

The changing nature of return migration to Afghanistan

Katie Kuschminder, Melissa Siegel and Nassim Majidi

Donors and practitioners need to adapt to a changing landscape of migration and return migration in their efforts to target Afghans most in need of assistance.

Over the past decade, return migration to Afghanistan has changed from refugee repatriation to primarily people returning from labour and mixed migration flows. It can no longer be assumed that repatriating refugees are the most vulnerable in Afghanistan, and policies need to recognise the diversity of return migration flows.

Over six million Afghan refugees have returned to the country since 2002, mainly from neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. Although more recently the rate of return has decreased sharply, the voluntary and forced return of migrants to Afghanistan continues. Return from Europe to Afghanistan has been a highly politicised issue over the past decade as Afghans remain to be one of the largest asylum-seeking groups in the continent. Each year, several hundred rejected asylum seekers opt for Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration support or are forcibly removed from Europe to Afghanistan. In addition, the political climate in Iran has changed towards Afghan refugees and since 2007 large numbers of Afghans have been deported annually. The result is that over the past decade the nature of migration and return flows to Afghanistan has greatly changed, and policies need to recognise that returning refugees are not necessarily the most vulnerable.

Household survey results

In 2011 we undertook a survey of 2,005 households in five provinces in Afghanistan to examine migration and return dynamics. Included in the sample were 1,100 return migration households (defined as households with either a returning migrant or returning refugees in their midst) and 185 households with a current migrant (defined as migrants who been abroad for three or more months at the time of the interview).¹

The results show that the number of people returning due to changes in political and security situation in Afghanistan heavily decreases from 2001 to 2011. From 2007 there is an increase in the number of people returning due to forced removals, reflecting the increasing deportation of Afghans by Iran from 2007 onwards. This change in the reasons for return is also reflected in the change in the reasons for initial migration. 2010 appears to be a critical turning point where for return migrants the primary reason for their initial migration was employment, not insecurity. This highlights that the reasons for migration and return to Afghanistan have changed since 2009 with recent flows oriented towards labour and mixed migration, not refugee migration.

Further analysis shows that the reasons for the initial migration have an impact



Afghan refugees returning to Afghanistan in 2004.

May 2014

on the well-being of the household upon return. Contrary to expectations, returning refugee households are more likely to be better off than returning labour migrant households.² Moreover, when comparing returnee households to non-migrant households and current migrant households, we find that returnee households are more likely to be well-off than non-migrant and current migrant households.

There are several reasons for this. First, returnees may be well-informed about the conditions they are returning to and therefore choose return because and when they know the conditions are suitable. This applies specifically to earlier waves of refugee returnees. Secondly, the assistance – in particular, shelter – that many receive upon return could have an impact on their well-being.³ Finally, it is possible that those who were able to migrate in the first place were already better off or gained skills and experiences that prepared them for a more effective reintegration process upon return. Taking these issues into account, continuing to provide support preferentially to refugee returnees may fuel local/non-returnee

resentment towards refugee returnees, continue to increase the economic status of returning refugees above the local norm and thus have a negative overall impact on reintegration and community cohesion.

These results have important implications for return and reintegration policies in Afghanistan. Returnees comprise nearly one-third of the population in Afghanistan, which is too large a proportion to target as vulnerable, especially at a time of transition and decreasing funding. Afghanistan – and international organisations and donors working in Afghanistan – should define vulnerability within the local context. Clearly, there are vulnerable refugee returnee households and individuals in Afghanistan but being a returnee does not automatically mean that one is worse off or more vulnerable than others. From a policy and implementation perspective, the priority is for donors and practitioners alike to acknowledge the diverse needs of all returnees in their efforts to target the most vulnerable.

Katie Kuschminder is a Research Fellow, and Melissa Siegel is Associate Professor, both at Maastricht University.

Katie.kuschminder@maastrichtuniversity.nl
Melissa.siegel@maastrichtuniversity.nl
www.maastrichtuniversity.nl

Nassim Majidi *Nassim.majidi@samuelhall.org* is Director, Samuel Hall Consulting <http://samuelhall.org> and PhD candidate at Sciences Po Paris.

1. Data collected through the IS Academy: Migration and Development project survey. Households were surveyed in five provinces: Kabul, Balkh, Herat, Kandahar and Nangarhar. In each province an urban, peri-urban and rural site selection was conducted with primary sampling units chosen at random based on lists obtained from the Central Statistics Organization (<http://cso.gov.af/en>). Data collection financed by Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and IOM. Full results at: <http://tinyurl.com/UNU-MERIT-migration-and-dev>

2. Using a multi-dimensional approach where well-being is seen as dependent not only on income or consumption but also on other dimensions such as skills, health, education, security and social inclusion.

3. Maastricht University and Samuel Hall (November 2013) *Evaluation of the UNHCR Shelter Assistance Programme*. <http://samuelhall.org/REPORTS/UNHCR%20Shelter%20Assistance%20Programme%20Evaluation.pdf>

