outbreaks compound needs.

At the same time, Afghanistan hosts one of the world's largest internally displaced populations, with 3.2 million people internally displaced at the end of 2025[27] and further displacement continuing into 2026. The combination of internal displacement and mass returns has overwhelmed already fragile services and support systems.

Need for inclusive national support

In Afghanistan, basic income schemes led by the de facto authorities exist but are highly restrictive in scope and coverage. For example, the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled Affairs provides a monthly payment of 2,000 AFG (31 USD) to widows, orphans, and persons with disabilities linked to conflict[28]. Alongside this, a parallel assistance mechanism targets assistance individuals unable to work who have resorted to begging[29]. People deemed eligible are registered and referred for support, including monthly cash assistance delivered through the Afghan Red Crescent. The de facto authorities also state that some individuals are referred to municipalities for employment opportunities[30].

The de facto Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA) also operates formal mechanisms aimed at connecting unemployed people to work opportunities through registration and labor market coordination. They also report providing technical and vocational training linked to labor market needs, alongside the licensing of training institutions to expand skills development pathways[31]. In addition, the de facto authorities have a scheme where people can apply to work abroad[32].

Despite these mechanisms, both basic income provision and employment support schemes remain too narrow to meet the scale and diversity of need. While such schemes exist and provide a basis for assistance and labor market engagement, eligibility criteria are highly restrictive in practice and may favor those with closer links to administrative structures. None of the forced returnees spoken to within this report were able to access any de facto authority-led support or employment schemes.

Expanding both income support and employment schemes in terms of the level of support provided as well as inclusivity in terms of eligibility criteria, would offer a more effective and dignified response to widespread vulnerability. Eligibility should be grounded in vulnerability and need to ensure fair and impartial coverage across all communities. Inclusive schemes could play a critical role in supporting forced returnees, enabling them to meet immediate basic human needs and reducing reliance on negative coping strategies as they attempt to reintegrate into already strained communities.

Legal and policy analysis

Non-refoulement

The principle of non-refoulement prohibits states from returning a person to a country where there are substantial grounds for believing they would face a real risk of serious harm. It is most clearly set out in Article 33 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees[33], which prohibits returning a refugee to a place where their life or freedom would be threatened on specific grounds, including race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group.

In addition to refugee law, non-refoulement obligations are firmly grounded in international human rights law. These obligations are broader in scope and apply to all individuals, regardless of their legal status. Article 3 of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment[34], explicitly prohibits transferring a person to a state where there are substantial grounds for believing they would be in danger of being subjected to torture.

While the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights[35] does not contain an express non-refoulement provision, its protections of the right to life (Article 6) and the prohibition of torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment (Article 7) have been authoritatively interpreted by the United Nations Human Rights Committee to apply with extraterritorial effect and thus provide obligations on States in situations of return. In its General Comment No. 20 on Article 7[36], the Committee affirmed that states must not expose individuals to a real risk of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment upon return to another country. Similarly, although the European Convention on Human Rights does not explicitly refer to non-refoulement, Article 3[37], which prohibits torture as well as inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, has been consistently interpreted by the European Court of Human Rights as prohibiting removal where there is a real risk of such treatment[38].

Non-refoulement obligations under refugee law, the Convention against Torture, and the ICCPR are overlapping, mutually reinforcing, and absolute, imposing on all states a non-derogable duty not to return individuals to places where they would face a real risk of torture, inhuman or degrading treatment, or threats to life. It is now widely accepted that the principle of non-refoulement forms part of customary international law and is therefore binding on all states irrespective of treaty ratification. This prohibition is absolute: it applies in all circumstances and does not allow for exceptions based on migration control or public interest considerations. Crucially, it also extends beyond situations of direct violence.

While non-refoulement is commonly framed in relation to persecution, torture, or direct threats to life, international jurisprudence also recognizes that it may be engaged where return would expose individuals to conditions of such severity that compromise human dignity or pose a serious risk to health or life, reaching the threshold of inhuman or degrading treatment. This requires a forward-looking assessment of whether such harm would be a foreseeable consequence of return, including where it arises from the cumulative impact of living conditions.

In *M.S.S. v Belgium and Greece*[39], the European Court of Human Rights held that exposure to extreme deprivation, including homelessness, lack of sanitation and food, and prolonged administrative uncertainty, could, in combination and in light of the applicant's particular vulnerability as an asylum seeker dependent on state support, reach the threshold of treatment contrary to the prohibition of torture, inhuman, or degrading treatment in Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Similarly, in *Paposhvili v Belgium*[40], the Court clarified that Article 3 may be engaged where removal would expose an individual to a real risk of a serious, rapid and irreversible decline in health or a significant reduction in life expectancy due to lack of access to adequate medical care. Taken together, these authorities support the principle that, where severe material deprivation or denial of essential care is assessed cumulatively and in light of individual vulnerability, it may in certain circumstances reach the threshold of inhuman or degrading treatment, thereby engaging non-refoulement obligations.

Durable solutions

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons[41] is the leading international guidance on durable solutions. It defines a durable solution as being achieved when IDPs no longer face displacement-specific risks and are able to access rights, services, and civic participation on an equal basis with non-displaced populations. The framework outlines eight key criteria to assess the extent to which a durable solution has been achieved: safety and security; an adequate standard of living; access to livelihoods; restoration of housing, land and property; access to documentation; family reunification; participation in public affairs; and access to effective remedies and justice.

The framework emphasizes informed and voluntary choice, requiring that IDPs have access to reliable information and freedom from coercion when selecting between sustainable return to their area of origin, local integration, or settlement elsewhere within the country. Achieving durable solutions is framed as a shared responsibility of national authorities and the broader humanitarian and development community, with policy measures needed to address structural barriers, governance gaps and social inclusion to ensure solutions are sustainable, equitable and resilient.

In Afghanistan, the de facto authorities prioritize return to areas of origin, including through initiatives such as building new townships, many of which are in remote locations and currently lack infrastructure and resources. Land allocation has taken place in some areas.

Humanitarian actors in Afghanistan prioritize immediate, life-saving assistance for forced returnees such as cash, food, shelter and protection, while basic human needs (BHN) approaches aim to restore services, livelihoods and infrastructure in communities hosting returnees. Programs such as UNDP's ABADEI[42] and UNHCR's PARRs[43] extend this through area-based support, often concentrated in locations with high numbers of returnees, including some urban centers, to strengthen local capacity and reintegration outcomes.

However, these approaches are constrained by limited geographic coverage, uneven implementation capacity and a lack of sector wide coordination. Despite the existence of strategic frameworks for durable solutions, implementation in Afghanistan remains fragmented and inconsistently operationalized due to chronic underfunding, limited coordination across relevant actors, access constraints, and short funding cycles, all of which restrict the ability to deliver sustained, multi-sectoral support for return, local integration, or resettlement.

Additional approaches are needed to ensure that resettlement and local integration are also viable and adequately supported options for IDPs and forced returnees.

Methodology

This report focuses on the experience of forced returnees residing in urban centers in Afghanistan and draws on a combination of qualitative and quantitative data sources. This report utilizes data from 389 individuals across six cities.

Focus Group Discussions were conducted in Herat, Jalalabad, Kabul, and Kandahar. These are amongst the largest cities in Afghanistan and key destinations for forced returnees. Discussions were held in February 2026 with open ended questions that aimed to capture returnees' experiences, needs and ideas for solutions. DRC spoke with 87 people, including 42 women and 45 men, through eight focus group. In each city, one discussion was held with women and one with men.

The report also utilizes protection monitoring interviews with forced returnees across key cities, Asadabad, Jalalabad, Herat, Farah, and Kandahar. Interviews were collected over a six-month period between September 2025 and February 2026. DRC conducted protection interviews with 302 forced returnees in these cities, 127 women and 175 men.

All data was collected anonymously, and no identifying details were recorded or are provided within this report.

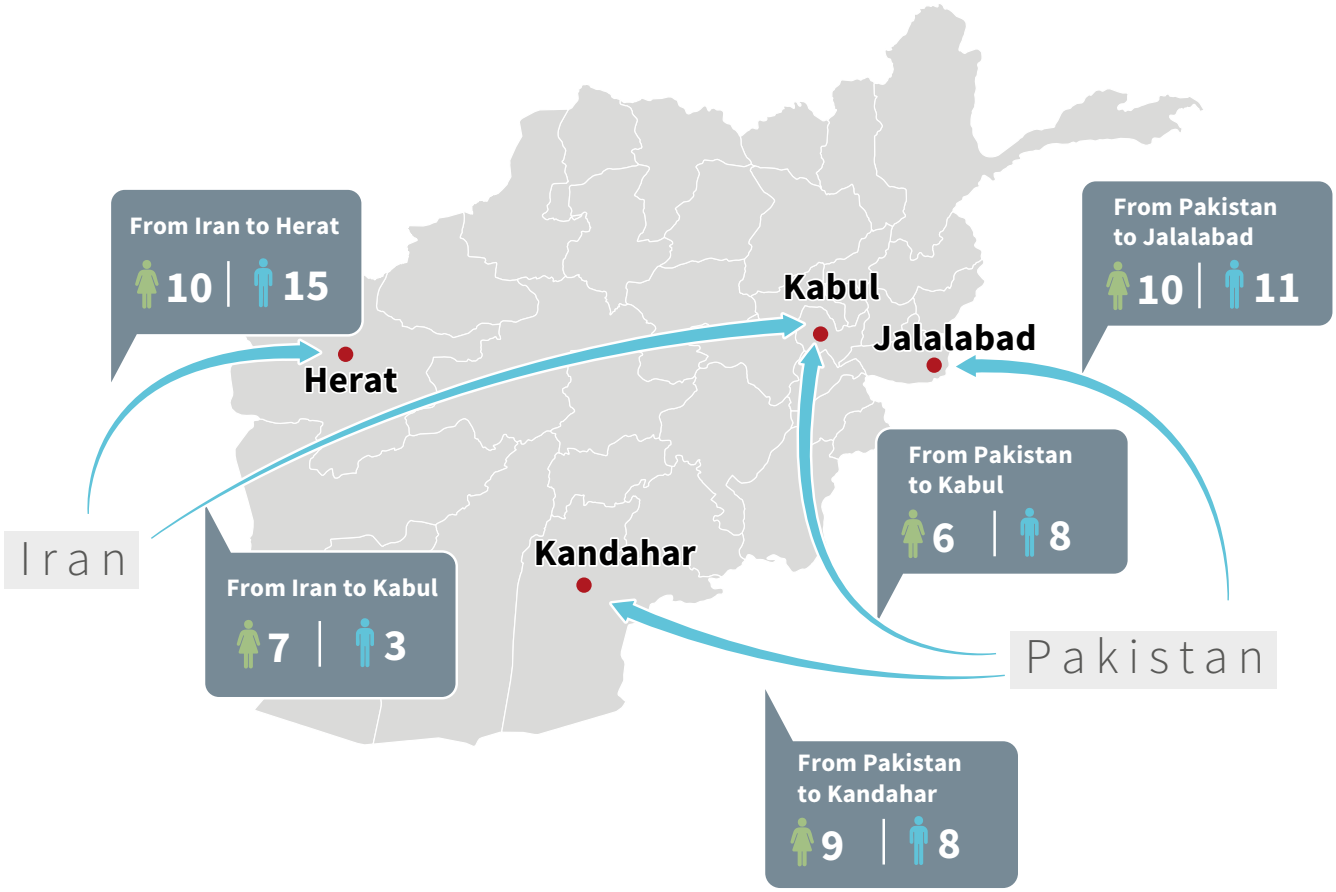
By combining these methods, the report provides insights into the lived experiences of forced returnees in some of Afghanistan's key urban centers and the challenges they face in achieving local integration.

Profile of focus group discussion participants

Of the participants, 52 people had been forced to return from Pakistan and 35 from Iran. Participants had lived in Pakistan or Iran for between seven and 48 years prior to returning to Afghanistan.

Among those forced to return from Pakistan, 33% (17 people) were born there. Among those returning from Iran, 6% (two people) were born in Iran. All participants with children reported that their children had been born in Pakistan or Iran.

At the time of the discussions, participants had been back in Afghanistan for between two months and two and a half years, with most having returned within the previous six to nine months.



Findings

Life in Pakistan and Iran

> *Life in Iran was better. My family situation was better. But still we were only able to afford rent and to meet our needs."*
>
> *Woman living in Herat, forced to return from Iran*

To understand the impact of forced return, it is first necessary to understand what people have lost. While individuals' experiences in Pakistan and Iran varied widely, focus group discussions revealed common narratives about living conditions and hardships. These accounts are important, as they illustrate the standards of stability and opportunity that people now compare with their current lives in Afghanistan. For many, the very notion of "return" is complex: participants had grown up outside of Afghanistan and, in some cases, knew little or nothing about the country.

DRC's focus group discussions indicate that, although life in Pakistan and Iran was often insecure, marked by legal restrictions and significant discrimination, the majority of people were satisfied with their lives and the standard of living they were able to maintain. People overwhelmingly described their experience in Pakistan and Iran as living "hand to mouth" but emphasized that they were able to meet their basic needs with relative ease.

Accommodation varied from living in camps in Pakistan, to home ownership in Iran. The majority of people spoke of renting long-term, modest homes with adequate space, electricity and water. Those who did own homes, often highlighted that these were registered under the name of a local national due to legal barriers preventing Afghan nationals from formally owning property.

Access to adequate food was consistent. People were able to purchase sufficient and nutritious meals for their families, equating to three meals a day that regularly included more expensive food items such as meat. Healthcare was generally available when needed with both male and female medical professionals available, and families were largely able to afford the associated travel and medical costs to meet health needs.

> *It was a normal life, sometimes we could afford a standard meal, often with meat, sometimes it was more tough and food was basic."*
>
> *Man living in Kandahar, forced to return from Pakistan*

100% of male participants had access to livelihoods including day labor in construction, agriculture, transport, as shop assistants and in small-scale trade. Women's employment was less consistent but still the majority of women had been working in Iran and Pakistan. Women pursued work both inside and outside the home in areas such in administration, paid domestic work, tailoring, food preparation and handicrafts. In some cases, families had established small businesses, such as shops or service-based enterprises.

In both countries, most livelihoods were in the informal economy, but work was generally available, allowing households to maintain a relatively consistent income. Some families reported having been able to accumulate modest savings over time.

> *We had small businesses, I was a driver and my brother had a shop. We didn't need support [aid]. We were aware of our neighborhood and when people needed support we would go and assist them."*
>
> *Man living in Kabul, forced to return from Pakistan*

Those who had lived in Iran reported access to more skilled, higher-paid or more reliable work when compared with those who had lived in Pakistan. This includes one woman highlighting her husband's career as an architect, and other men mentioning secure employment as security guards or skilled builders. Women also held higher paid or more secure roles in Iran, including factory and administrative work where they were contributing significantly to household income.

> *My husband was an architect, and I was a tailor in a factory. In Iran, things were very expensive, but we were able to handle life and afford basic needs. The situation was hard but still better than here, at least we could access work."*
>
> *Woman in Herat, forced to return from Iran*

Children's lives were described as particularly different prior to return. Participants highlighted that their children were able to attend school in Pakistan and Iran, although access varied depending on location, costs and documentation. Many mothers repeatedly emphasized how their children had grown up in environments where education was prioritized regardless of their sex. The majority of parents reported that they paid for their children's education, or the equipment required to attend school with relative ease. In addition to school, children pursued hobbies and socialized outside of the home.

A minority of families noted that their sons needed to work due to household economic pressures. In most cases, this work was limited and allowed boys to continue attending school. However, a small number of families facing more severe financial hardship relied more heavily on children's income. Two participants in Jalalabad and Herat reported that their sons were not attending school and instead worked collecting scraps metal and daily labor to support the household.

Women also stressed the stark differences between their lives in Pakistan and Iran and their current circumstances in Afghanistan. Many women spoke about missing the independence and sense of purpose that work had provided, as well as the economic contribution it brough to their households. In addition, women noted they were free to socialize and visit relatives.

> *Women cannot go out as freely as they did in Pakistan. This is difficult."*
>
> *Woman living in Jalalabad, forced to return from Pakistan*

Life in Iran and Pakistan was not without hardship. People consistently reported widespread discrimination throughout their lives in both countries. Many described persistent social tensions with host communities, where negative attitudes towards Afghans were expressed through racial slurs, exclusion, and poor treatment in daily interactions. These experiences of prejudice and marginalization were common, and at times limited access to services, work opportunities and a sense of belonging.

> *They called us occupiers in their country, every insecurity and crime was blamed on us."*
>
> *Woman living in Kabul, forced to return from Pakistan*

Although such conditions had existed throughout people's lives in both countries, it was highlighted how such discrimination and marginalization had increased since both countries scaled up their return policies. In addition, some people who were living without the necessary documentation described limiting their movements due to fear of arrest or deportation, with two men noting they only ventured to their workplace and home.

While life in Iran and Pakistan was often marked by hardship and discrimination many people nonetheless described a sense of stability. This points to a modest but clear set of expectations: access to secure and adequate housing with sufficient space and basic services, reliable livelihoods, education, nutritious food, and the freedom to move and socialize.

Forced returns

> *None of us came voluntarily; all of us were forced."*
>
> *Man living in Kabul, forced to return from Pakistan*

For many Afghans, life in Pakistan and Iran had been relatively stable, with access to work, education, and basic services forming part of everyday existence. This shifted as policy changes in both countries began to tighten legal status and increase return pressures, alongside evolving security and administrative practices affecting access to services. The impact has not been uniform or sudden at a national level; rather, different communities have experienced changes at different times, often shaped by local enforcement dynamics and shifting political priorities. As a result, conditions that were once manageable became increasingly precarious, with access to protection, livelihoods, and essential services gradually eroding for many Afghan households seeking refuge.

None of the returns described by DRC's research participants met any meaningful threshold of voluntariness. The circumstances under which people left Pakistan and Iran were defined by coercion, fear, and, in many cases, direct violence.

Direct violence in Pakistan and Iran was widely reported within DRC's protection data as a reason for return, with torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment (18%), forced eviction or destruction of property (18%), and arbitrary detention (3%) all cited. Focus group participants similarly reported physical assault, verbal abuse, threats, intimidation, and the destruction of shelters in camp settings.

Detention in Pakistan and Iran during the return process was widely reported within focus groups, particularly among people returning from Pakistan. At times, entire households were detained, including children and elderly people. Men in Jalalabad, Kabul and Kandahar reported that they were forced to pay for their release from detention. Men in Herat reported that they had left Iran within the deadline issued by authorities and believed this was the reason they avoided detention, though they noted that neighbors who had stayed beyond the deadline had been detained.

Participants also reported family separation during the return process. These separations sometimes followed a period of detention, but in other cases occurred directly. DRC has documented cases in which people were arrested and detained at their workplaces, separating them from their families, as well as an instance where a child was hospitalized in Iran while their relatives were detained and forced to leave without them. In Kandahar, one woman reported that her husband remains in detention in Pakistan and that she has had no contact with him for months since she was forced to return to Afghanistan. DRC protection data also found that 14% of respondents experienced family separation during return.

> *The police would come for us and arrest us. They came, kicking down our doors, and were disrespectful to us, using very bad words. Even though I'm an old man, they didn't care. Unfortunately, none of us came voluntarily. We had to leave."*
>
> *Man living in Kabul, forced to return from Pakistan*

> *They cut off our electricity, blocked our SIM cards, arrested men, and later detained women as well. We were deported without being allowed to take our belongings."*
>
> *Woman living in Kabul, forced to return from Pakistan*

> *It was around midnight when the police came to our house. We were all living together; my four brothers and their families were there too. They arrested all of us, including the children. We pleaded with them to leave my father because he is elderly. Then we were all taken to jail. They do this to the whole community; this is how they force us to leave. They beat us too."*
>
> *Man living in Kabul, forced to return from Pakistan*

> *Before leaving, the situation for Afghans in Pakistan had become extremely difficult. Some of our family members were detained by Pakistani forces, sometimes even our wives or daughters. For up to 15 days, we did not know where they were."*
>
> *Man living in Kandahar, forced to return from Pakistan*

Beyond these acts of direct violence, systemic measures made daily survival nearly impossible: employers dismissed Afghan workers, schools refused to enroll Afghan children, healthcare facilities denied treatment, and even bakeries reportedly refused to sell bread in some areas. The widespread reporting of these incidents suggests they were not isolated and instead appear to reflect a broader effort to make life untenable and force departure. These findings are also substantiated by DRC protection data where people highlighted structural or coercive drivers that forced their return, including psychological or emotional abuse (15%) and discrimination or denial of services (17%).

> *Companies were told that they could no longer employ Afghan people. Hospitals and healthcare facilities also stopped seeing us, and schools stopped allowing children to attend. In addition, the police made threats, saying: if you do not leave, we will react in a bad way."*
>
> *Woman living in Herat, forced to return from Iran*

The majority of families highlighted they had little or no time to prepare to leave. Many sold possessions at sharply reduced prices, abandoned businesses and stock, forfeited prepaid rent, and left vehicles behind. This all resulted in significant loss of capital that was compounded by travel expenses and costs to transport possessions. In addition, some people noted they were forced to pay bribes to police during their return, particularly in Pakistan. Only a limited number of personal belongings were brought to Afghanistan, leading to significant asset loss and increased vulnerability upon arrival.

> *I lost all my assets during this time. My house was worth about 20 lakhs [Pakistani rupees] (around $7,100), but I was forced to sell it for only 8 lakhs (about $2,850). I then had to pay almost 300,000 Pakistani rupees (around $1,070) to transport my household belongings. In addition, I had to pay about 50,000 rupees (around $180) in bribes to Pakistani forces in order to cross the border. We asked the Pakistan government to give us more time so we could sell our belongings properly, but they refused."*
>
> *Man living in Kandahar, forced to return from Pakistan*

The psychological impact of returns was also severe. Participants described the process as deeply traumatic, with some noting they were still experiencing stress, anxiety and depression months or years after having been forced to leave.

Violent and coercive returns render many Afghans highly vulnerable, traumatized both by forced displacement and the abuses experienced during return. This further undermines people's ability to re-establish livelihoods and reintegrate in a country already facing severe social, economic, and security challenges.

Returns driven by direct violence and systemic exclusion cannot be considered voluntary. They constitute forced returns, regardless of whether formal deportation orders were issued or individuals agreed to leave in response to intimidation or deliberately intolerable conditions. Under international law, the principle of nonrefoulement applies to all forms of removal, including those influenced by coercion and structural pressures.

Return locations

Most people returned to their province of origin, except in Kabul, where roughly half of participants came from other provinces. Among those returning to their home province, many were not from the city center but from rural districts. Urban migration was largely driven by access to employment, services, and education for children.

> ***"We all want to live in Kabul because it's a city, it's the capital, and we might have some options for our children. Also, for our business, of course, right now there is no business, and we don't have the money to set them up again. In my province, the place my father is from, we don't have any land or property. We still pay rent here in Kabul, high rent, but we still want to live in Kabul. I don't feel any sense of belonging to Laghman, my father was only three years old when he left for Pakistan."***
>
> *Man living in Kabul, forced to return from Pakistan*

Returnees' lack of familiarity with the Afghan context exposes them to risks related to the presence of landmines and other explosive ordnance, as Afghanistan remains one of the most heavily mine-affected countries in the world after decades of conflict.

Haji Abdul Rahman
forced to return from Pakistan

Haji Abdul Rahman, 65, lives in an informal settlement on the outskirts of Kandahar with his extended family. After more than 50 years in Pakistan, he was forced to return in late 2024. He arrived with nothing.

“We left with the clothes on our backs,” he said.

In Karachi, Abdul Rahman had built a stable life. He owned a shop and two houses, supporting his wife and four children. When he was forced to leave, he had no time to sell his business or belongings. Everything was lost.

“I was a shopkeeper and a landlord. I had two houses. One we lived in a good, two-story house. The other I rented.” When Abdul Rahman was forced to leave Pakistan, there was no time to sell his properties, shop or supplies. “We left with the clothes on our backs.”

Now, he lives in a single-room mud shelter, no larger than a small shed, shared with five family members. There are no windows or doors. Each night, sleeping mats are laid out carefully so everyone can fit.

Abdul Rahman is frail and can no longer work. He walks with a stick, his eyesight failing. His survival depends on his three nephews, who live nearby in similar conditions.

One of them, Zalmai, used to run a shoe shop in Karachi. In Kandahar, he now shines shoes on the street. “Some days I make 100 Afghanis. Some days nothing,” Zalmai said.

Between the three brothers, they support 11 people. Their income covers only bread, tea, and occasionally vegetables. For everything else, the family depends on limited and irregular aid.

When they arrived, they were told support would come and land would be allocated. Nine months later, aside from a small cash payment at the border, nothing has materialized.

“Last night I borrowed bread from a neighbor,” Abdul Rahman said.

Despite the hardship, the family say they feel a sense of belonging in Afghanistan after facing discrimination in Pakistan. They want to stay and rebuild their lives.

But their situation is becoming untenable. Savings are gone, and opportunities are scarce. “If nothing changes, we will have to move again,” Zalmai said.

The family do not want to rely on aid. They want to work, rebuild small businesses, and live with dignity.

Access to information upon arrival

Upon arrival in Afghanistan people described having very limited information about the return process or what future support was available. In addition, many had little knowledge of daily life in Afghanistan and faced immediate concerns about securing an income.

The small number of men who did mention being aware of support prior to arrival in Afghanistan noted that they had heard via social media or radio that there were land allocation schemes for returnees and that there would be assistance from the de facto authorities for a period of six months. Despite registering their details, neither of these expectations had been realized for any participant.

Assistance at the border was described as minimal. Most participants noted only limited immediate aid in the form of cash, with many describing they had no structured support beyond their initial arrival, and that information on future support was severely limited. In their state of disorientation and confusion, people's expectations of support and information were described as largely unmet.

DRC provides explosive ordnance risk education and emergency psychological support at the Islam Qala, Milak, Torkham, and Spin Boldak border crossings. In addition, UN agencies offer reception and registration in coordination with de facto authorities, who provide transportation support, while UN agencies also deliver cash assistance. INGOs provide health services, basic non-food items, and protection and referral support.

Returnees to Afghanistan face a severe lack of access to information, leaving them unable to make informed decisions about their future, as envisaged in the IASC Framework on Durable Solutions. People arrive with little understanding of daily life, available services, or the return process, and expectations of support, such as land allocation or temporary assistance, are largely unmet. This critical information gap not only heightens their immediate vulnerability but fundamentally undermines peoples' ability to plan, access protection, and rebuild their lives.

Access to livelihoods

> *If my sons bring money from polishing shoes then we can buy some food, otherwise we go without."*
>
> *Widow living in Kandahar, forced to return from Pakistan*

The foremost concern for focus group participants was access to livelihoods. Not a single person reported that they, or any of their family members, were earning a stable income.

In Afghanistan, only one in four women are working or actively seeking work, compared with around 90% of men. The de facto authorities have imposed bans preventing women from working in sectors including the civil service, national and international NGOs, and beauty salons[44]. At the same time, enforcement of requirements for women to be accompanied by a male relative has further curtailed their freedom of movement and limited access to employment[45].

For forced returnee families, this exclusion has devastating consequences: households that once depended on the contributions of two adults are now left with a single adult income. Without sufficient access to earning opportunities, families are too often unable to secure an income that guarantees even basic levels of health, security, and dignity.

Women expressed a strong determination to contribute to household income, building on experience gained in Pakistan and Iran, and described widespread frustration at being unable to work outside the home. Many stressed the impact on their wellbeing, including the stress caused by their economic situation and the depression caused by being confined to their homes. At the same time, they emphasized a strong willingness to earn an income and be ready to pursue home-based work, such as tailoring or preparing food to sell. However, most said they were unable to start even small-scale home-based income generating activities due to a lack of capital. Women's work was raised as a vital component of rebuilding lives in Afghanistan.

Men expressed high levels of stress and anxiety as they struggled to earn an income to meet the basic needs of their families. Most men relied on daily wage labor or informal street vending, selling low-cost items such as nuts, vegetables and tissues; shoe shining; carrying goods with wheelbarrows; or collecting scrap metal and plastic. Earnings were extremely limited and inconsistent, with many households earning only 100–200 Afghanis (around $1.50 to $3.00) two or three days per week to support families that are on average seven people. This income was insufficient to meet basic needs, leaving families in a state of constant desperation.

> *The situation in Iran was better than Afghanistan because at least you could find some kind of daily labor."*
>
> *Man living in Herat, forced to return from Iran*

Child labor was widespread and normalized as a coping mechanism, with families resorting to all available means to make ends meet. While child labor was prevalent across households, rates were higher in female-headed households due to barriers women face in accessing work and therefore their need to rely on male children to earn an income.

> *My son, he is ten years old, yesterday he cleaned the communal toilets and earned 100 Afghanis ($1.50)."*
>
> *Woman living in Kandahar, forced to return from Pakistan*

Children as young as six were collecting plastic and scraps from the streets or selling small goods. Some respondents highlighted their sons had been forced to sacrifice schooling to earn income for their families, as the families could neither afford the equipment to send them to school nor could they survive without their income earning potential. Men highlighted that until they could support their families with at least adequate food and rent, schooling would be deprioritized. This exposed children to immediate harm and undermined long-term opportunities. Denial of education and the burden of work risk perpetuating cycles of poverty and displacement.

Livelihoods are one of the eight core criteria of the IASC Framework on Durable Solutions and a critical component of durable reintegration. For returnees, the ability to earn a sustainable income is their foremost priority and central to achieving self-reliance. The current chronic lack of access to livelihoods leaves returnee families in Afghanistan exposed to severe deprivation and heightened risk of harm. Households often survive on unstable, insufficient income, with many unable to meet basic needs for food, rent, or healthcare undermining their dignity and survival.

Shelter

Most participants reported initially staying with relatives for a period of between a week to around a month after arriving in Afghanistan. However, these arrangements were rarely sustainable, as host families themselves were under significant economic pressure, limiting their ability to provide longer-term support. A small number of participants reported ongoing instability months after return, describing how they continued to move frequently between friends, relatives, and neighbors for short stays of a few days to a week.

> *We stayed with relatives at first, but their house was too small, and we could not stay long."*
>
> *Man living in Jalalabad, forced to return from Pakistan*

> *I was living with my father, but his situation is not good. He is the only one who works and he was already supporting seven people, then us as well. He couldn't afford to support me and my family any longer, so we had to leave his home after a month."*
>
> *Woman living in Herat, forced to return from Iran*

In Kandahar, some men described bypassing family arrangements altogether and moving directly to informal settlements where acquaintances from Pakistan had already settled. They initially lived under tarpaulins and scraps of material before gradually constructing single-room, clay-built shelters. A small number of people across the focus groups noted that they did not stay with relatives, either due to losing contact with them or because their homes were in rural areas. In these cases, people either rented immediately, stayed in a camp near the border, or slept in the open.

Housing conditions were widely described as poor and inadequate to meet basic standards of safety and dignity. Overcrowding and a lack of privacy were reported as widespread, with participants frequently describing multiple families sharing small homes in order to divide the cost of rent.

> *"In our house, we are 11 families who live together. In just my family, there are 21 people. There are more than 90 people all together, it's like a school."*
>
> *Man living in Kabul forced to return from Iran*

Many participants spoke of living in simple mud-built shelters that lacked any services or protection from the elements, conditions that become particularly difficult during extreme heat or cold. In Kandahar, one woman described living in a toilet, placing wood over it to create a makeshift sleeping area. She had requested support from the community leader, but as she could not afford to pay, this was the shelter that was provided to her.

According to DRC protection data, just 36% of people were living in adequate shelters described as permanent housing. 31% of families were living in non-permanent, incomplete or exposed dwellings, 25% in tents, 5% in collective shelters, and 3% in makeshift structures.

Access to basic services within or close to shelters was reported as extremely limited. Participants highlighted that many homes lack adequate sanitation facilities, while reliable access to water and electricity is often absent or irregular. Many people noted that they were unable to afford the cost of utilities, with electricity being cut off as a result.

Accessing drinking water was repeatedly raised as challenging. Some households noted they paid for water when they were able to afford it, but this was not consistently possible given their limited and irregular income. As a result, many people reported drinking water that was not suitable for consumption, increasing the risk of waterborne illness and other health problems. Protection data similarly found that 54% of people reported not having access to drinking water. These conditions were repeatedly contrasted with housing in Pakistan and Iran, where families reported having access to more stable and functioning utilities.

> *I just wish I had the living conditions that I had in Iran."*
>
> *Man living in Herat, forced to return from Iran*

The vast majority of people reported living under a constant threat of eviction, with the financial burden of housing placing severe pressure on already fragile households. 54% of respondents within protection data similarly reported being at risk of eviction.

Focus group discussions found that most families rented their accommodation and often accumulated significant debt to landlords to secure even the most basic shelter. Participants noted they consistently prioritized rent payments, yet many remained unable to cover the full cost. In some cases, rent arrears extended up to nine months. As a result, many households are forced to borrow money simply to maintain their accommodation, leading to steadily increasing levels of debt to multiple people. Returnees in rented accommodation face constant pressure from landlords over unpaid or overdue rent. Harassment, verbal abuse, and threats of eviction are widespread, with many households repeatedly caught in disputes over rental agreements.

> *I was supposed to pay rent for the past five months, the landlord is always calling me, he says: either you pay the rent or you leave, but I can't pay the rent."*
>
> *Man living in Kabul, forced to return from Iran*

In some cases, families reported renting small plots of land simply to pitch a tent, reflecting the severe shortage of affordable housing options available to returnees in these urban areas. In Kandahar, participants living in informal settlements described occupying land owned by the de facto authorities without paying rent, but noted that this arrangement provides little security, as they live under the constant threat of eviction and removal.

The constant risk of eviction, whether due to unpaid rent or the precarious status of informal settlements, was described as a persistent source of anxiety. For many returnees, the insecurity and poor conditions of their housing situation compound the wider economic hardship and psychological strain associated with displacement and forced return.

Access to food

Food insecurity was acute and widespread. The majority of people reported that they rarely ate three meals a day and that the meals they were able to access were not nutritious. Many described surviving primarily on tea and bread, typically eating only once or twice per day, and supplementing this with vegetables when they could afford them. Protein intake was extremely limited, with participants repeatedly highlighting that they never ate meat and could rarely afford other basic sources of protein such as beans.

> *There are days when we can only eat once, so we have to stretch our food to make sure everyone in the family gets enough."*
>
> *Woman living in Jalalabad forced to return from Pakistan*

Food standards were notably higher among families living in informal settlements in Kandahar, as they were not paying rent. Nevertheless, they reported that since returning to Afghanistan, they had never been able to afford the quality of meals they had access to in Pakistan.

> *The food we had in Pakistan, we have never eaten in Afghanistan. Sometimes we only have bread."*
>
> *Man living in Kandahar, forced to return from Pakistan*

> *When my husband manages to find work, we live from that, when he doesn't, we borrow from friends and relatives."*
>
> *Woman living in Herat, forced to return from Iran*

Some families described buying stale bread from bakeries at reduced prices in order to stretch limited resources. Others relied on the generosity of neighbors when food could be spared, though this support was inconsistent as surrounding households were themselves under economic pressure. Participants also highlighted that food costs in Afghanistan were increasing which was further impeding their ability to meet nutritional needs.

> *We go to the bakeries and the bread that is left over from the previous day, we buy that for a discounted price. We normally eat this with tea or water."*
>
> *Man living in Kabul, forced to return from Pakistan*

> *This year, the economic situation is awful, we're jobless and there's nothing to eat and the cost of things like rice has increased and we can't afford it."*
>
> *Woman living in Herat, forced to return from Iran*

> *We cannot get enough food each day. A bag of rice is about 55 USD right now, we can't afford that."*
>
> *Man living in Herat, forced to return from Iran*

A key coping mechanism reported was relying on credit from shops for food, although many described this as increasingly difficult with trust in their ability to repay waning. In Kabul, men noted that they had previously been able to obtain food on credit relatively easily, but now shop owners were aware that people were unable to repay, and this information had circulated, leading to this support diminishing. Women explained that they often skipped meals or reduced portions to ensure that children and other family members could eat.

> *I needed to buy food items; I have small children. But because no one trusts us to be able to repay the shops won't let us borrow from them and pay later."*
>
> *Man living in Kabul, forced to return from Pakistan*

> *I borrowed a lot of money from a shopkeeper, but now I am not able to go outside freely as I am worried I will see him and he will ask for his money and I can't pay."*
>
> *Woman living in Herat, forced to return from Iran*

In addition, many families are unable to afford wood and other cooking fuel. As a result, many families collect plastic and utilize this as fuel for cooking.

Lack of sufficient and nutritious food has serious consequences, including malnutrition, weakened immunity, illness, and increased reliance on negative coping strategies. For children, it can lead to permanent developmental impacts. Severe food insecurity exposes people to serious risks to their health and, in extreme cases, to their survival. Prolonged deprivation, when it reaches a threshold of severity, can amount to inhuman or degrading treatment under international law. Access to adequate food is also recognized as a core component of durable solutions in the IASC framework, highlighting that food security is essential not only for immediate survival but for enabling safe, dignified, and sustainable returns.

Access to healthcare

Access to healthcare was reported as a key issue. Men most commonly cited cost as the primary barrier, explaining that consultations, medicines and transport to health facilities were often unaffordable.

Women described facing additional obstacles. Women's access to healthcare remains severely constrained by both legal restrictions and social practices. In many areas, women are prohibited from being physically examined by male healthcare providers, as contact with unrelated men is considered impermissible under prevailing interpretations of law. In addition, women frequently require a male guardian, or *mahram*, to accompany them to appointments, which limits privacy, restricts direct communication with providers, and often discourages timely care-seeking.

Women within this research, despite being located in large cities in Afghanistan, reported that access to a female healthcare providers was limited and required travelling significant distances. This further increases costs and makes seeking care difficult or, in some cases, impossible. As a result, women reported delaying or forgoing treatment.

> ***I have medical issues, I want to see a psychologist for my mental health and a doctor as I have stomach pain. But my husband says we don't have enough money so why would we pay for your medical treatment?"***
>
> *Woman living in Herat, forced to return from Iran*

Limited access to healthcare in Afghanistan places returnees at serious risk of preventable illness and long-term health consequences, with women facing the most severe barriers due to legal restrictions, social practices, and a shortage of female healthcare providers. These gaps not only undermine access to essential healthcare but, when severe, may constitute breaches of international humanitarian law, putting lives at direct risk. Access to healthcare is also a core element of durable solutions under the IASC framework, recognizing that timely, safe, and equitable medical services are critical for people's ability to rebuild their lives in safety.

> *If you're not educated, it's like being blind, but with an education you are able to see."*
>
> *Man living in Kabul*
> *forced to return from Pakistan*

Access to education

Very few participants reported that their children were currently accessing formal education in Afghanistan. Families repeatedly described being unable to afford the costs associated with schooling, including books, materials and transport. This was further compounded by the need for boys to contribute to household income to ensure family survival. Girls above grade six remain prohibited from attending school.

Further barriers prohibiting access to education for girls were long distances to schools and safety concerns. Men frequently reported that they could not prioritize their children's education until the basic needs of their families were met, emphasizing that they were the final decision-makers.

Women consistently said that their decision to remain in Afghanistan depended heavily on whether their daughters could access education, despite current restrictions. Many of the women spoken with were themselves uneducated and illiterate, which they attributed directly to the restrictions they had faced, and were determined that their children should have a different future. However, women are often not empowered within their families as decision makers.

As a result, many children were not attending school, raising concerns about the longer-term consequences for children's development and future opportunities. The abrupt loss of opportunities for both girls and boys following return to Afghanistan was described as deeply distressing, particularly by mothers who expressed concern about their children's futures. Access to education is fundamental to future opportunities and breaking cycles of poverty.

Community cohesion

Participants repeatedly described the difficult economic situation facing the communities to which they had returned, including their own relatives. Many explained that they understood these conditions as a key reason why communities were often unable to provide sustained support. In the initial period following return, some families did receive assistance from neighbors and relatives, including food, water, and other basic items. However, participants widely reported that this support was diminishing. They attributed this to several factors, including the continued arrival of large numbers of returnees, rising food prices, growing competition for limited employment opportunities, and the reality that many returnee families remain in need of assistance months or even years after returning.

Participants also described perceptions of being treated differently from other community members across several areas of daily life, including access to assistance, employment opportunities, social networks, and participation in community decision-making. Some people reported that community leaders prioritized host communities over returnees in the distribution of aid and resources. While DRC and other NGOs deliver need based on independent needs assessments, limited funding means not everyone can be reached, which may contribute to perceptions of bias.

> *Returnees are often overlooked when assistance arrives, and sometimes local families get priority."*
>
> *Man in Jalalabad forced to return from Pakistan*

At the same time, several participants perceived that they were excluded from informal job opportunities and local networks, particularly in contexts where competition for work was high and employment was often secured through social connections. Participants explained that these dynamics contributed to feelings of marginalization and created additional challenges for integration and access to support.

Whilst many returnees expressed gratitude for the help host communities had given them and understood their hardships, community cohesion appears at risk of diminishing due to limited resources, large numbers of returnees and returnees being indebted to community members.

Support to both host and returnee communities is essential to ensure community cohesion and avert any potential resentment between groups for perceived assistance based on displacement status. Communities in Afghanistan are largely welcoming to returnees but if adequate support is not provided to all communities, this is at risk of significantly diminishing. Community cohesion is essential to the integration of all communities in Afghanistan.

Mental health

> *All of us women sat here are depressed."*
>
> *Woman in Herat*
> *forced to return from Iran*

Deterioration in mental health was frequently raised without prompting by both men and women. Many people reported anxiety and stress associated with the trauma of their return as well as from being rapidly uprooted and forced to return to a country they didn't know.

> *I have a daughter, she is depressed. She'd like to go out of the home for any reason just to lift her mood."*
>
> *Woman living in Herat,*
> *forced to return from Iran*

The overwhelming majority of women described symptoms of depression, anxiety and a deep sense of hopelessness that they said had not characterized their lives prior to return. Protection data found that 57% of people experienced stress that impacted their daily lives. Parents expressed particular concern for their children, noting the lack of a stable future was affecting their mental wellbeing, especially for girls.

Men consistently described anxiety and stress over their inability to earn an income and fulfil their role as providers. In addition, several women noted that husbands or sons had turned to drug use to cope with the pressures of daily life. Within DRC's protection casework we frequently encounter returnees whose vulnerability is linked to drug addiction.

Women

> *Men here don't have freedoms, so imagine for women."*
>
> *Man living in Kabul, forced to return from Iran*

Women consistently described a profound loss of autonomy compared to their lives in Pakistan and Iran. Many explained that they are now largely confined to their home and unable to work, a sharp contrast to the greater freedom of movement and participation in daily life, including economic activities outside the home, that they had previously experienced. This was leading to feelings of social isolation and dependence on male family members.

Women frequently reported observing distress and signs of depression among their daughters, who were now confined to the home after previously attending school, pursuing hobbies, socializing, and planning for their futures. The abrupt loss of these opportunities following their return to Afghanistan was described as deeply distressing and was commonly associated with mental health concerns and increased depression.

> *In Pakistan it was a better life than Afghanistan, we had our freedom, but here we don't, we can't even work."*
>
> *Woman living in Kandahar, forced to return from Iran*

Female participants also described a significant increase in tensions within the household, which many linked directly to the severe economic pressures facing families following return. Many women reported rising levels of domestic violence which they associated with men's inability to fulfil their socially expected role as providers, a dynamic that was explicitly acknowledged by some male participants as well.

> *We are not even safe at home, because of our husbands."*
>
> *Woman living in Herat, forced to return from Iran*

> *I live with my daughter and her husband. Her husband is angry towards me, he says it's because we haven't come for just one or two days, we have been staying with them for months now."*
>
> *Woman living in Kandahar, forced to return from Pakistan*

> *When the head of household doesn't have an income, he automatically changes with his family. It's like this frustration is transmitted to the family so they also suffer very badly, the wife and children."*
>
> *Man living in Herat, forced to return from Iran*

Early and forced marriage were also reported among some families experiencing acute financial hardship as coping mechanisms.

> *My two daughters were married to older men as second wives."*
>
> *Woman living in Kandahar, forced to return from Pakistan*

Future intentions

Forced returnees within focus groups described very modest aspirations for their lives, yet even these remain out of reach in practice. Men and women described wanting secure income, stable and safe housing, and education for their children. Despite limited knowledge of Afghanistan prior to their return, several participants described a sense of belonging upon returning, particularly in contrast to the discrimination and exclusion they had faced in Iran and Pakistan.

> *To stay, we need a house, work, schools for children, and basic services."*
>
> *Man living in Jalalabad, forced to return from Pakistan*

People identified support in accessing livelihoods as their primary need and the most crucial form of assistance to help them overcome their current hardships. Participants consistently emphasized that they do not seek long-term dependence on humanitarian assistance, with many stressing that they have never relied on aid and do not wish to do so.

> *"This is our homeland. Even if we spent 1,000 years in Iran, it would not be home. Here is our country. If we can build something and do something, we will stay. We are searching for opportunities so we can remain here. If there are opportunities for us and our children, of course we will stay."*
>
> *Woman living in Herat, forced to return from Iran*

> *"If my husband and I have any opportunity to work here, we will not face any problems. The issue here is that we cannot find work."*
>
> *Woman living in Herat, forced to return from Iran*

> *"Emergency assistance is not a sustainable solution, most of us who returned from Iran we have a type of skill. We need longer term economic support."*
>
> *Man living in Herat, forced to return from Iran*

The vast majority of participants stated clearly that if they were able to earn enough to provide a decent standard for their families, they would choose to stay in Afghanistan and rebuild their lives here. Women continuously emphasized they desired a future for their children, which includes education. Several stated that if it were up to them, they would leave Afghanistan again to secure education for their daughters.

However, in the absence of these conditions, the majority of people indicated that they would consider leaving the country again. Many emphasized that they had no desire to leave a second time, having already attempted to restart their lives from nothing and carrying the trauma of previous removals from Iran and Pakistan, yet they once again felt left without a choice. For some, onward movement was described as an imminent possibility unless their situation quickly changes.

> *"My situation is getting worse not better, the savings I had are running out. If the situation doesn't improve, I'll have to leave."*
>
> *Man living in Herat, forced to return from Iran*

> *"We might try to leave again, maybe to Iran or another country, if life does not improve here."*
>
> *Man living in Jalalabad, forced to return from Pakistan*

Perceptions on township schemes

Awareness of township schemes was uneven among participants. Men were generally more informed than women, reflecting the broader pattern of women's exclusion from public information and household decision-making. Among those who were aware of the schemes, concerns were consistent. Participants highlighted the remote location of many sites, the absence of basic services, the lack of livelihood opportunities, and the absence of financial support to enable families to construct homes.

In Kandahar, a group of men stated that they would accept land allocation primarily as a means of escaping the constant threat of eviction from their current settlements. However, it was clear that land alone did not represent a viable solution. Without access to infrastructure, basic services and employment opportunities, participants emphasized that such schemes could not provide a sustainable or durable solution.

Pathways to self-reliance

Livelihoods are only one dimension of durable solutions and cannot alone resolve the broader challenges of displacement. However, focus group participants consistently identified livelihood support as their primary priority above all other forms of assistance. This section therefore highlights examples of program successes and potential approaches to livelihood support, demonstrating how they can contribute to sustainable local integration in cities.

Roqia, 45-year-old mother,
forced to return from Iran, currently living in Herat

Roqia spent seven years living in Iran, where she worked in a shop and was the main income earner for her family.

After being forced to return to Afghanistan, the family relocated to Herat, where their situation quickly fell into crisis. With no stable income and limited opportunities, Roqia was unable to meet the most basic needs of her family.

Her children were forced to work in a greenhouse to help cover household costs. At the same time, she took on 50,000 AFN in debt to pay rent and food. With no clear path forward, the family began to consider leaving Afghanistan again.

Roqia then connected with the Danish Refugee Council and was invited to enroll in an asset recovery program, designed to help returnees rebuild livelihoods.

She received a cash grant, alongside training in business planning and marketing, and technical support to start a small business. Roqia used the grant to open a shop, returning to the work she knew. The training strengthened her ability to run and sustain the business.

“At a time when all doors were closed to me and I felt completely hopeless, this support felt like a miracle and changed my life.” she said.

Roqia and her family are beginning to rebuild their lives. She can now cover essential household costs, and her children are no longer forced to work.

The pressure to leave has eased, giving the family space to stay, recover, and start building a more stable future.

DRC's Economic Recovery approach

DRC's economic recovery programming addresses food security, decent livelihoods and financial inclusion across both emergency and solutions to enable self-reliance. As well as providing multi-purpose cash assistance to meet urgent basic needs, DRC supports communities through cash for food and, and cash for work. These activities provide short-term income to meet emergency needs, with cash for work also offering opportunities to build practical skills through work-based activities, such as infrastructure rehabilitation and service provision, and support local infrastructure projects.

The second stage supports access to employment. This includes financial literacy and vocational skills training aligned with market demand, with stipends enabling participation, as well as asset replacement for those who have lost businesses or equipment during displacement or return. In addition, technical and material support to small and medium-sized enterprises supports both start-ups and business expansion.

The third stage focuses on sustainable access to resources and financial inclusion. Community Based Saving Groups operate as structured, savings and lending mechanisms, where members take on defined roles and collectively manage business finances. Groups are initially supported with a grant to establish the fund, after which members contribute their own savings. These pooled funds are then lent to individuals within the group based on need and repaid over an agreed timeframe on an interest-free basis. This structure establishes a revolving fund for group members to access based on need. Alongside structured training in financial management, record keeping, and business planning, this model enables members to build financial skills while accessing capital in contexts where formal banking services are limited. In some cases, groups move beyond individual lending to collective investment, establishing joint businesses, such as one example of a women-run restaurant, or purchasing shared assets, including machinery for agricultural production, further strengthening income generation potential and economic resilience.

In addition, psychological support is integrated into this programming. Support within community-based groups focuses on helping participants understand and manage stress, build coping strategies, and strengthening interpersonal skills. Participants are given simple reflective exercises to complete at home, which are then discussed in the group, fostering trust, confidence, and peer support. Individual sessions are available for those who prefer to address sensitive issues privately. By combining group-based learning with tailored support, the approach helps participants improve emotional wellbeing, strengthen social connections, and build the confidence and resilience needed to manage daily challenges and engage in livelihood activities.

Taken together, these programs illustrate what works, not isolated interventions, but layered support that responds to people's immediate needs while enabling progressive steps towards self-reliance. DRC ensures basic needs are met alongside skills training and asset replacement to support entry into wage or self-employment, while community-based saving groups provide a foundation for longer-term financial inclusion and collective economic activity. In Afghanistan, where many returnees face a deteriorating trajectory rather than a pathway to durable solutions, this integrated model is essential. Without sustained investment across the full continuum, from emergency assistance to economic inclusion, people risk remaining trapped in cycles of dependency, unable to achieve meaningful local integration.

Several systemic barriers make livelihoods programming particularly challenging in Afghanistan. Firstly, the scale of need is immense with 3.2 million IDPs[46], 5.7 million returnees[47], and highly vulnerable host communities whom all require support amid ongoing crises, including climate shocks and insecurity.

The de facto authorities primarily focus on return to areas of origin for returnees and lack government-led economic recovery programming open to all people in need. Funding is limited and often short-term, with donors typically committing one to two years at a time, which makes holistic, sequenced approaches challenging. This combination of high need, limited resources, and fragmented programming constrains the potential for livelihoods interventions to deliver durable solutions.

To successfully achieve durable livelihoods, a holistic, integrated approach is required. This would include sustained, multi-year investment; coordinated donor funding to cover complementary interventions; government-led schemes accessible to all people in need, regardless of displacement status; and collaboration across humanitarian and basic human needs actors to link emergency assistance, skills development, employment support, and access to financial resources. Programming must also be inclusive of returnees, IDPs, and host communities alike to maintain social cohesion and avoid tensions caused by selective support. Only with this combination of scale, coordination, and continuity can livelihood interventions offer a genuine pathway towards self-reliance and meaningful local integration.

Rahmi, father of six,
forced to return from Pakistan, currently living in Kandahar

Rahmi, 35, was born and raised in Pakistan and had never set foot in Afghanistan before being forced to return two years ago. He now lives in Kandahar with his wife, Elaha, and their six children, three girls and three boys.

“I thought we’d be in Pakistan forever, I never imagined leaving. I never even considered coming to Afghanistan. I didn’t know anything about Afghanistan.”

In Pakistan, Rahmi had built a stable life. He ran a small but successful dessert shop, selling ice cream, milk-based puddings, and fruit juice. His children all attended school, and his wife supported the business.

“I am skilled, but I couldn’t afford to restart my shop, I came back with nothing.”

After returning, Rahmi chose to settle in Kandahar city rather than his father’s remote village, where he had no connections and no realistic prospect of finding work. Despite his skills, he struggled to find stable employment. He eventually found work in another dessert shop, but the income was low and unreliable.

“My life was better in Pakistan; Afghanistan is very tough. At first, it felt so hopeless.”

With limited income and a family to support, Rahmi found it difficult to meet basic needs.

Everything changed when he received a small business grant from the Danish Refugee Council. With the support, he was able to lease a shop and purchase essential equipment, including tables, chairs, freezers, and ingredients.

Rahmi has since reopened his own dessert business. His wife, Elaha, plays a key role, preparing recipes at home for him to sell. Rahmi says the steady income changed everything and feels more optimistic about the future.

“Now I feel like this is our homeland, I want to stay here and hope my children will too.”

Laila, mother,
forced to return from Pakistan, currently living in Kabul

Laila, a young mother of two, lives in Kabul with her husband and children. In December 2024, her family was forcibly returned from Pakistan. They arrived with nothing - no money, no belongings, and no clear way to survive.

"We had nothing in our hands, no money, no skills, no plan, and no idea how we would survive," Laila said.

Her husband tried to earn a small income with a two-wheel cart, but it was never enough. Every day brought new worries: rent, food, and keeping her children safe. Laila feared that her children might never return to school.

"I felt helpless and ashamed because I could not support my family," she recalled.

Life became a daily struggle. Laila often felt that leaving Afghanistan again was the only option.

In May 2025, Laila was invited to enroll in the Cash for Training program delivered by the Danish Refugee Council Economic Recovery team. She undertook three months of skills training in tailoring, followed by three months gaining professional skills with on-the-job experience. During this time, the cash stipend helped cover her family's immediate needs.

"For the first time since we returned, I felt that someone believed in me," Laila said.

After completing the training and receiving business assets, she opened her own tailoring business. She now earns around 300 AFN per day, helping her family meet essential needs.

"My children are going to school again. I have regained my confidence, my dignity, and my place in my family."

Today, Laila can support her household and plans to grow her shop. She dreams of taking on apprentices and helping other women in her community, just as she was supported.

Conclusion

The findings of this report point to a consistent pattern of deteriorating living conditions among forced returnee households attempting to establish themselves in Afghanistan's urban centers. Families returning from Pakistan and Iran arrive with limited resources and, in the absence of meaningful support, experience a rapid erosion of their ability to meet even basic needs, as savings are depleted, debt accumulates, and households increasingly resort to harmful coping mechanisms. Across all locations, access to livelihoods, adequate housing, food, healthcare and education remains severely constrained, while women and girls face additional structural barriers that further compound household vulnerability. As a result, the trajectory described by returnees is not one of reintegration, but of deepening and sustained hardship.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate that local integration remains both the preferred and, in some cases, the only viable pathway for returnees wishing to settle in urban centers. However, this potential is systematically undermined by structural constraints, including limited access to livelihoods, overstretched urban services, and unaffordable housing. In the absence of targeted and sustained support to address these barriers, local integration will remain unattainable for the majority, with many households facing an increasing risk of onward displacement.

Addressing this gap requires building on the shift already underway from short-term, fragmented assistance toward more coherent and sustained approaches that enable returnees to establish a minimum level of stability. While area-based approaches remain important, for returnees who choose to settle in urban areas, these could be further complemented by more explicit local integration initiatives. Central to this is livelihoods support, which returnees consistently identify as the primary determinant of their ability to integrate locally, as access to reliable income underpins their capacity to secure housing, meet basic needs, and support children's access to education.

At the same time, livelihoods interventions alone will be insufficient without parallel efforts to address the broader structural barriers that constrain integration. This includes increasing access to adequate and affordable housing, strengthening service provision in high-return urban areas, and ensuring access to healthcare and education, while taking deliberate steps to reduce barriers faced by women and girls. Approaches must also be inclusive of people who have been displaced for decades and host communities, both to mitigate social tensions and to avoid further straining already limited urban systems.

There is also a need to strengthen and expand de facto authority-led policies. Existing support schemes, while important, remain limited in scope and accessibility, and in practice exclude many of the most vulnerable. Expanding these mechanisms and ensuring that eligibility is based on vulnerability and need will be essential to enable equitable access for all communities in need.

Crucially, the scale of need must be reflected in the level and duration of support provided. The volume of returns, combined with already high levels of internal displacement and the cumulative impact of decades of instability, means that humanitarian and basic human needs funding remains central to any credible response. Increased and sustained funding is required but must be accompanied by more coherent coordination and clearer operational frameworks, including concrete action plans that bring together all relevant actors. Strengthening technical capacity, including within national and local systems, also represents a critical gap that, if addressed, could significantly improve the effectiveness and sustainability of responses.

The conditions documented in this report raise serious protection concerns. Returnees are exposed to chronic deprivation and are unable to meet their most basic needs, including access to adequate food, shelter, healthcare, and livelihoods. The cumulative and sustained nature of these conditions, as evidenced across multiple sectors, may reach the threshold of severity required to constitute inhuman or degrading treatment or a threat to life. State's looking to return people to Afghanistan must make individual assessments that look at foreseeable and ongoing nature of harm, rather than isolated factors in themselves. Where this threshold is met, returning individuals to Afghanistan would be inconsistent with the principle of non-refoulement, which is binding on all states as a norm of customary international law and applies irrespective of treaty ratification.

Ultimately, the findings underscore that durable solutions in Afghanistan cannot be achieved without making local integration viable in practice. Whilst this report has focused on the experience of forced returnees, the solution is an approach that provides assistance and support based on vulnerability and need, regardless of displacement status. Without a greater focus on local integration, vulnerability will continue to deepen, and the prospect of achieving durable solutions will remain out of reach for many.

Recommendations

The de facto authorities exercise effective control over the population of Afghanistan and are therefore the primary duty bearers towards the Afghan people. They are in a position to implement a range of measures, and to reverse existing restrictions, to rapidly improve conditions for some of the most vulnerable Afghans, regardless of displacement status. This includes expanding livelihoods through public works and support to small businesses, enabling women's economic participation by lifting restrictions, strengthening urban capacity through investment in affordable housing and protection against forced evictions, increasing access to basic services in high-return areas, and reversing the ban on girls' education beyond grade six.

Iran and Pakistan:

- **Suspend all forced returns:** States must adhere to their obligations under international law, including the principle of non-refoulement. Given current conditions in Afghanistan, returns should be suspended, as proceeding risks exposing individuals to serious harm and undermining their ability to rebuild their lives sustainably.
- **Ensure voluntariness:** Guarantee that any returns are informed, voluntary, and carried out in dignity, and halt violent and coercive measures used to pressure returns.
- **Maintain access to services:** Ensure Afghan nationals retain access to documentation, healthcare, education, and livelihoods while in host countries.

Donor States:

- **Align funding with durable solutions frameworks:** Ensure that all funding for durable solutions programming in Afghanistan is aligned with the IASC Framework, supporting all three pathways, return to areas of origin, local integration, and relocation within Afghanistan, based on informed and voluntary choice.

- **Prioritize and increase funding for Afghanistan:** recognizing that without sustained support for communities and basic services, the country's overlapping crises could worsen, deepening vulnerability and risking systemic collapse.
- **Adopt protection-based return policies:** Ensure that any decisions on returns are grounded in evidence that individuals can meet their basic needs and access essential services, and that returns would not breach international legal obligations. Refrain from policy changes that enable or accelerate returns under current conditions, which are neither safe nor sustainable.
- **Prioritize livelihoods and economic recovery:** Expand livelihoods funding, focusing on market-based approaches and large-scale job creation recognizing livelihoods as the central pillar of successful reintegration.
- **Support all communities:** Provide inclusive support to host communities, internally displaced people, and returnees to strengthen social cohesion, reduce tensions, and ensure equitable access to assistance regardless of displacement status.

UN and NGOs:

- **Coordinate sector-wide durable solutions programming:** Strategize jointly to ensure a coherent, cross-sectoral approach that prioritizes all three durable solutions, return to area of origin, local integration, and relocation within Afghanistan, rather than fragmented or isolated interventions.
- **Support all communities:** Ensure programming addresses the needs of returnees, IDPs, and host communities alike, strengthening social cohesion and preventing tensions or exclusion in contexts of repeated crises.
- **Strengthen planning and implementation:** Revise the durable solutions roadmap and accompany it with a concrete action plan, with clear responsibilities, timelines, and measurable indicators.
- **Enhance information provision:** Ensure returnees and host communities have timely, accurate, and accessible information on available support, rights, and services to enable informed decision-making.
- **Advocate for protection:** Use evidence from the field to consistently advocate with authorities, donors, and other stakeholders for adherence to international protection standards.
- **Community consultation:** Consult directly with returnees, IDP, and host communities to ensure programming aligns with their needs and aspirations, recognizing that they are experts in their own lives and solutions.

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Founded in 1956, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is Denmark's largest international NGO, with a specific expertise in forced displacement. DRC is present in close to 40 countries and employs 7,500 staff globally.

DRC advocates for the rights of and solutions for displacement-affected communities, and provides assistance during all stages of displacement: In acute crisis, in exile, when settling and integrating in a new place, or upon return. DRC supports displaced persons in becoming self-reliant and included into hosting societies. DRC works with civil society and responsible authorities to promote protection of rights and inclusion.

Our 6,200 volunteers in Denmark make an invaluable difference in integration activities throughout the country.

DRC's code of conduct sits at the core of our organizational mission, and DRC aims at the highest ethical and professional standards. DRC has been certified as meeting the highest quality standards according to the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability.

HRH Crown Princess Mary is DRC's patron.

To read more about what we do, see: www.drc.ngo

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