



Holding the Middle Ground:

Experiences of Displacement, Community Relations, and Conflict between IDPs, Returnees and Host Communities in Herat, Nangarhar and Takhar

For four decades, Afghanistan confronts one of the world's most protracted and complex population displacement challenges. In 2019, 578,000 Afghans were displaced from their homes due to conflict, violence, or disaster. A further 490,000 Afghans returned from abroad under distressing circumstances, who continued to live a life of displacement even after returning home. They were either unwilling or unable to return to their place of origin or, after returning, forced to leave their home district again due to a lack of opportunities or insecurity. At the end of 2019, an estimated 4.2 million Afghans were considered internally displaced persons (IDPs).

The protracted displacement crisis affects not only displaced people but the communities that receive them. In a context struggling with deepening insecurity, economic fragility, and political uncertainty such as Afghanistan, protracted displacement strains the already thinly stretched and often poor-quality public services even further, intensifying competition for scarce livelihood opportunities.

Furthermore, displacement produces new yet fluid and disjointed communities of new migrants, old migrants, and host communities, requiring both displaced and host community members to negotiate a new environment with new groups of people. Therefore, both national and international policymakers have struggled to grasp the fluidity

and extent of forced internal migration amidst a prolonged armed conflict. Their response to the growing crisis has been hindered by a lack of data and coordination problems.

This report provides an in-depth review of the realities and impact of the internally displaced people and their host communities in Herat, Nangarhar, and Takhar provinces, which have the highest numbers of displaced people. The report focuses on three areas, including understanding the experience of being displaced, the dynamics between host populations and displaced communities, and vulnerable groups' experiences, specifically women and youth.

The research for the study was carried out over five months from October 2019 to January 2020. The findings are based on data collected from surveys, interviews, and focus groups conducted with IDPs, returnees, host communities, local officials, and aid workers in Herat, Nangarhar, and Takhar, and key informant interviews with policymakers and international aid workers in Kabul.

The research team adopted a bottom-up approach and used community-based and participatory research methods to better understanding these dynamics. Therefore, while policymakers and aid workers were included in the study, the bulk of the report focuses on the communities' perspectives and experiences.

This publication summarizes the findings of the forthcoming Scoping Report "Holding the Middle Ground: Experiences of Displacement, Community Relations, Conflict between IDPs, Returnees and Host Communities in Herat, Nangarhar, and Takhar" and subsequent recommendations by the authors, Althea-Marea Rivas, Mirwais Wardak and their colleagues at the Peace Training and Research Organization (PTRO).

Key Findings

Policy Frameworks:

The 2017 Returnee and IDP policy is a significant step forward for the Afghan Administration. It addresses many of the issues that previous policies have failed to recognise, including the possibility of other options beyond return for IDPs.

However, for the policy to realise its potential, it requires a more adequately staffed government office to guide the implementation and monitoring of the new guidelines, clearer communication and mentoring of implementation at the sub-national level, and improved coordination among national and international actors.

Displacement:

The internal displacement journeys in all three provinces were characterised by uncertainty, insecurity, and vulnerability. The Returnees' and IDPs' journey to their new home location was fraught with the lack of security and abuses.

For returnees, both deported or those who returned on their own, the abuse and hurdles included police harassment, detention, and torture. Analogously, many IDPs were robbed, drained of their resources, and subject to maltreatment. Though this is one of the most perilous times during displacement, there was little to no assistance for these families.

The settlement experience was significantly influenced by the events that took place during the journey after leaving home. Fear, mental stress, and diminished resources often placed participants at further risk of exploitation once they arrived at the new location, further contributing to secondary displacements.

Drivers of Displacement:

Lack of security, poverty, and food insecurity were commonly cited drivers of displacement among returnees. The results from the household survey, focus groups, and interviews conducted for this report reflect the official numbers with the majority of participants stating that violent conflict was the main reason they were forced to leave home. The nature of the conflict varied; however, there were multiple factors driving displacement, further intensified by the onset of conflict. These factors include food insecurity, ethnic tensions, abuse and harassment, and natural disasters being the most common.

Aid and Assistance:

Both host and displaced community participants expressed concern and frustration over the perceived lack of assistance from national and international actors. Many displaced families did not receive assistance, but among those that did, the emergency aid provided was insufficient even to meet their short-term needs.

The slow and inadequate response of the government and aid agencies impacted the IDP families and placed immense pressure on various host communities who already struggle with poverty and unemployment. Consequently, the lack of assistance to both communities served as a catalyst, further fuelling inter-community tensions.

While it was clear that most families were struggling with a range of issues, including poverty, food insecurity, the lack of access to land, water, and sanitation; they often balanced this with living in a secure area and improved access to services. However, the security did not negate the difficulties of displacement and the lack of assistance from local and international actors. Corruption, the absence of government participation, and insufficient aid were all seen as contributing factors to untenable circumstances for IDPs and their host communities.

Community Tensions:

Our research indicated that inter-community conflict was much lower than expected or as commonly suggested in policy and aid agency reports. Displaced families were sometimes viewed with fear and blamed for increased crime rates. The main sources of conflict were land, failure to pay rent or wages, and cultural differences often around women. Cultural and regional differences led to discrimination in daily life, including employment, housing, or even restricting the IDPs' access to social networks.

A common perception within host communities was that the population increase in their areas placed pressure on the already weak essential health and education services and employment availability. While this created some negative sentiments towards the IDPs, many local residents acknowledged that the poverty in displaced communities was direr than in the host communities and identified job training and employment support as a key area for international aid and national government actors to provide support to displaced people. In fact, the most common source of support for displaced families was the local community.

Collective Community Works and Resilience:

Rather than pervasive inter-community conflict, evidence from all three provinces pointed to the existence of efforts to enhance collective community resilience. Local communities helped displaced families despite the scarcity of resources, strained public services, and ethnic divisions.

This shift, noted at different levels across all the three provinces, is partly attributed to a growing acceptance by host communities that internal displacement is a common occurrence. Displaced families are seen as suffering due to the shared experience of violence, insecurity, and poverty that affect Afghan families all over the country. Therefore, host communities feel a moral obligation to assist IDPs and returnees where possible.

There was evidence across all the research sites that displaced families received support for daily basic needs from other displaced families and host community members. Without negating the existence of inter-community conflict, the study found that local community cultural norms, often constructed in policy documents and reports as driving ethnic divisions and violence, are, in fact, the impetus for an essential and growing source of informal humanitarian assistance to displaced families and strengthen overall community resilience to violence and uncertainty.

Environmental Challenges:

Low-quality food, water, cooking methods, and food storage practices have had detrimental health effects on women and their families. The emissions released from materials utilised to make cooking fires, such as plastic bottles, containers, old wires, and cotton lead to various illnesses and have damaging environmental and health impacts.



Mental-Health and Women:

Local networks and social groups play a crucial role in providing psycho-social support to displaced women and children and contributing to building community resilience. Displaced women and

children face significant challenges to their mental health and well-being due to living with decades of conflict, displacement, and poverty. The mental health support in the national healthcare system is imprecise and inadequate and often inaccessible due to limitations around social and gender norms. Community-based groups, however, are stepping in to provide support to address these gaps. Investment in longer-term mental health facility-based services and professional training in Afghanistan is crucial. However, immediate engagement with and support from donors to informal support networks is necessary and could significantly impact the psycho-social well-being of displaced women and children.

Struggling Youth:

Youth among both the displaced and host communities, had varied experiences of education, violence, family obligation, and voluntary commitments, often running alongside high levels of economic vulnerability. Instances of conflict were among the youth could be observed, e.g., about access to unskilled daily labour or unpaid loans. Nonetheless, there was also an overwhelming commitment to move forward personally and transition into adulthood. However, the desire and enthusiasm for a peaceful Afghanistan and a certain future among the young people is tempered by the ongoing experiences of forced displacement, the legacies of war, and the fear of inheriting a future rife with conflict.



Recommendations

Moving Beyond Coordination Obstacles and Complexity:

Both national and international actors need to take serious steps to move beyond debating the same obstacles to the provision of practical humanitarian assistance to the IDPs in Afghanistan that have dominated the conversation for over a decade. Complexity should no longer be used as

a justification for the ineffective or fractured response.

Improve Coordination:

While significant advances have been made recently, partnerships at the national and international levels need to be strengthened. Government agencies' capacity to record displacement data needs to be improved, including better data collection systems.

Invest in Innovation and Prioritise Skill Transfer:

Data must be gathered regularly over extended periods and across borders. Further innovation must be introduced to improve data collection and focus on national and local authorities' skills development to gain a more accurate understanding of the relationship between displacement, cross-border movements, and durable solutions.

Engage with Local Resilience:

The voices of affected populations should not be an afterthought because they are integral to developing a collective and targeted response to addressing displacement. Stakeholders should diversify their programming to become more relevant and aligned with local needs. International actors need to shift focus from what international agencies can do for communities and instead support the resilience emerging in both the host and displaced communities.

Strengthen Accountability Measures:

Accountability tends to flow upwards to donors or political actors. Donors can, however, use their influence to encourage aid organisations to have greater accountability to local communities using community-based evaluations and post-assistance participatory forums.

Invest in Community-Based Mental Health Services:

The widespread impact of mental health challenges in local communities, particularly displaced populations, needs to be fully acknowledged and prioritised in assistance programming. More significant investment in community-based mental health services and women's and youth networks is necessary, providing accessible and immediate support to local communities.

Invest in Understanding the Youth's Needs:

A growing population of young, displaced, marginalised, and alienated Afghans will directly impact the governance, security, and development prospects of Afghanistan. This particular group needs to be taken seriously beyond the countering violent extremism and radicalisation agenda. Further research into Afghan youth's lives and needs should be prioritised, which will enable the stakeholders with techniques to better support millions of young Afghans struggling with insecurity, displacement, and violence.



Photographs taken by Jamshid Ismail in September and October of 2019 in Herat and Nangerhar Provinces.

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