

## Anchoring return: the role of the Solutions Strategy

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**Providing a minimum standard of living and livelihood opportunities to help anchor those who have returned is critical for the future stability and security of Afghanistan. This is one of the three main objectives of the 2012 Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees.**

Afghan refugees long constituted the world's largest refugee population and one of the most protracted situations in the world. They have also been the subject of the largest repatriation ever undertaken – which is still ongoing. Since 2002 more than 5.8 million refugees have returned to Afghanistan, ending years of exile; 80% had been in exile for more than 20 years. Around 4.7 million refugees were assisted in their return by UNHCR through its voluntary repatriation programme.

While there were massive returns between 2002 and 2008 (4,369,086 registered by UNHCR), the past three years have seen a steady decline in overall return figures with a total over the three years of 201,284 returns. This trend reflects the changed circumstances compared with the first years of the repatriation where Afghan refugees' enthusiasm and optimism at the end of the Taliban regime appeared to lead refugees to overlook the obstacles and challenges in returning to a country devastated by 20 years of war. Many of those obstacles are still present – in particular, lack of access to livelihoods and basic services in return areas, and heightened insecurity in some parts of Afghanistan – but the previous enthusiasm for return has given way to a more realistic approach, with many refugees adopting a 'wait and see' approach. It is also clear that while in past years many returnees still had strong links with the country of origin, the third generation of Afghans born in exile with less tangible links to their country of origin look more realistically and critically at the situation, waiting for concrete signs of improved security and economic stability.

It is worth noting that there have also been some quite impressive positive trends: GDP growth of 8.2%, a sevenfold increase in the

number of teachers, access to basic health services for 85% of the population, and a drop in maternal mortality from 1,400 to 327 per 100,000 live births. However, despite these positive results, and billions of dollars of international aid, Afghanistan remains the poorest country in the region.

Since the beginning of its voluntary repatriation programme in Afghanistan in 2002, UNHCR has provided initial assistance to returnees to help meet their immediate survival and reintegration needs: shelter, water points, income-generating projects, skills training, literacy training and cash for work. Nevertheless, those who opt to return continue to face huge challenges including lack of access to security of land tenure, lack of basic services, ongoing conflict and insecurity. There is also a lack of safe roads, access to markets, irrigation systems and protection from floods and other natural disasters. Providing a minimum standard of living and livelihood opportunities to help anchor those who have returned is critical for the stability and security of the country. At the same time, pending their return, the situation of Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries must be managed and alternative solutions strengthened. There is a serious need for integrated interventions by the UN and the Afghan authorities to ensure that the necessary humanitarian and development assistance is provided in a complementary manner.

### Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees

With these aims in mind, in 2011 the governments of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan with the support of UNHCR initiated a quadripartite consultative process that led to the launch in May 2012 of a 'Solutions Strategy for Afghan

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Refugees to Support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration and Assistance to Host Countries', endorsed by more than 50 countries.<sup>1</sup> The Solutions Strategy presents an opportunity to identify ways of anchoring returnees meaningfully within Afghanistan and to prevent secondary movements.

At the beginning, the Solutions Strategy focused attention on 48 selected 'high return' areas in order to concentrate activities linked to reintegration of returnees. After an initial assessment, however, it was clear that new returnees were moving to other areas and therefore it was decided both to expand the number of target return areas and to direct assistance in line with actual returnee flows. A 2014 portfolio of proposed projects has been prepared through the joint efforts of the three governments, UN agencies, intergovernmental organisations, and international and national NGOs, working through an integrated framework for multilateral cooperation and coordination in each country.

Closely aligned with the Afghan government's National Priority Programmes (NPPs), the Solutions Strategy seeks to facilitate the transition from short-term humanitarian aid to longer-term development initiatives. The National Solidarity Programme (NSP),<sup>2</sup> one of the NPPs, is one of the main means of promoting rural development in Afghanistan. Launched in 2003 by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) with the aim of developing and rehabilitating rural villages in Afghanistan, the programme aims to empower rural communities and promote their participation in local development. Due to its wide geographical coverage, the NSP is a national development programme with significant potential to reach returnee communities across Afghanistan and contribute to sustainable return.

The Solutions Strategy's priority theme is youth empowerment through education and skills training. Special attention is also given to projects that address women's

empowerment and aim to improve women's inclusion in decision-making processes at home and within the community; these projects focus on raising awareness of women's potential earning power and capacity for participation, in line with a broader approach for the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). UNHCR will continue to identify and prioritise its interventions to match areas of high return in view of access and return trends, including to urban areas. In locations with an obvious shortage of actors, UNHCR will provide quick impact projects (e.g. construction of small access roads to improve livelihoods opportunities), while advocating for development actors to create more sustainable and longer-term opportunities.

Projects implemented under the Solutions Strategy have focused not only on shelter and essential services but also on ways to enhance protection and peaceful co-existence. Apart from provision of shelter, water, health clinics and ambulances, vocational/skills training and expanded educational facilities, the Solutions Strategy has also in the last two years enabled the installation of solar lighting systems in houses and streets in high return areas (enhancing the safety of women), the construction of three micro-hydro-power plants to improve access to electricity for both returnees and host community, and the rehabilitation of socio-economic infrastructure (roads, irrigation systems and community centres). The primary focus of all UNHCR interventions, both immediate humanitarian assistance and longer-term integration, is to advance protection principles. This means that UNHCR will focus not only on providing assistance in the form of shelter or material assistance or cash but also on the safety, dignity and rights of persons of concern. In some cases, this will involve addressing protection concerns directly (for instance, through SGBV support projects or legal assistance programmes); in others, it may involve undertaking activities that will lead to a future protection dividend (for instance, livelihood projects that result in a reduced risk of secondary

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displacement or education opportunities that will reduce the risk of early marriage).

### Partnership and coordination

In order to develop and implement interventions in close alignment with national programmes, coordination and partnership with government programmes, such as the NPPs, is vital. The Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) and its provincial departments continue to be UNHCR's main government counterpart for voluntary repatriation and sustainable return and reintegration. However, more active engagement is sought from other key ministries and UN development agencies, also with a view to including returnees' needs in the UN's post-2015 development priorities. Opportunities for cooperation with the World Bank's Rural Development Programme and the Asian Development Bank are currently being explored, with the intention of linking return solutions to agricultural development. And FAO and UNHCR have initiated discussions on a cross-border initiative, through which refugee farming families in Pakistan would be given access to training to enhance their prospects for sustainable return and reintegration in Afghanistan.

In 2013, the governments of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan adopted a Joint Resource Mobilization Strategy for coordination and fundraising at both regional and country levels. Key elements of the strategy include ensuring predictable multi-year funding in support of the Solutions Strategy, as well as developing partnerships with non-traditional donors and development actors.

The Solutions Strategy's National Steering Committee is guiding implementation of the Strategy through the Inter-Ministerial Coordination Committee, chaired by the MoRR, and is also managing the new multi-donor trust fund. The initiative is all the more critical to ensuring a sustained focus on the humanitarian situation during the coming, unpredictable period of transition in Afghanistan – which may have an impact not only on displaced people and returnees inside Afghanistan but also on those still in exile in neighbouring countries and around the world.

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1. [www.unhcr.org/afghanistan/solutions-strategy.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/afghanistan/solutions-strategy.pdf)
2. [www.nspafghanistan.org](http://www.nspafghanistan.org)



The village of Mahajer Qeslaq, in Balkh Province, built for returning refugees from Pakistan and including solar lighting.