

Heeding the warning signs: further displacement predicted for Afghanistan

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There is currently much evidence pointing to another wave of displacement likely to occur in Afghanistan. Ignoring these early warning signs and failing to act may mean paying a higher price in the future, both financially and in human terms.

Over a decade after the fall of the Taliban and following massive international development and military intervention in Afghanistan, all the evidence suggests that we are likely to witness yet another major displacement crisis. The main differences this time around will be that internal displacement will eclipse external displacement, and the main asylum option will be the capital, Kabul, followed by bigger regional cities. There are a

number of factors to consider when assessing the likelihood of future displacement:

Mobility as an important coping mechanism for Afghans: About three in four Afghans have experienced forced displacement at some point in their life, and many have experienced it multiple times (both internal and external). Thus, many Afghans no longer have a strong connection to their own country, let alone the

land and livelihood that would help them stay. Having left before, they are likely to do so again when the going gets tough. Their threshold for resisting moving is lower, and they have experience of what to do and where to go, or at least how to weigh their options.

People once again on the move: Most Afghans already have an exit strategy – or have considered one – for when the time comes to move again. Those with resources have already begun to move their family to Dubai; others are looking into study or work opportunities abroad or family reunification with relatives in the West. Some spend an entire family's savings to smugglers to get one young man abroad in the hope that this will open up another gateway. At the same time, internal displacement has been steadily increasing over the past few years, with over 630,000 individuals recorded as having left their homes, 110,000 in 2013 alone and a similar number the year before.

Afghan diaspora in many places: The displacement experience of Afghans has made for a relatively large diaspora not just in the neighbouring countries of Pakistan and Iran but also in Europe, North America, Russia, Central Asia and Australia, thereby increasing destination options. Many in the latter countries have acquired citizenship and the privileges and possibilities that come with it. Family reunification or the marriage between an Afghan in the diaspora and one in Afghanistan has been a feature over the past years and is likely to increase as it provides a ticket out that bypasses lengthy asylum procedures and rejections. Furthermore, migration research has shown that the existence of diasporas always lowers the threshold for out-migration, as a path has been established and a support network exists.

Return not as successful and sustainable as hoped: Though it is unclear exactly how many Afghans have returned home (some more than once) since 2001, 5.7 million is a recent estimate.¹ Added to this are the 2.7 million who are still in Pakistan and Iran, and who are unlikely to return home unless

there is a strong forced incentive from the host countries, namely deportation. But return has been unsustainable for many, if not a majority, due to the struggle to obtain a place to live and make a living, let alone access basic services and enjoy security and protection. Many returnees already live in secondary displacement.

Added demographic stress: With its exceptionally high birthrate (2.4%), Afghanistan's population is predicted to exceed 40 million by 2030, with ever greater competition for resources such as land, services and employment in a country that already struggles to provide for the current population of around 28 million. More stresses and vulnerabilities are likely to produce displacement and, with a larger population, any future displacement will mean larger numbers of refugees and IDPs.

Insecurity as a key driver of displacement: The recent sharp increase in violence in Afghanistan does not inspire much confidence that the push factors will be resolved any time soon. Security incidents and the killing of civilians have been steadily on the rise over the last few years, and the trend is already continuing into 2014. Civilian casualties, however, only tell us part of the story, and should be considered along with the increase in threats, intimidation and human rights violations, the rise in instances of impunity, and the lack of protection provided by the Afghan government and its security forces. The choices are increasingly limited: acquiesce with whoever is in power, leave, or risk injury or death. This makes displacement a much preferred coping mechanism as long as it can be afforded.

Lack of economic growth and associated livelihood opportunities: It is hard to deny that after 12 years of international development assistance Afghanistan is still an underdeveloped country that struggles on multiple levels. Afghanistan is ranked 175 out of 187 in the Human Development Index and 147 out of 148 in the Gender Inequality Index. Two key indicators, under-five child

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mortality and maternal mortality, are among the highest in the world. While much of migration is not directly forced by insecurity and human rights violations, it would be ill-conceived to describe it as 'voluntary'.

Slow and inadequate policy response:

The Afghan government has been slow in acknowledging and responding to the need to address displacement, expecting people simply to go back to where they came from within Afghanistan. Recently the government signed the Afghanistan Food Security and Nutrition Agenda and the National Policy on Internal Displacement; however, both remain at document rather than implementation stage, requiring concrete recommendations and a framework to translate policy into reality. A lot of future assistance to Afghanistan is riding on the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework, and donors are increasingly wary of channelling more funds into an inefficient and corrupt government. This, coupled with decreasing access opportunities by humanitarian and development actors, will continue to put stress on already vulnerable communities, and hence drive displacement. If services and assistance do not come to those in need, people will go to where they can access them.

Where will people go?

If we can predict where people are likely to go, at least in large numbers, this could help to focus assistance – and also prevent subsequent displacement. With traditional exit options becoming increasingly difficult (Pakistan insecure and impatient, Iran simply impatient), and new ones usually necessitating access to considerable resources (both financial or educational), going abroad is becoming increasingly difficult. This will concentrate displacement internally.

Afghanistan in general, and its capital Kabul in particular, has experienced a rapid urban growth over the past decade, with an estimated 7.2 million urban dwellers in 2011 (some 25% of the entire population²), considerably above the regional average for Asia. Kabul is one of the fastest growing cities

in the region, and in July 2013 counted at least 53 informal settlements, though in reality there are likely to be more; other cities have seen a similar growth of urban slums, where IDPs live side-by-side with returnees, urban poor and nomadic populations, generally squatting on government or private land. While still hard-pressed in terms of access to services and finding livelihoods, many still feel it is better (or at least safer) to stay put. Similar experiences in other countries suggest that this concentration of people only adds to the demographic pressure which can in turn lead to further displacement.

Why are we not seeing the writing on the wall?

Afghanistan is undergoing an important political and security transition, both of which are linked to an economic transition, and all these are creating an environment internally and internationally of 'wait and see'. Those who do see the writing on the wall may be reluctant or unable – strategically and in practice – to do anything about it.

There is also an element of not wanting to admit failure. Acknowledging another displacement crisis would be acknowledging the failure or at least limited success of the more than a decade of the internationally driven state-building project. If the West pretends now that there is no displacement crisis, it can walk away from involvement or responsibility, and later blame the Afghan government. Furthermore, admitting to having contributed to, or at a minimum not having prevented, another displacement crisis might entail accepting responsibility to provide asylum.

And finally, whether we admit it or not, Syria right now is the new hot spot, while Afghanistan has gone out of vogue. Closer to Europe, with a displacement crisis of the magnitude of the early Afghan refugee years, Syria has effectively distracted attention from whatever may be going on in and around Afghanistan.

Despite these distractions, and reasons for the West not to get engaged, we should still

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be asking: What will be the consequences if these early warning signs are ignored? If we do not act now, and are not prepared to provide assistance, might we pay a higher price in the future, both financially and, most importantly, in human terms? The West once ignored Afghanistan and let it fester, only to wake up to a threat of terrorism from Afghanistan. What makes us think that the combination of an unaddressed internal displacement crisis, the growth of urban slums and an increasingly younger demographic unable to obtain education or employment is going to come out any better?

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1. UNHCR (2012) *The Voluntary Return and Reintegration Programme* www.unhcr.org/4fedc64b9.html
2. Different sources generally put Afghanistan's population at between 25 and 30 million, though UNFPA estimates it to be considerably higher than 30 million. The figures for Afghanistan's urban population therefore also varies, usually estimated as 25 or 30%.