

Afghan returnees as actors of change?

Marieke van Houte

Afghan returnees from industrialised countries are expected to contribute to development and peace building in Afghanistan. However, which category of returnee is expected to bring what kind of change often remains under-defined.

Refugees returning 'home' are seen by the international community as the ultimate proof of peace and return to 'normalcy'. Somewhat paradoxically, however, they are also seen as agents of change who can contribute to development and peace building. Returnees from industrialised countries are considered to constitute the more highly educated, wealthy, entrepreneurial and strongly networked elite, who have acquired skills, capital and ideas while abroad. Furthermore, they are expected to be mediators between cultures. Throughout the European Union, governments use their budgets for Official Development Assistance to finance so-called Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) programmes of unwanted migrants. However, returnees from Europe are a very heterogeneous group of people and not all of them have these characteristics. A study of returnees to Kabul indicates that people's legal status and motivation for return are significant in a number of ways.

Voluntary returnees – as opposed to AVR returnees – retain their permanent right to live in their host country. This transnational mobility, combined with their good socio-economic position, gives them confidence in their ability to protect themselves from violence and at the same time to keep their dependants safe in their Western country of residence. Many voluntary returnees are driven by ambition and choose to return to Afghanistan despite the expected post-2014 turbulence. They return with optimism and energy, and many see the knowledge, skills and attitudes gained in Europe or elsewhere as assets that they can offer to Afghanistan. However, they find that their 'foreign' ideas are often viewed with suspicion and many soon become discouraged and disillusioned.

Voluntary returnees constantly re-evaluate their decision to stay or move, and may re-emigrate in the face of post-2014 changes. However, this very mobility also allows them to take the risk to be 'different' from mainstream society, and to advocate opinions that go against the current discourse.

In contrast, involuntary returnees, who retain no legal status in the host country, tend to be of more modest background and have often spent all their savings or become indebted to finance their migration, and they return further impoverished, frustrated and disappointed rather than enriched by their migration experience. Having lived but never really participated in their former host country, they have picked up few new skills or ideas and tend rather to be conservative/traditional as a strategy to negotiate belonging in Afghan society.

In the unpredictable environment of Afghanistan, transnational mobility is the most valuable asset for returnees. Rather than implying a fluid commitment to Afghanistan, it instead enables them to be more independent of national structural constraints and to negotiate change. While the international community sees permanent repatriation of refugees as the ultimate proof of peace, it may rather be that it is their continued mobility that will contribute most to sustainable livelihoods and potentially to peace and development.

Marieke van Houte is a PhD fellow at the Maastricht Graduate School of Governance, Maastricht University, the Netherlands. This piece is based on her PhD thesis on return migration which she expects to defend in 2014. mariekevanhoute@gmail.com
www.maastrichtuniversity.nl