

Uzbek IDPs in western Afghanistan: to move onward, to stay or to return

by Elca Stigter

Microanalysis of intra-household decision making and movement patterns of a segment of Uzbek IDP households in Afghanistan facilitates a better understanding of how complex migration processes are shaped by social, political and economic factors.

Research undertaken in 2004 (as part of a larger project on transnational networks, refugee return and labour migration)¹ focuses on two nearby compounds in an urban neighbourhood of the western Afghanistan city of Herat. The small sample of Uzbek IDPs who were researched are surrounded by indigenous Herati families and households from elsewhere in Afghanistan. All the Uzbeks are from Faryab province, 350 kilometres away in north-eastern Afghanistan, the majority from its main city, Maymana. Contacts with relatives are maintained via elaborate social networks. Relatives and neighbours from Maymana pass through Herat on their way to Iran, exchanging news and letters. The brother of one IDP works as a driver between Herat and Maymana and conveys remittances, relatives and goods.

The IDPs occupy the lower echelons of this Herati neighbourhood. Herat's economy is booming due to its position at the crossroads of trading routes with Iran and Turkmenistan. IDPs feel the consequences as the return of Afghan refugees from Iran pushes up the cost of renting property. One informant, Malika², reported that in March 2004 her household's rent almost doubled to \$US60 a month. IDP families note that displacement has invariably depleted their assets, giving them less flexibility in terms of expenditure and fewer resources to fall back on.

Male IDPs do a variety of unskilled jobs. They may earn two or three dollars a day but income is irregular. Masoud, Malika's husband, used to work in construction in Mazar-i-Sharif and in a brick-kiln factory in Iran. In Herat he bought a cart to push goods in the bazaar but fell ill

after five years and started selling potato pancakes made by his wife. It is a precarious livelihood. IDPs are harassed by the police and constantly risk fines, confiscation of goods and overnight imprisonment as a consequence of city directives restricting pancake sellers and other street vendors.

The Uzbek IDPs feel they are strangers in a foreign and often hostile urban environment. If in need, the families turn to each other, Uzbeks living elsewhere in Herat or those entrepreneurs in the bazaar that provide them with work or credit. They do not know the traditional neighbourhood representative (*wakil*). Women's contact with people beyond their compounds is limited as they are often busy with their household chores and home-based work to enhance their families' income. One Uzbek compound maintains good relations with two Herati neighbours - characterised by frequent visits and an exchange of small favours. Though only 50 metres apart the two Uzbek compounds have little contact with each other.

Decision making

Masoud's elaborate displacement history has been shaped by Afghanistan's period of conflict. After marriage, he continued moving between Maymana and elsewhere for mostly economic but also security reasons (including a spell in Iran) and, when the Taliban collapsed, travelled with his family to Herat. His movements and reasons for movement illustrate how IDPs move back and forth between the categories of returnee, IDP, labour migrant/refugee. Some Uzbek IDPs stayed throughout the years of

conflict within Afghanistan, while others went temporarily to Pakistan or Iran. Sometimes they returned to Maymana to explore options in their place of origin but lack of employment prospects or renewed insecurity meant they could not afford to stay. Herat was chosen because of its economic opportunities, because many men from Maymana were imprisoned there by the Taliban and because of its function as a transit point to Iran.

Malika narrates, "I was tired of travelling - that is why I stayed here. When I came, it was my decision not to go to Iran. After one month in Herat I realised that life outside of Afghanistan is not good." Since then they have stayed in Herat, sharing the rent with other families. By May 2004, however, the situation had changed. "Two families left and I feel alone. That is why I want to go back. I am tired of being out of Maymana, far from my sisters and brothers." Malika already pictures how she can bake bread to contribute to the household income, while her husband envisions his onward movement to Iran after having rebuilt his house for Malika.

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Decisions to move on or stay put are interrelated with those made by others who share a compound. If they leave, the rent increases for families with whom they live and immediate emotional and economic support networks are diminished. Like Masoud and his family, some prefer to linger in this economically more disadvantageous situation to save more money before returning to Maymana.

One Uzbek woman clearly establishes the linkage between economic opportunities and home: "Wherever I can earn money and get food, there is my home." However, when she continues with her story, it becomes

clear that other reasons are at least as important; with her family around her in Maymana, her position vis-à-vis her disliked co-wife (who is not from Maymana) would be greatly strengthened.

Only one IDP family still dreams of going to Iran. For this family, return to Maymana, where rainfall is scant and five brothers would have to divide their small plot of family land, is not feasible. Despite having once been deported from Iran they are saving to try to rejoin male relatives on the other side of the border. In their letters they report that life in Iran is difficult because of the high rents and the absence of relatives but that it is easier to find a job than it is in Afghanistan.

Strategies used by IDP households are dependent on their positions within the extended family, their personal preferences, gender and age. While women talk about their personal wishes and the need for support from their own family, men emphasise their role as family protectors and providers. Ultimately the reasons for displacement, return and onward movement are often complex and sometimes contradictory in nature. One Uzbek girl recites her mother's continuous indecision: *"When I remember the bad days in Maymana then I prefer to stay here, but when I think about my relatives then I just want to go."*

Conclusion

Transnational and national networks can facilitate sustainable return but, at the same time, promote further displacement for economic reasons. While some IDP families will return to their place of origin, temporarily building on the resources and capacity of already present relatives,

others will remain where they are or plan to move across the border to join their relatives. Thus, individuals and households shift between different official categories at different times (IDPs, refugees, labour migrants).

Uzbek IDPs, like others, are continuously reassessing their options on the basis of different scenarios. The trigger to start moving again – and how, where to and for how long – can be influenced by violence and harassment, a lack of economic opportunities and gender and age-linked roles and responsibilities. They show a wealth of livelihoods strategies throughout their displacement history. Despite difficult living conditions, Herat appears to provide sufficient labour opportunities to enable them to provide for themselves, sometimes even allowing them to sustain family members in their town of origin.

At the same time push factors increase in the urban context of Herat, in particular as it becomes more and more difficult to find cheap accommodation. This, alongside a weakening of support networks, can accelerate the decision to return to their city of origin or push those with established kin networks in Iran to try to cross the border.

The notion of 'home' is defined differently at different times. Central in much of the decision making is the presence of family in the potential next destination. Further, intra-household dynamics play a key role in the decision making – in particular when different places are home to different people within a household. Uzbek women definitely have a say in this, and sometimes determine the decisions ultimately made.

Various discourses are used in Afghanistan with regard to refugee and IDP return, labour migration and reintegration. While acknowledging that different actors in Afghanistan are aware of the interrelationship between displacement (including labour migration), transnational networks and reintegration, there remains much to be done to make policies and practice more grounded in the daily realities of Afghans.

There is a need to:

- better understand power structures and social networks in particular urban neighbourhoods
- acknowledge and, if necessary, support the decision-making and income-generation capacities of women
- further strengthen overall development efforts in Afghanistan to increase employment opportunities for men and women
- recognise that different household members have different interests and attitudes to return, staying put and onward movement: information provided to household heads may not be in the interests of all members
- acknowledge the interrelationship between return (and 'reintegration') and the existence of nationwide and transnational social networks, which sustain populations either in the place of origin or elsewhere.

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¹ The case study reports will be available by October 2004 at www.areu.org.af.

² This article does not use the IDPs' real names.

