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## Urban Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons in Afghanistan

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### Introduction

In the past eight years, refugee return and internal displacement have caused rapid urbanization rates in Afghanistan's main cities. The phenomenon of urban migration is not new: it follows economic development and demographic transition trends. However, the traditional seasonal migration of largely male individuals has been outgrown by the longer-term settlement of entire families searching for physical and human security in Afghanistan's cities. In only six years, Kabul experienced a three-fold increase of its population, from 1.5 million in 2001 to 4.5 million in 2007,<sup>1</sup> and estimates reaching over 5 million people today. It has been termed "one of the fastest growing cities in the region."<sup>2</sup>

The central question of this paper is: *How to respond to urban displacement and improve the care and maintenance to vulnerable displaced and returnee populations in Afghanistan's main cities?* While the line between voluntary migration and forced displacement is often blurred at the field level, it remains important to distinguish between migration and displacement given the different risks and vulnerabilities associated with each and the corresponding responses required. As a result, this paper will focus on specific groups that have been made vulnerable through their experiences of return and displacement, namely returned refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). It will not be concerned with other categories of migrants, nor will it be concerned with the return of highly qualified Afghans to their homeland. Although studies have acknowledged that returnees can illustrate successful cases of return and reintegration, "the majority of returnees struggle for survival, are un- or under-employed, and live at or below the poverty level."<sup>3</sup> Secondly, this paper is limited to urban areas, defined as areas in and around Afghanistan's major cities, including surrounding suburbs and informal settlements located on the outskirts of cities and along peripheral city roads. As such, a broader definition of "urban" will be used, referring to both urban and semi- or peri-urban areas.

<sup>1</sup> K. Koser, "Internal displacement in Afghanistan," Brookings Institution, November 8, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> J. Beall and D. Esser, "Shaping Urban Futures: Challenges to Governing and Managing Afghan Cities," AREU (2005).

<sup>3</sup> S. Schmeidl, "Repatriation to Afghanistan: durable solution or responsibility shifting?" *Forced Migration Review*, Issue 33 (September 2009).

The findings presented in this report stem from two research projects led by the author in Afghanistan in 2009 and 2010 on the coping strategies of returned refugees in urban areas, for the Norwegian Refugee Council,<sup>4</sup> and on the profiles of IDPs in urban areas, commissioned by the World Bank Economic Policy and Poverty Team of the South Asia Region.<sup>5</sup>

After reviewing the background and context of urban displacement in Afghanistan, this paper aims at highlighting the relevance and timeliness of analyzing the movements of returnees (i.e. returned refugees) and IDPs to Afghanistan's main cities. It outlines the current conceptual and operational challenges of urban displacement, alongside an analysis of the profiles and needs of vulnerable returnees and IDPs in urban areas in recent years. In the final sections an overview of the lessons learned on urban policies towards displacement is linked to concluding remarks on a possible joint US and EU effort.

### **Background, Relevance, and Timeliness**

Afghanistan's capital city and other urban centers are likely to continue expanding for the foreseeable future with security and living conditions deteriorating in the rural areas. The phenomenon of informal settlements is a result of urban growth driven by a combination of natural growth, newcomers entering the housing market, and migration patterns, whether rural-urban migration, secondary migration or direct migration of returnees and IDPs. At a time when about 70% of Kabul is composed of informal settlements, with an urban growth rate of 5.4% annually and a doubling of the population over the next seven years,<sup>6</sup> it is becoming increasingly difficult to track, estimate, and assess the presence and profiles of returnee and IDP populations settling in urban areas.

There are three types of influx of displaced persons to cities (which can be grouped under the broader term of "urban displacement"): 1) returnees who came to settle directly to cities upon their return; 2) returnees who went to their areas of origin and were then forced to move again, in a pattern of secondary displacement, to the cities; 3) and internally displaced persons, which include conflict-induced, natural-disaster induced displacement, and also poverty-induced displacement.

- *Returnees and Secondary Displaced individuals.* Since the fall of the Taliban, it is estimated that more than 5 million refugees have returned to Afghanistan, of which four million were voluntary returns in UNHCR's largest repatriation operation. Many returnees are still struggling to fully reintegrate into the country. Particular problems experienced on return are access to land, shelter, basic services and lack of livelihood. While many returnees indeed came from urban areas and returned there, some claimed they did while yet other returnee families were unable (or unwilling) to return to the rural areas from which they fled, and moved to urban centers instead.

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<sup>4</sup> N. Majidi, "Research Study on the Coping Strategy of Returned Refugees in Urban Settings," Norwegian Refugee Council Afghanistan, Altai Consulting (March 2010).

<sup>5</sup> N. Majidi, "Research Study on IDPs in Urban Settings — Afghanistan," Background Paper for the World Bank Poverty Assessment Report for Afghanistan (2011).

<sup>6</sup> Statistics provided by Jan Turkstra, Urban Development Advisor, and Abdul Baqi Popal, Senior Program Coordinator, UNHABITAT (Kabul, July 15, 2010).

Many returnees have claimed to be originally from the capital in order to settle there directly upon their return. Levron, Magnaldi, and Patera recorded that 90% of repatriating refugees claimed that their place of origin was Kabul in the years 2002–2003.<sup>7</sup> This is in part the result of a large influx into Kabul during the Taliban years, but it is also a result of preferences acquired by refugees who lived in protracted situations abroad, preferring then to relocate to urban centers in Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> This is the case for returnees from Iran and Pakistan who were involved in the service or construction sectors of urban areas, and less so in the agricultural sectors, hence not being able to revert to rural modes of subsistence upon return.

- *Internally Displaced Persons.* Assessments and estimates of IDPs in urban areas in Afghanistan are lacking, as is knowledge of the causes for displacement, which is often a combination of poverty, lacking livelihoods in rural area and insecurity. A significant number of IDPs are known to be living in squatter and informal settlements on the outskirts of Afghanistan’s major cities; and many others are part of an ‘invisible’ urban population as they have not self-identified themselves nor have they been identified as pertaining to the displaced category.<sup>9</sup> As a result, surveys of IDPs in urban areas have so far concentrated on those that live in collective groups, as opposed to the displaced who live individually and have blended in the urban landscape.

Urbanization is an important phenomenon in Afghanistan, as in the rest of the world. Kabul has grown by 70% since 2002, reaching an annual growth rate as high as 15% in 2002, of which 12% was due to migration.<sup>10</sup> Many returnees are living in precarious conditions in cities, either in illegal settlements on land that they do not own or in shared accommodation. During 2008, although there was a steady stream of return from Pakistan, many returnees were unable to return to their place of origin and spontaneous settlements have arisen in Nangarhar province housing approximately 4,700 families.

The displaced populations in urban settings are living alongside the urban poor and host residents in each of the major Afghan cities. Their arrival and stay, whether in the form of protracted or recent and temporary displacement patterns, has increased pressure on local infrastructure and city services, further exacerbating the vulnerabilities of residents and of the mass of urban poor. This is particularly the case with regards to access to shelter and land, water and sanitation, food and livelihood opportunities. The conceptual and assistance frameworks need to be re-evaluated and adapted to the urban context to meet the basic living requirements and protection needs of the urban displaced in Afghanistan. As highlighted in the latest issue of the Forced Migration Review, “urban displacement has emerged as a new dimension to the challenges we face in meeting the humanitarian needs of IDPs and refugees.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Levron, E. Magnaldi, S. and Patera, J., “Modes de subsistence des réfugiés en milieu urban: Etude de cas Kaboul Afghanistan”, UNHCR (February 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Niamh Murnaghan and Petr Kostohryz, Norwegian Refugee Council (Kabul, August 2009).

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR, “National Profile of Internal Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Afghanistan,” under the auspices of the National IDP Task Force and the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) (November 2008).

<sup>10</sup> World Bank, “Should Kabul Grow by Expanding to a New Town or by Building Up Its Existing Suburbs?” Kabul Urban Policy Notes Series, No. 3 (September 2005).

<sup>11</sup> A. Tibaijuka, “Adapting to urban displacement,” *Forced Migration Review*, Issue 34 (February 2010).

These are examples of vulnerabilities faced by and coping strategies used by returned refugees in the context of return and reintegration of the past eight years. They find themselves in situations where they need to reconstruct their livelihoods, in different conditions than what they experienced before or during exile. Overall, the absorption capacity of many communities, even in main urban areas, has reached its limit, presenting a massive challenge for the governments and the international community if the refugees' expectations about the conditions of their return to Afghanistan are to be fulfilled.

### **Conceptual and Operational Challenges**

In 2008, Ewen MacLeod, UNHCR Country Representative for Afghanistan, stated that “there are some worrying trends in internal displacement in Afghanistan. Displacement is becoming more protracted for many. For example, people currently displaced by conflict have not been able to return home after the end of local conflicts as quickly as they have in the past, and there is a risk that these IDP populations are becoming permanently displaced ... Growing insecurity is coinciding with drought and rising food and fuel prices in certain areas, and the combined effects are likely to be compounded during the winter months. This combination may result in more movement toward cities, placing greater demands on urban service providers and swelling the number of urban poor.”<sup>12</sup> The reality of the situation in 2010 remains the same: there are, within the assistance, donor and government and non-government communities, opposing views on how to best assess and respond to the needs of urban IDPs and of families living in informal urban settlements.

In response, a national-level dialogue is being carried out within the framework of the National IDP Task Force, chaired by the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR), with the assistance of UNHCR. At the provincial level, following the winter months of 2009–2010, and the lobbying of NGOs led by Solidarités, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has taken the responsibility for a forum on the appropriate humanitarian response to displacement in Kabul, called the Kabul Informal Settlement (KIS) forum. These discussions have highlighted an ongoing conceptual and operational debate.

The main questions that have emerged within this debate are the following: Who are the people living in informal urban settlements? Can they be labeled as displaced populations, i.e. returnees or IDPs in need of support, or are they voluntary and economic migrants? How are they to be distinguished from the mass of urban poor living in the same urban areas? What are their needs? Is the appropriate response humanitarian or does it require a longer-term, development policy approach? Which agency and which ministry should be taking the lead on this issue? Is it a question of displacement or a question of urban development and management? Are donors responsible for channeling funds to assisting populations living in the major cities in Afghanistan, given the context in other areas of the country? These questions point to the need to clarify the process of identification, vulnerability assessment, and response to displaced populations in urban settings.

This puts conceptual and operational questions and challenges at the heart of the debate on the appropriate responses to urban displacement.

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<sup>12</sup> E. MacLeod, “Displacement and Security in Afghanistan,” seminar hosted by the Brookings Institution, University of Bern (June 23, 2008).

### *Conceptual issues: questions and challenges*

The conceptual concern centers on the feasibility of (i) separating conflict-induced from poverty-induced displacement and notably distinguishing IDPs from economic or rural-urban migrants on the one hand, and (ii) delineating when displacement ends.

First, the broad definition for the urban displaced makes it difficult to identify conflict-induced IDP groups (including those secondary displaced) as well as returnees in urban areas, and hence problematic for the humanitarian agencies to intervene to provide targeted protection and assistance. Unlike IDPs camp situations (either in rural or sub-urban areas), the urban displaced are not formally and systematically separated from their urban environment and from other longer-term residents. As such, they are often less “visible” and recognizable. The fact that they are integrated in the urban economic and social fabric makes it more difficult to differentiate them from economic migrants and the urban poor. The same holds true of returnee movement to the cities.

A key concern remains the well-established difficulty of distinguishing between forced and voluntary displacement within a broader context of conflict and insecurity. Forced migration is defined by political persecution, and the flight from conflict and insecurity; while voluntary migration is viewed as being economically and socially motivated. In reality, this distinction is very hard to make. As Betts observes, “In practice, this distinction is problematic; it is not possible to distinguish sharply between volition and coercion, as they exist on a spectrum. In practice, most migration has elements of both coercion and volition, and is likely to be motivated by a mixture of economic and political factors.”<sup>13</sup> This division is part of the debate today over which groups should be, in priority, receiving assistance. On this question, humanitarian assistance NGOs or agencies are to some extent conflicting with donors and government stakeholders. Some donors have argued that the urban situation in Afghanistan today does not represent a humanitarian emergency, nor do the vulnerable groups living in informal settlements in urban areas systematically fit the description of displaced populations; rather, they resemble more, in their own analysis, the situation of other urban poor. From the Government of Afghanistan’s (GoA) perspective, the situation is one of legality over the occupation of illegal land for many of these informal settlements, land that is the property of ministries (such as the Charahi Qambar settlement situated on the property of the Ministry of Defense) or of private individuals.

Secondly, when does displacement formally end?<sup>14</sup> The target is being able to determine when the displaced stop showing signs of vulnerabilities and protection needs related to their displacement<sup>15</sup>. The lack of clarity is in part due to the lack of measurement of these flows and of reintegration patterns. It is difficult to record any progress in urban areas since durable solutions are less visible than in rural areas. Although this question holds heavy implications for national and international responses and assistance to vulnerable communities, there is currently no consensus. In Afghanistan, classical notions of durable solutions are not adapted: populations will not go back or voluntarily relocate and the government is not ready to accept the prospect of local integration and in reality, cities do not possess the necessary

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<sup>13</sup> A. Betts, “Forced Migration and Global Politics” (2009), p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Title of the special issue of the *Forced Migration Review*, Issue 17 (2003).

<sup>15</sup> W. Kalin, “Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons,” *Report of the Representative of the Secretary-General on the human rights of internally displaced persons*, A/HRC/13/21/Add.4, United Nations (February 9, 2010).

infrastructure. It is unlikely that the country's security situation will improve in months and years to come, hence increasing displacement pressures and the attractiveness of cities as safe havens.

The concern over the duration of displacement symbolizes the fact that certain displaced groups, notably the protracted caseload, have been living in urban areas for 10, 15, or 20 years or more, with no intention of going back to their prior area of residence. This settlement pattern shows that a significant number of them have found coping strategies and solutions to displacement — integrating locally, at often low levels of subsistence. It also means that their initially temporary displacement has turned permanent; they are now less likely to leave, although that is still the goal held by officials of the GoA.

Often, national governments and donors are more reluctant to assist IDPs in urban environments because of the widespread assumption that those who make it to the cities are not the most vulnerable and can therefore more easily develop coping mechanisms to support themselves. As a result, the plight of urban returnees and urban IDPs is not always addressed, as it requires a specific 'urban programming approach'.

### *Operational challenges*

The challenge of internal displacement is on the rise in Afghanistan with significant limitations of the humanitarian space and access to parts of the country, hence limiting assistance in areas of origin as well as in areas of displacement. The concentration of returnee and IDP flows in specific urban areas is likely to have significant consequences on urban development in terms of access to services, infrastructures and labor markets. Considering the significant share of returnees and IDPs in urban populations, it is therefore critical to properly assess the magnitude and features of displacement in Afghan urban areas, in order to inform current and future operations for development and poverty reduction. Given these contextual challenges in Afghanistan, "delivery of assistance is limited largely due to the lack of access, by humanitarian agencies, to several IDP locations. Access to land, livelihoods, education and health care are also outstanding IDP needs with particular reference to Extremely Vulnerable Families."<sup>16</sup>

At the basis of this challenge is the lack of a mapping system: numbers can greatly vary, different organizations having different methods of identifying and counting the displaced; they also have different indicators and information management systems to gather data on the profiles of the displaced populations, their land tenure, assistance needed and received, etc. So far, there have only been limited urban initiatives, such as the KIS Task Force in Kabul (which attempts to provide a mapping of populations in informal settlements) and an assessment of the *Who, What, and Where* (3Ws) managed by OCHA. These efforts are still at a very early and preliminary stage in part due to a lack of information sharing and stakeholder transparency. Other constraints are logistical: informal settlements and displaced populations fluctuate more clearly than organizations can keep track of them through their field assessments. There has in effect not yet been any systematic way of implementing this approach at the national, provincial or district level. This is of particular importance given the limited humanitarian space in countries such as Afghanistan today. "We have to pay more

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<sup>16</sup> UNHCR, BO Kabul. "Internally displaced persons — IDPs leaflet" (October 2010).

attention to what is going on in urban areas because we can hardly intervene elsewhere these days.”<sup>17</sup>

Another challenge centers on the concern over the absorption capacity of urban areas, and the combined pressures and tensions of displacement on the urban environment, the urban poor and the increasing urban IDP population; which provides a clear operational challenge for assistance. This is a legitimate and pressing concern. Displaced populations in urban areas are notably vulnerable in their access to housing and land, as well as food, water, health and education. These vulnerabilities are at the basis of humanitarian concern that has led organizations to deliver aid in urban areas. However, the question remains one of relativity for donors and one of priority for the GoA. Given the lack of comparative analyses between the needs of displaced urban populations and other urban poor or rural populations, it is difficult to assess to what degree it should be a priority to fund and allow for interventions in the major urban areas, such as Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Mazar and Jalalabad; and to what degree the vulnerabilities should be addressed from an urban planning and development perspective.

### **Urban Displacement: An Assessment of Profiles, Vulnerabilities, and Coping Strategies**

The main differences between returnees in urban areas and IDPs in Afghanistan are not the challenges faced, as these are dependent on structural and environmental factors linked closely to each city’s infrastructure and absorption capacity; as a result, vulnerable returnee and IDP families face similar impoverishment risks. However, notable differences are to be highlighted in their socio-economic profiles. The main contrasts are the prior migration and urbanization patterns, economic profiles and skill sets, access to social networks and loans, and the important push/pull factors relating to choice and human agency. As the more detailed profiles below will show, urban returnees adopted urbanization as a return strategy in line with “pull” factors and their experience of exile and skill sets; IDPs factor in insecurity and pressures to leave, with a higher incidence of “push” over “pull factors” and with urbanization as a coping mechanism to minimize the adverse consequences of flight. This section aims at comparing the profiles of the displaced with returnees in urban areas; no attempt is made here to distinguish them from the urban poor.

#### *Profile Comparison: Urban IDPs vs. Returnees*

*Urban returnee profiles.*<sup>18</sup> On average, urban returnees surveyed have lived 15 years in exile in Iran or Pakistan. In both countries of exile, the preference of Afghan refugees was for living in urban areas — either in cities or in camps located within an urban area. In the sample surveyed, following a random methodology, more than two-thirds had lived in urban areas during exile. In Iran, the Afghan population mixed in the same neighborhoods as Iranians in cities and villages throughout the country; in Pakistan, half of the sample surveyed had aggregated in camps. Tehran and Peshawar were the two main urban hubs hosting this population. They cover all 34 provinces of origin in Afghanistan, and the majority (77.4%) was already urban prior to their exile. Their main strategy then, upon return, was one of continued urbanization: instead of returning to their areas of origin, they opted for a return in

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Poo-Lin Stefano Wong, OCHA (Kabul, June 10, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Data collected from a sample of 610 returnees were surveyed in Kabul, Herat, Jalalabad and Mazar-e-Sharif, NRC (2009).

Afghanistan's main cities. The main “pull” factors to these cities were first and foremost the perception of better economic opportunities.

When asked if they were well prepared for their return, 74% of interviewees responded negatively. The degree of information on the reality of return and the opportunities for reintegration was therefore a general lack in the return process of these refugees — a lack that, from the onset, had a negative impact on their reintegration process and the likelihood of a durable and sustainable return. While in exile, they report having had better jobs and less unemployment (with 15% of them now being unemployed). However, that is well below the current unemployment rate in Afghanistan, estimated between 25–30%, and below their unemployment levels prior to exile (at par with the national average). They show a skill set that is influenced by the patterns of employment during exile, with a clear shift to the construction sector, with numbers almost triple in that sector when comparing pre and post exile periods in Afghanistan. One-third of the employed labor force surveyed fell under the category of unskilled labor, the remainder illustrate a range of skills from tailoring, to driving, masonry, trade, blacksmith and metal work, carpet weaving, shop keeping, teaching, and other technical skills. Furthermore, 42% showed interest in participating in vocational training opportunities to learn or improve on their skills in tailoring, carpentry, shop keeping, driving and masonry; the remainder showed a lack of confidence in such courses and voiced their disbelief in their capacity to following such training (either too old, or the fact that time spent in training is money foregone). Returnees in urban settings do show other signs of economic vulnerability: more than half voiced a lack of access to loans, or the presence of relatives or friends that would provide them with financial or material assistance.

*Urban IDP profiles.*<sup>19</sup> The IDP population surveyed shows a different profile — one-fourth of the population surveyed has suffered secondary displacement, having returned from exile to their area of origin before moving on to Kabul, Herat, or Kandahar; one-fourth suffer from a prolonged displacement with protracted caseloads having been displaced prior to December 31, 2002. On average, the duration of displacement was recorded at six years.

One of the main findings is that 92% of urban IDPs lived in rural areas before their displacement; urbanization is a clear pattern related to perceptions of greater security and livelihood strategy, hence shedding light on the debate over the profiles of these people, given that push and pull factors are inherently about security in the broad sense of the term — both physical and human security. The interplay between “push” factors — insecurity, unemployment, and food insecurity — and “pull” factors — security, economic opportunities, and social networks — highlight a forced movement away from their homes and a calculated movement towards urban centers.

The overall data does not hide the fact that each city presents its own specifics as it relates to its IDP population. Herat is home to a significant protracted caseload that lived in formal IDP camps (of which the main three are Maslakh, Shaidayee, and Minaret), that are now considered as informal settlements no longer run by UNHCR or the government, but where people have built their own homes. Social networks play a crucial role in the settlements of Herat where waves of arrivals and a longer duration of displacement have been turned to an advantage in terms of know-how and experience of displacement. The social networks are

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<sup>19</sup> Data collected from a sample of 452 IDPs surveyed in Kabul, Herat, and Kandahar, survey commissioned by the World Bank Economic Policy and Poverty Team of the South Asia Region (2010).



also an important element of displacement in Kandahar — although security is the main pull factor to the city, the presence of relatives and friends has allowed IDPs from Kandahar province a better housing situation, living predominantly in relatives' homes or rented homes. In Kabul, however, the population is more “visible,” living on the outskirts of the city in tents and temporary mud homes often built overnight, living in camp-like environments where ethnic groups and displacement profiles are mixed. Their visibility and the fact that they group more recent waves of displacements have ensured the Kabul population with a higher rate of assistance, as 90% of Kabul IDPs surveyed report having received some kind of emergency or winter assistance, as opposed to 6% of those surveyed in Kandahar.

### **Vulnerabilities of the Urban Displaced and Their Coping Strategies**

Looking at the broader economic profiles of the displaced across all three cities, the main problem is one of inadequate skill set, and specifically of rural skills that are no longer applicable in an urban context. The majority is un- or under-employed, with bad quality daily work, thereby rendering their economic integration problematic if not impossible. They are therefore led to rely not only on their wages, but significantly on loans and donations from relatives and friends, a phenomenon more widespread about the IDP population than the urban returnee population.

*Urban challenges and impoverishment risks.* The results of the quantitative and qualitative surveys of both returnees and IDP populations in informal settlements in Afghanistan's main cities highlighted the five main challenges as being:

- Tenure security: access to land and housing,
- Under/unemployment,
- Food security (including food and water),
- Access to electricity, and
- Access to health services.

These challenges are defined as impoverishment risks: problems, which if not addressed effectively and in a timely manner, will lead to long term vulnerabilities permanently affecting the reintegration process of urban returnees and IDPs. Each risk presents its own set of coping strategies and areas of opportunity to be explored to alleviate the pressures of resettlement on urban displaced populations. It is important to note that in the majority of urban returnee and IDP experiences, risks are multiple and simultaneous. The household that suffers from landlessness and homelessness will also more severely suffer from food insecurity and a decline in health levels, due to increased living pressures. Both studies highlight the fact that urban returnee and urban IDP populations surveyed live on less than \$1/day for each household member, below standard poverty rates.

*Inadequate tenure security.* The land on which they live most often does not belong to them but to public institutions or private individuals. 85% of IDPs and 46% of returnees were incapable of producing any form of official deed, hence showing a very low-level (or non existence of) land tenure security. The formal housing market in urban areas in Afghanistan fails to keep pace with natural and urban growth rates, rendering much of the housing unaffordable to displaced and poor populations. As a result, spontaneous settlements emerge, where the displaced occupy unused land, setting up tents on vacant land, squatting buildings,

or building mud houses on their own. One third of the IDPs surveyed reported living in unsatisfactory and precarious accommodations.

This, in turn, is susceptible to lead to land disputes and social fragmentation. The issue of the right to land in informal settlements has led to situations of heightened tensions and confrontation. The pressures on land and services result in a competition over resources and in discriminations between longer-term residents (or host community) and IDPs. Specifically in the locations in Kabul and Herat, the research team was informed of a range of disputes over land and of failed attempts at finding alternative and durable solutions for the displaced. Location is a crucial factor for networks and livelihoods systems as poor families living far from the center cannot afford transportation to the city for work and for basic needs. The most recent example of such conflict confronted Hazaras and Kuchis in the Dashte Barchi area of Kabul in August 2010, when violent clashes broke out between the two ethnic groups, the former being the longer-term residents of the area who want the latter to leave the lands on which they have settled.

*Food insecurity.* Interviewees raised the issue of water access as one of their most pressing difficulties: water points are far, or there are very few for communities of hundreds of families, or water solutions offered to them (such as water tankers) are not sustainable. Overall, only 7.1% of IDPs interviewed reported never facing problems satisfying the food needs of their household. For the majority, however, food shortages are common, as food and nutritional intakes are often the first needs being compromised as a coping strategy to respond to poverty and external shocks. As for returnees, the focus being on improving land, housing and employment conditions, above other needs, the nutritional diet of the family is often the first need that is compromised, with consequences for family members' health levels and children's development. Overall, food insecurity is the third reason or push behind their migration; and remains a problem even in displacement. As a result, the most common coping strategy used by returnees and IDPs are to lower the quantity and quality of meals and purchase food on credit from local shops.

*Low health and hygiene levels.* Risks faced by the displaced are interlinked. Displacement is known to cause serious declines in health levels. These can be "hidden" signs of social stress and psychological trauma or more "overt" diseases caused by the lack of hygiene, with diarrhea and parasitic diseases being common in areas with unsafe water supplies. Although displaced families acknowledge that health services are available in reasonable distance from their residence, their concern is that they cannot pay for medical visits and treatments. The majority of the respondents complained of the fact that they cannot afford the basic health costs of urban areas — the issue regarding health care is therefore not one of accessibility but one of affordability. The highest health hazard in informal settlements surveyed is the poor level of hygiene, with a lack of proper latrines, hygiene education and waste management. Returnees show a higher reliance on mobility as a coping strategy when faced with health hazards: they will travel longer distances, to Pakistan or to Kabul, to seek treatment, whereas IDPs are bound to the place where they have moved.

*Lack of access to basic services and rights.* Displaced families welcome the fact that their children are provided with access to better schools and learning opportunities in urban areas. However, there are significant differences between locations: in more precarious informal settlements, the right of children to primary education is not respected. There is a widespread lack of basic educational facilities available for both girls and boys in these areas.

These problems show that beyond the need for emergency assistance are specific needs for land, housing and shelter assistance, provision of food, water, hygiene, and sanitation (WASH) activities in informal settlements of Afghanistan's main urban areas. They are an important factor to be taken into account in the policy context in shaping responses to the needs of these populations. To avert certain time-bound and temporary crises, displaced households rely on their own coping mechanisms. These coping mechanisms are aimed at a short-term calculus, to avert a crisis, without necessarily attending to the potential negative repercussions. As such, they may lead to creating new vulnerabilities within the household, such as increased indebtedness from loans and purchases on credit, of health hazards caused by diminished nutritional diets for family members.

### **Providing Care and Maintenance: Lessons Learned**

*“The illusion of impermanence.”* The Framework for Durable Solutions states that IDPs are considered to have reached a durable solution in three cases: if they return to their homes, if they integrate locally in the area of displacement, or if they leave to another part of the country and no longer show signs of displacement-related vulnerabilities.<sup>20</sup> Two out of three of these solutions have been set forth by authorities in Afghanistan: in the case of IDPs, increasing pressures for new caseloads to go back home or for protracted caseloads to relocate; as for returnees, land allocations schemes have been, with limited success and viability, proposed as an alternate solution. Behind these scenarios is the assumption that returnees and IDPs are only “temporarily urban.” However, when migrants bring their families with them, return migration is less likely to happen.

These populations are most likely to stay where they are, putting an end to the myth of return. Once they have moved all their belongings, lost their sources of livelihoods and often their homes, there is little for these families to return to; in the case of returnees, coming back after an average of 15 years of exile, they might not have any land or homes to go back to, even in their areas of origin.

*Solutions?* Although local authorities put forth that the most viable long-term solution for returnees and IDPs is relocation under a land allocation scheme in the greater urban area, populations interviewed in Herat or Kabul have so far not welcomed such a solution. Location is a crucial factor for networks and livelihoods systems. Poor families living far from the center will not be able to afford transportation to the city for work and for basic needs. This was the case in Barikab in Kabul, and in Zhari Dasht in Kandahar. According to UNHABITAT, the land allocation scheme of Zhari Dasht was built 20–25 kms outside of Kandahar, but it was too far for most people to afford living there. So the question then is: “Can we make affordable land available and at scale?”<sup>21</sup>

An example of an ineffective planning on a land allocation scheme (LAS) is that of the AliceGhan project, 30kms North of Kabul, funded by the Australian government and inaugurated in 2007 to house vulnerable returnee families, and later to include IDPs as well. The project foundered mainly because of (i) distance: a poor location too far from work in Kabul, (ii) lack of opportunities: a proper feasibility study was not done in AliceGhan, and

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<sup>20</sup> “Adapting to Urban Displacement,” *Forced Migration Review*, Issue 34 (February 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Dr. Jan Turkstra, UNHABITAT offices (Kabul, July 15, 2010).

(iii) lack of basic infrastructure: inappropriate housing designs and a failure to secure running water which naturally affects well-being, health and learning potentials for children of school-age. There has been a temporary arrangement consisting of bringing water tankers with MoRR, but no permanent solution has been found. People are therefore highly reluctant to go settle there. As a result, while the full capacity of the AliceGhan project had been planned for 1,525 families, at the moment the occupancy rate is very low, at only 20% of the total capacity.

*UN Mandate: the need to integrate a recipient-based approach.* Eight years after the start of repatriation, the UN does not have a nation-wide strategy to deal effectively with displacement and the needs of returnee families, from humanitarian efforts to early recovery and development. This is in part due to the operational focus on the return process, rather than the recipient process. Large-scale development projects do not target the specific needs of returnees and host communities, and these populations are in particular need of livelihood activities. UNHCR has stretched its mandate and budget to respond with limited resources to these needs – but it needs more support. UNHCR is now working closely with UN-HABITAT to benefit from lessons learned on their initiative to regularize informal settlements. Given the importance of land in finding a long-term solution for the inhabitants of Kabul's informal settlements, UN-HABITAT's partnership with the Kabul municipality and experience regarding regularization of settlements in Afghanistan will be useful in exploring ways to address the humanitarian and developmental challenges of the KIS sites.

*The official fixation on return.* The GoA's official stance has been to put off any type of longer-term planning for returnees and IDPs in urban areas. MoRR has been trying to discourage internal displacement and prevent the establishment of new areas for IDPs in urban areas. "Our policy is to encourage people to return to their original areas," said Hafiz Nadeem, a MoRR official, adding that building latrines and wells in informal camps would attract more IDPs.<sup>22</sup> This approach has in the past prevented a durable solution and prevented organizations from providing basic services. The most notable example in Kabul is of Action Contre la Faim (ACF)'s work in Charahi Qambar. The organization's application for building toilets and water points was rejected by the government. "We are allowed to do anything but nothing that is sustainable" was the reality cited by an NGO worker in Kabul who highlighted the lack of durable solutions: on WASH activities for example, the government will allow water trucking but not building water points. However, such activities are extremely costly, without a proper exit strategy, and will therefore not be funded by donors on the long run.

### **Concluding Remarks: Opportunities for a Joint EU / US Effort**

The main question to be addressed by a joint EU/US effort for the provision of assistance to vulnerable displaced populations is the following: How to reconcile the seemingly contradictory perspectives taken by the national authorities, line ministries, and municipalities on the one hand, and the internal and ongoing debate between agencies on the ground?

To seek a possible reconciliation between these contrary positions, we may consider certain assumptions and conclusions about the consequences of displacement on urban settings and urban populations. The presence of "visible" populations on the outskirts of Afghanistan's

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<sup>22</sup> *Integrated Regional information Networks (IRIN)* "Afghanistan: Sanitation woes in makeshift IDP camps" (April 23, 2009).

main cities can be seen as an opportunity to build urban programming initiatives in a context where humanitarian access is increasingly limited in the rest of the country. In this context, what could be the role of donor countries?

1. Building a broader urban approach to displacement with components of humanitarian response, early recovery, livelihood and infrastructure rehabilitation, and development. Given the common urban challenges faced after return or after displacement by the populations discussed in this paper, there are a set of predictable risks (related to land, housing, employment, food security, access to public and social services) that can be remedied by planning for responses. As such, it is an opportunity for the EU and US to jointly develop a model of risks and risk avoidance<sup>23</sup> in urban settings.
2. Supporting the GoA in implementing programs in the form of public works, subsidies, and support for productive activities. Where the GoA might not have sufficient resources with regard to public works, it will be an opportunity for EU and US counterparts to encourage a stronger collaboration between municipalities and non-governmental actors, notably by negotiating official government authorization for NGOs to implement activities that address basic human rights (e.g., developing infrastructure for water provision).
3. Capacity building within ministries and municipalities, jointly with specialized UN agencies, to monitor the inflows and outflows of populations and assess their needs using vulnerability mappings and poverty assessments.

*Strengthening the funding and mandate of UN agencies such as OCHA and UNHCR, which have proven willing to take the lead on these issues in Kabul.* It will be necessary to increase the budget for humanitarian assistance and support, notably through OCHA, which could be nudged into taking the lead in urban settings. However, OCHA, which faces severe staffing limitations and logistical obstacles in its current work in Afghanistan, needs the support of its headquarters in New York and of member states in order to fulfill its mandate. Likewise, UNHCR needs the backing of its donors so that it can continue pilot activities launched in Kabul on the profiling of displaced populations. Such exercises need to be implemented systematically, in cooperation with MoRR and its provincial representatives, in all major urban areas, given the deterioration of security throughout the country.

4. Funding additional research projects aimed at developing field assessment guidelines that can be used as an agreed upon set of tools for stakeholders involved in assisting the displaced. The aim of such guidelines will be to provide (i) thorough means to estimate the displaced populations in urban areas, (ii) a methodology for the profiling of the displaced, and (iii) a comparative assessment tool to review the protection needs and vulnerabilities of displaced and urban poor populations. A use of common assessment tools by NGOs, donors, and government alike will be a step forward in reducing some of the conceptual and operational challenges detailed in this paper.

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<sup>23</sup> M. Cernea and C. McDowell, *Risks and Reconstruction: Experiences of Resettlers and Refugees*, for the World Bank, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (Washington DC, 2000).