

# Reframing solutions for Afghan refugees

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**Regional programming and advocacy in relation to Afghan refugees should be framed around supporting and responding to, rather than 'solving', protracted displacement.**

Afghans continue today to represent the world's largest protracted refugee situation, with Pakistan and Iran still hosting some 2.5 million Afghan registered refugees, with equivalent numbers of unregistered refugees also expected to be present in both host countries. Some 75% have been in exile for over three decades, and for many Afghan refugees the prolonged nature of their exile has not increased their ability to integrate into their host communities. Many are actually seeing their humanitarian

conditions deteriorate as their period of displacement lengthens and there is currently little incentive for Afghan refugees to return.<sup>1</sup> For the vast majority, the prospect of a durable solution to their displacement remains unrealistic and distant.<sup>2</sup>

Addressing the needs of Afghan refugees in protracted displacement appears to require a distinctly development-oriented response, which can seem at odds with humanitarian activities. Bridging this gap

May 2014

between the humanitarian responses required to meet the immediate needs of Afghan refugees and the longer-term development requirements of these communities is one of the great challenges for international policymakers and assistance providers alike.

### **The durable solutions challenge**

The response to Afghan refugees is almost always framed within the search for 'solutions'. Yet traditional approaches to assistance based on humanitarian relief alone do not necessarily constitute the appropriate response to protracted refugee situations. For humanitarian response actors, along with international donors and policymakers, it is therefore important to understand the particular character of the Afghan refugee situation and apply this understanding across the two hosting countries, Iran and Pakistan, and also within Afghanistan in relation to supporting returning refugees.

UNHCR's recent efforts to facilitate a comprehensive strategy to addressing Afghan refugees has illustrated many of the challenges attached to achieving comprehensive and integrated approaches in an overly politicised and highly complex regional security environment. The regional Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR)<sup>3</sup> marks an important attempt to elaborate a response framework by UNHCR and the Governments of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan to address all facets of protracted displacement in the region. The strategy acknowledges that development and humanitarian issues remain mostly compartmentalised and that there is a level of trepidation from actors on both sides about engaging with each other.

Yet operationalising such approaches remains challenging. The traditional durable solutions framework – repatriation or return, resettlement, and local integration – is in reality applied with a firm focus on return as the only viable durable solution. This 'return bias' creates sensitivities for response agencies that seek to implement longer-term assistance interventions in interacting with host governments who

understandably perceive such efforts to equate to local integration by default.

In Afghanistan, however, the return bias is widely acknowledged to have had a very adverse impact on overall development efforts. The return of over five million refugees since 2002 has placed huge pressure on local communities, and serious obstacles to repatriation remain today for large segments of this returnee population owing to the weak absorptive capacity of the Afghan state, ongoing insecurity and the limited development dividends reaching large swathes of the country. With the full impact of the transition and security handover uncertain, return remains an unviable option for many displaced Afghans. Against this backdrop, humanitarian agencies continue to navigate a programme response for Afghan refugees that is frequently at risk of sending mixed messages vis-à-vis the durable solutions debate, compromising relationships with host governments in both Pakistan and Iran.

### **Regional refugee context and policy environment**

A regional response approach offers opportunities for improved levels of regional cooperation for all actors seeking to address the ongoing protracted displacement situation for Afghan refugees. The SSAR has now established a policy framework for the three countries to work within. Politically, this reaffirms return as the primary objective in relation to durable solutions; practically, it promotes improved programming interventions in all three countries towards creating conditions for sustainable return and achieving improved reintegration prospects for those who have already returned to Afghanistan.

Additional positive changes include new commitments to keeping Afghan refugees high on the agenda of the international donor community and a renewed interest in building improved evidence bases for understanding and addressing Afghan refugees' vulnerabilities and designing appropriate programme strategies and

interventions. This creates space for encouraging the combining of humanitarian interventions with development approaches and reframing the relief interventions of humanitarian agencies to better support eventual development outcomes.

Negative aspects include the ongoing return bias and the absence of genuine commitments by Iran and Pakistan to a) include alternative stay arrangements for registered refugees as part of the package of durable solution options, b) adequately address the issue of unregistered/undocumented refugee populations and c) provide protection and assistance for vulnerable unregistered Afghan refugees.

Humanitarian agencies working on Afghan refugee response efforts need now as much as possible to reframe programme objectives and strategies in relation to the SSAR, highlight the ongoing humanitarian needs of Afghan refugees living in protracted situations, and encourage donors to support new approaches that promote self-reliance and reduce dependency. There are a number of key steps that humanitarian NGOs can take to help address and support Afghan refugees in protracted displacement:

**Make the case for community-driven programmes:** Humanitarian agencies should not seek (nor claim) to 'solve' protracted displacement, nor promote specific durable solutions, but rather offer pragmatic and innovative means to addressing the problem in ways that are beneficiary-oriented and community-driven.<sup>4</sup> Promoting self-reliance should be a core programming principle, and learning and advocacy should be used to help overcome the reluctance of host governments who tend to associate self-reliance with integration and naturalisation.

It is also important to communicate effectively about refugee response programmes to host communities, local authorities and national governments to increase awareness of the importance of supporting long-standing Afghan refugees with interventions that

promote improved levels of engagement and active participation, such as community-based livelihoods support. To dispel the perception increasingly held by host communities and national governments that Afghan refugee populations are a burden, innovative programming models need to empower Afghan refugees to make productive contributions to communities as a whole; such community-based approaches can spur on local economic growth and, if well communicated, do not need to compromise longer-term return and repatriation goals.

**Tell donors what works:** Promoting alternative forms of support to Afghan refugees within more restrictive humanitarian funding streams could include greater focus on income-generating activities, livelihood and cash- and/or voucher-based schemes, as well as greater support to host communities. Education and vocational training programmes that emphasise cross-border dimensions (such as skills and curricula certification) can have the dual effect of supporting and enabling refugees to enhance their own labour market opportunities in displacement, while at the same time meeting host government objectives related to return and repatriation.

**Protect access to rights:** While focusing on increased self-reliance through programming approaches, addressing and responding to the formal rights of Afghan refugees and returnees remains of paramount importance. The ability of Afghan refugees to achieve greater levels of self-reliance can only be realised if there is adequate access to the full package of rights enshrined in the 1951 Convention, including access to work and freedom of movement. Communicating this rationale and encouraging improved acceptance of this by host governments can be done in positive and context-sensitive ways that illustrate the value of improving conditions and reducing vulnerabilities.

**Do more effective advocacy:** Equally important for humanitarian response actors is to ensure that discussions of protracted

May 2014

displacement situations gain greater prominence on the agenda of development actors and international donors. Facilitating improved interaction between humanitarian and development actors has the potential to encourage the delivery of services to refugees and host communities in ways that avoid parallel systems and promote greater political will to 'unlock' protracted refugee situations. Guidelines in relation to humanitarian parameters on responding to protracted refugee situations – clearly identifying and articulating where support should start, overlap and end between humanitarian and development actors – would be a useful and important contribution to the donor discussion currently underway.

**Think regionally:** The regional SSAR can help support efforts to build greater awareness around the benefits of understanding, identifying and utilising cross-border linkages across Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan to see how future programming interventions interact and have positive impacts upon the lives of Afghan refugees and returnees. New efforts could be directed, in particular, towards developing innovative programme responses for urban protracted displacement situations across the region.

### Conclusion

To date, an over-reliance on humanitarian interventions has characterised the response to the Afghan refugee situation and has compromised efforts to secure lasting and sustainable solutions. Increasing international interest in the situation of protracted Afghan refugees and the challenges surrounding return therefore remains of key importance and requires a renewed level of focus. Such approaches should be anchored in bottom-up programming principles and seek to distance themselves from any overt promotion of specific durable solutions. Instead, regional programming and advocacy in relation to



Returnee, IDP and local girls attending classes in a school built by the Norwegian Refugee Council in Maymana, Faryab Province, Afghanistan.

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Developing and promoting such new approaches to programming are essential to achieving a shift from care and maintenance to a more empowering and participatory package of assistance. Policy discussions within the humanitarian community across the region to improve learning around self-reliance programming initiatives would not only help ensure longer-term financial support but would also reassure host governments in Iran and Pakistan that increased self-reliance does not equate to local integration, playing instead an important role in enhancing the prospect of sustainable voluntary return when conditions allow.

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