

IOM AFGHANISTAN

RESEARCH SERIES ON RETURN AND REINTEGRATION IN AFGHANISTAN

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SYNTHESIS OF  
FOUR BRIEFS ON  
DISPLACEMENT TRENDS  
AND CHALLENGES IN  
AFGHANISTAN SINCE  
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The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. As an intergovernmental organization, IOM acts with its partners in the international community to: assist in meeting the operational challenges of migration; advance understanding of migration issues; encourage social and economic development through migration; and uphold the human dignity and well-being of migrants.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	6
I. ECONOMIC RESILIENCE AND MENTAL HEALTH	7
II. CHALLENGES OF URBAN MIGRATION	9
III. IMPACT OF BASIC SERVICES ON MIGRATION	11
IV. COMMUNITY AND HOUSEHOLD RESPONSES TO CLIMATE CHANGE	13
STRENGTHENING SOCIAL COHESION FOR (RE)INTEGRATIONS AT A TIME OF FRACTURE	16



Afghan farmers have struggled with the impact of increasing drought, with family members having to migrate to supplement family income. Dehsabz district, Khoja Chasht village, tomato crops (Credit: Samuel Hall 2021).

## GLOSSARY

Adaptation	Coping with the impacts of climate change that are unavoidable at the community level. Adaptive coping mechanisms serve as a protecting factor and ultimately decrease the adverse impact of climate stressors, including reducing the frequency of occurrence.
Basic services	Public/private service provision systems that meet human basic needs including drinking water, sanitation and hygiene, energy, mobility, waste collection, health care, education and information. <sup>1</sup>
Infrastructure	The basic systems and services, such as transport and power supplies, that a country or organization uses in order to work effectively.
Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)	Persons or group of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border. <sup>2</sup>
Mental Health & Psychosocial Support	Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) includes any support that people receive to protect or promote their mental health and psychosocial wellbeing. <sup>3</sup>
Migrant	An umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. The term includes a number of well-defined legal categories of people, such as migrant workers; persons whose particular types of movements are legally defined, such as smuggled migrants; as well as those whose status or means of movement are not specifically defined under international law, such as international students. <sup>4</sup>
Mitigation	Reducing the impacts of climate change within communities.
Negative coping mechanism	Negative coping mechanisms include responses to climate stressors that ultimately do more harm than good. This can include using contaminated water sources, selling agricultural land to factories, or being forced to move to different communities.
Returnee	International refugees who have returned to their country or community of origin.
Social commons	Human-made commons, meant to protect individuals and societies. It focuses on the collective dimension of protection that is needed and on the collective endeavour to achieve it.
Threat multiplier	Climate change is often referred to as a threat multiplier for both natural disasters and conflict. Climate change is a threat to security, as it “disrupts individuals’ and communities’ capacity to adapt to changing conditions, usually by multiplying existing or creating new strains on human livelihoods.” <sup>5</sup>
Secondary displacement	People experience secondary displacement when, after being displaced from their homes or place of habitual residence, they are forced to flee their area of shelter or residence to another, second location.

1 UNESCO, ‘[Basic services](#)’, 2021

2 UNOCHA, ‘[Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#)’, 2004

3 Government of the Netherlands, ‘Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Crisis Situations’, (website accessed 28 June 2022).

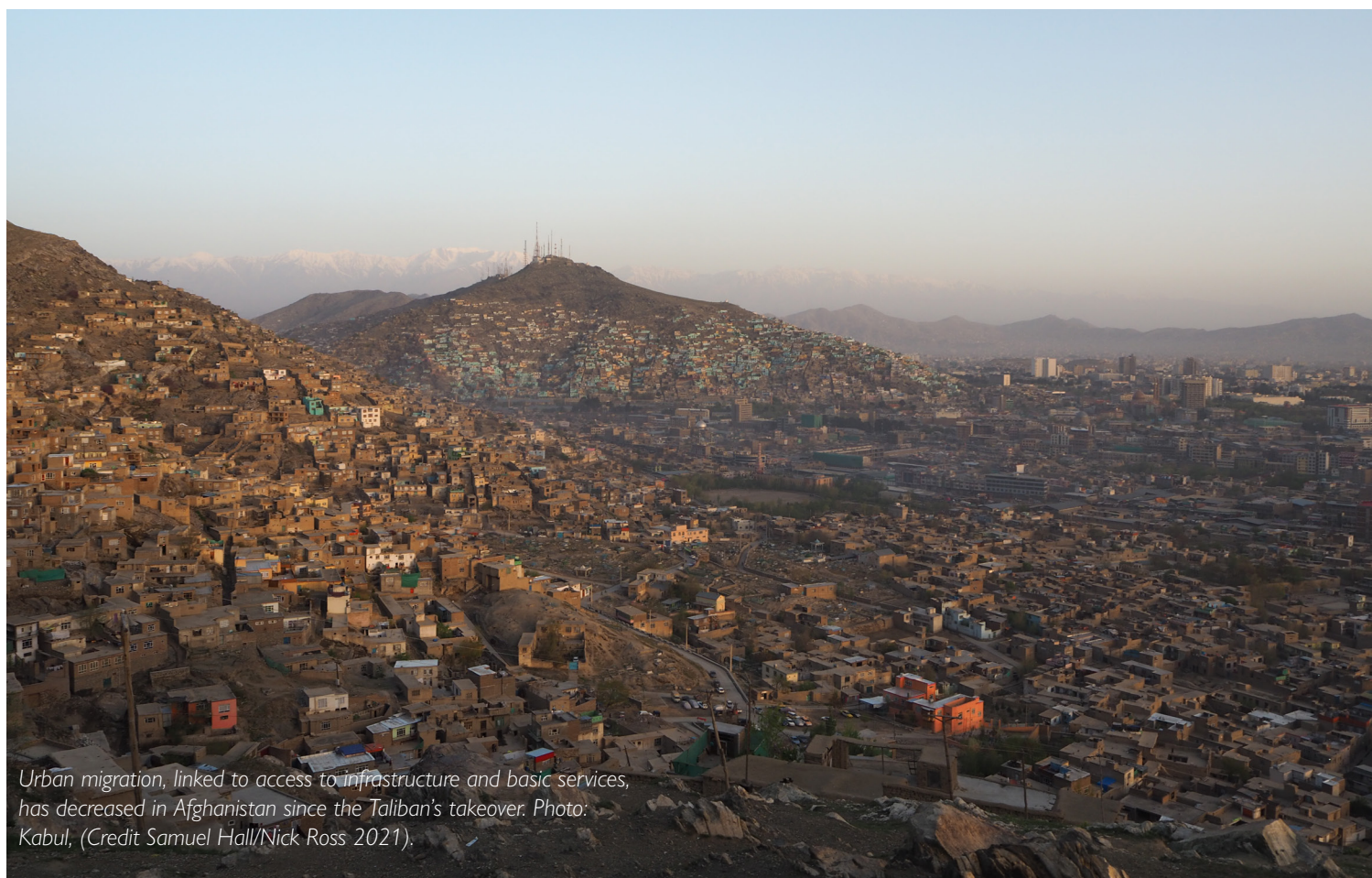
4 IOM, ‘[Glossary on Migration](#)’, 2019.

5 Huntjens P. and Nachbar, K., ‘Climate Change as a Threat Multiplier for Human Disaster and Conflict,’ The Hague Institute for Global Justice Working Paper 9 (May 2015).



## LIST OF ACRONYMS

AFN	Afghan Afghani (currency)
ARTF	Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund
DfA	<i>De facto</i> Authorities
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IEA	Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan
IOM	International Organization for Migration
KII	Key Informant Interview
MDI	Multi-Dimensional Integration Index
MHPSS	Mental Health Psychosocial Services
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SSI	Semi-Structured Interview
WFP	World Food Programme



*Urban migration, linked to access to infrastructure and basic services, has decreased in Afghanistan since the Taliban's takeover. Photo: Kabul, (Credit Samuel Hall/Nick Ross 2021).*

# INTRODUCTION

## WHY THIS RESEARCH?

While Afghanistan has been home to much research on return and reintegration across the last two decades, gaps remain on key topics – such as mental health, basic services and infrastructure, climate change and urban migration, specifically since the fall of Kabul in August 2021. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) implemented the Reintegration and Development Assistance in Afghanistan (RADA) project before 2021 and is continuing to conduct activities in the country. Funded by the European Union, RADA's objective is “to support sustainable reintegration of returnees within their communities of return”, tied to the UN Sustainable Development Goal 10.7.<sup>6</sup> RADA uses an integrated approach to the economic, social and psychosocial aspects of reintegration at both the individual and community levels across eight Afghan provinces with high return rates.<sup>7</sup>

Samuel Hall collaborated with IOM through four research briefs addressing these knowledge gaps. The briefs highlight the key unaddressed challenges facing Afghans, which donors and practitioners, and a global audience, need to be aware of to take immediate action on. The aim is support the IOM's learning agenda and future reintegration work as it expands its work and presence in the country at a time of need. The broader aim is to enhance donors' and partners' knowledge and understanding of migration, displacement, and (re) integration to inform evidence-based decision-making on Afghanistan among key international and national stakeholders. This series of research briefs seeks to achieve the stated objectives by:

- Broadening understanding factors of migration and displacement in Afghanistan since August 2021
- Assessing the capacity of communities to provide an enabling environment for (re)integration
- Strengthening understanding of the role infrastructure and services in migration movements

- Assessing the mental health needs of the displaced and their communities, and the extent to which their (social, psychological, psychosocial, and economic) needs are being met.

## KEY OBJECTIVES

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) commissioned Samuel Hall to conduct a series of 4 briefs, focusing on the topics of mental health, urban migration, infrastructure & basic services, and climate change displacement. The purpose of the research is to provide IOM and other migration stakeholders with knowledge and learning on important aspects of forced migration. This brief is designed to inform future programming, including the development of evidence-based proposals.

## Research methodology and data used

The research papers are based on empirical fieldwork conducted in Herat, Kabul and Nangarhar in the spring of 2022 with a total of 215 people consulted for the four research briefs.<sup>8</sup> Samuel Hall employed a qualitative approach to data collection, through key informant interviews (KIs); storytelling-based semi-structured interviews (SSIs) (for the mental health brief), and semi-structured interviews (SIs); and focus group discussions (FGDs). Remote KIs were held with technical experts and key stakeholders of the four topics – mental health, climate change, urban migration, and infrastructure & basic services – who were based in Afghanistan or had significant understanding and knowledge of the Afghan context.

Samuel Hall's research teams in Afghanistan conducted field research after a period of training which included research objectives, familiarisation with tools, research ethics, and qualitative research techniques. Samuel Hall also relied on existing data sources such as IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM).

<sup>6</sup> SDG 10.7: “to facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed policies”

<sup>7</sup> The eight provinces covered by the RADA programme are: Baghlan, Balkh, Herat, Kabul, Kandahar, Kunar, Laghman and Nangarhar

<sup>8</sup> Total FGDs: Mental Health: 39 (19 male, 20 female: 7 FGDs), Climate change: 31 (16 male, 15 female) (6 FGDs), Urban Migration: 31 (16 male, 15 female) (6 FGDs), Infrastructure: 33 (17 male, 16 female) (6 FGDs). Total SSIs: Mental Health: 22 (10 male, 12 female), Climate Change 15 (9 male, 6 female), Urban migration: 9 (6 male, 3 female), Infrastructure: 15 (15 male, 0 female). Total KIs: 16

# I. ECONOMIC RESILIENCE AND MENTAL HEALTH

## ECONOMIC AND HUMANITARIAN CRISIS AND MENTAL HEALTH

The events of August 2021 which saw the Taliban take power triggered international economic sanctions, and drastically impacted the Afghan economy. Afghanistan's post-2001 over-reliance on foreign aid rendered it devoid of the resilience required to respond to the sequence of events over the summer of 2021. During the last months of 2021, per capita income fell by approximately one third.<sup>9</sup> The downward trend has continued in 2022, with many rural respondents to this study stating that they are no longer able to secure an income through daily wage work, or other forms of work.<sup>10</sup> In urban areas, civilians have become, once again, the victims of indiscriminate terrorist attacks as seen in Kabul city's Dashte Barchi neighbourhood, on October 1, 2022 with the targeting of a private educational facility, which has left dozens of girls and young women murdered, and many more students injured.

### 1. Gendered impacts on mental health

The post-August 2021 economic decline and resulting humanitarian crisis have affected men's mental health as they are now unable to fulfill their socially prescribed role as the sole provider for their families. In the interviews conducted in Herat, particularly, this has resulted in an increase in substance abuse among youth and suicidal ideation among men – respondents detailed developing symptoms of mental health conditions (particularly anger, irritability, disrupted sleep patterns, and physically lashing out at family members) due to the current economic climate. Illustrating this trend is the narrative of an IDP man who was exhausted by being unable to provide for his family or fulfill other social obligations such as attending funerals. He explained:

*"There have been times that I have brought rat poison in the house [for committing suicide]. I don't want people to remember me with nasty names due to this living*

*condition...I have seen many people in bad condition. For example, they wanted to kill their entire family members by giving them rat poison."*<sup>11</sup>

Women have faced particularly harmful challenges to their mental health since August 2021. Female-headed households – the number of which have grown over the last year, with an estimated two million widows across the country – have been impacted by poor mental health caused by the combination of severe poverty with restrictions on women making it more difficult to generate an income.<sup>12</sup> For women who used to work in jobs such as laundering clothes, cleaning, and breaking peanut shells, restrictions imposed by the *de facto* authorities (DfA) have severed them from their means of income generation, as they are no longer able to move around their communities freely, and former employers have migrated. Additionally, a rise in domestic violence resulting from mental health conditions expressed through anger is having a negative impact on women.

Displacement itself increases mental health pressures as social ties and support networks are severed. Historical patterns of disadvantage among internally displaced women, and returnee women in Afghanistan exacerbate mental health stressors. Reduced mobility and the disruption of their support networks render these women susceptible to domestic violence and socio-economic isolation.

Though both genders suffer, men are perceived to be more justified in experiencing mental health conditions than women. Society is more sympathetic towards men with mental health conditions than women. Women reported, in our sample, being more likely to be beaten inside the home by their relatives than men who suffered from mental health problems. Nonetheless, IDPs stated that people with mental health are not valued by society, regardless of their gender.

<sup>9</sup> World Bank, 'Towards Economic Stabilization and Recovery', April 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Research carried out for the mental health research report which is also part of the RADA research series.

<sup>11</sup> SS122, male Pashtun IDP, Herat, 29 May 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Since August 2021, the DfA have issued edicts such as banning women from governmental employment; prohibiting women and men working together in the same physical space, prohibition from attending secondary schools; and requiring a mahram if travelling more than forty-five miles. Additionally, women must attend services such as health clinics in the company of a mahram. Despite these institutionalised changes, geographic differences continue to exist in restrictions placed upon women. In some rural communities where women and men used to perform agricultural roles together, this is no longer allowed, whilst in other communities, women are able to move around relatively unhindered, though their opportunities have been dramatically restricted.



## 2. Trust in formal MHPSS services

“Mental health” is not a widely used term in Afghan society. Mental health conditions are heavily stigmatised, and described by respondents as a mental malfunction which disrupts the affected person’s relationships with their family, community, and others. Respondents often viewed visible mental health disorders as dangerous, and described how they deliberately treat such people badly, often to scare them away from children and family members.

Times may be changing due to how widespread mental health needs have become. Everyone knows someone affected by a mental health disorder. Everyone the research team spoke to reflected on the short term and long term impacts of this trend. Respondents stated that whereas prior to August 2021 most households contained one person who was suffering a mental health condition due to the war, now everybody is suffering from mental health conditions as a result of poverty, unemployment, inflation and debt.<sup>13</sup>

Who, within the population, will be able to access mental health support? Previous research points to a general distrust of professional mental health services and practitioners, and within this, research conducted among urban displaced youth by Samuel Hall in 2016 found that female youth were over three times more likely to seek third-party support for their mental health than male youth.<sup>14</sup> However, respondents to this research (in 2022) overwhelmingly positioned formal, or professional, mental health services as the most desired form of support.

This research shows a significant shift in perception of formal Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) services, though it is unclear at what point over the past seven years this shift began. The consistent factor prohibiting respondents from accessing support was cost: cost of transportation, consultation fees and any associated prescription fees. Imams were often accessed only as a second-best to qualified doctors, where respondents had no recourse to the latter.

## 3. MHPSS integration at the community level

Afghan community health, since August 2021, has

worsened with a reduction in community and peer support. Community health is a term defined by WHO as representing the environmental, economic and social resources that communities hold to protect and support their own.<sup>15</sup> In Afghanistan, communities are no longer able to protect their own. Communities experience a social fracture with potential long term and damaging effects on social cohesion, and on the very fabric of social relationships in a country that is used to survive through the strength of its social system.

Severe poverty, combined with unemployment, inflation, debt, and overall absence of sufficient support to meet basic needs, is limiting and reducing community resilience, causing individual and collective suffering. This is leading to domestic violence that is doubly harmful for children, as well as changing perceptions of girls who have mental health conditions, who may be seen as ‘unfit for marriage’, rendering them particularly vulnerable in the event of their parents’ death. Child marriage has risen dramatically since August 2021, with families selling their young daughters to cover basic household expenses. The impact of this – on children’s mental health and their family – is clear.

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Respondents and key informants confirmed that MHPSS provision would be most effectively delivered if integrated into community support, basic needs assistance and service provision as this enables less obvious access to MHPSS services (which are often stigmatised). Overwhelmingly, respondents advocated for a holistic approach to improving mental health, combining MHPSS with poverty alleviation through increased economic and livelihood support. Supporting this element, the experts interviewed emphasised the need for a strong economic component to be integrated throughout any MHPSS provision. Finally, MHPSS provision should be long term, particularly as children have been subjected to violence, at times also as a result of their parent’s mental health issues. For this to be impactful, communities should be consulted on how to deliver MHPSS support, while de-stigmatising mental health conditions through local level community campaigns and trainings.

<sup>13</sup> FGD5: R4, male, Nangarhar, 14 May 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Hall, Urban Displaced Youth in Kabul, 2016, p19.

<sup>15</sup> WHO, ‘A discussion document on the concept and principles of health promotion, Health Promotion International, 1:1, May 1986, p73–76



## II. CHALLENGES OF URBAN MIGRATION

Urban areas as “social commons” – referring to human-made commons meant to protect individuals and societies – are under threat in Afghanistan and require support.

### 1. Contrary to decades of rural-urban migration, urban migration is stalling or reversing

The following trends have emerged since August 2021: An initial influx of people into provincial capitals and Kabul due to conflict and concerns about security was followed by a return to home provinces and more rural settings. This was due to a perceived reduction in access to employment opportunities, services and infrastructure, which had previously been perceived as advantages of urban migration. **The trend of migration towards urban hubs thus appears to have been at least temporarily reversed.** The declining economy has dried up city-based employment opportunities. At the same time, the DfA have made concerted efforts for hundreds of thousands of displaced persons from urban areas to return to rural areas of origin since late 2021.<sup>16,17</sup> This has included closing informal settlements in urban centres, for example, around Qala-e-Naw in Badghis province and Kabul.<sup>18</sup>

There are still, as expected, Afghans migrating to urban areas: IOM counted 83,140 displaced people moving to Kabul between January and April 2022.<sup>19</sup> In addition to people forced to flee their homes, urban migration is undertaken for better livelihoods, to join family members, for marriage, and for education. Urban migration trends are local and must be contextualised at the sub-national level: counter to the trends reported by interviewees in Kabul and Nangarhar provinces, those in Herat reported more migrants to urban centres since August 2021, often due to drought in neighbouring provinces. **But perceptions of urban areas are changing: they are no longer seen as a stepping stone for social mobility and improved futures for families.**

### 2. Peri-urban, informal areas remain clusters of hope for migrants as “social commons”

Peri-urban, unplanned areas have sprawled with the investments made by migrants and displaced groups. They represent social commons where communities organize themselves and support each other, building up their own urban neighbourhoods in forms of collective and informal decision making.

The main urban areas of destination among those interviewed for this research were Dashte Barchi in Kabul, Naw Abad in Herat, and Majboorabad in Nangarhar. These urban neighbourhoods share similar characteristics: they tend to be more recently founded, low income, and underfunded in terms of public spending. Each of the three areas can also be understood as urban ‘gateways and estuaries’<sup>20</sup> – areas where new urban arrivals initially stay when they move to the city, living alongside migrants who have been residents over longer time periods.

However, these spaces of urban protection are today endangered. **Urban migrants now face more challenges accessing services compared to hosts in the same community, not least due to their disproportionate poverty, exacerbated by lower income, and an overall decrease of service provision, increasing local tensions and competition.**

The prevailing economic conditions have increased fears, especially in urban areas, that migrants will steal the few remaining jobs – business owners interviewed indicated a preference for hiring young, male, unmarried employees because they are viewed as willing to work long hours, and even sleep at work rather than having to return home to a family. Access to shelter was the most cited challenge for migrants. An inability to integrate into the urban economy means extreme poverty and pracity for many migrant households.

16 NRC, ‘Afghanistan: Eviction threats put hundreds of thousands of vulnerable families at risk of homelessness.’ 30 June, 2022.

17 Najibullah L., ‘Help us in returning IDP’s: Taliban to Intl-Community’, Khaama Press. 15 September, 2021. Also: NRC, ‘Afghanistan: Eviction threats’, 2022.

18 NRC. ‘Afghanistan: Eviction threats’, 2022.

19 IOM, DTM Baseline Mobility & Emergency Community-based needs assessment – Round 15 March & April 2022. Kabul Province.

20 For an outline of urban estuaries, see Landau, Loren B., ‘Mobility, Belonging, and Governance in Africa’s Urban Estuaries’, *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*. Fall/Winter 20:1 2013 pp. 107-121; and Landau, Loren B., ‘Friendship fears and communities of convenience in Africa’s urban estuaries: Connection as measure of urban condition’, *Urban Studies* 55:3 2018 pp. 505–521.

## 2. Forms of discrimination are on the rise in urban areas

A form of ‘crisis nepotism’ is increased by economic distress and the erosion of mutual aid and social integration mechanisms, which produce an atomisation of the labour markets. Migrants and business owners referred to a situation in which migrants are often exploited, regardless of their level of skill, education, or social capital.

Most migrants to urban areas tend to be lower skilled, having largely worked in the agricultural sector in their communities of origin. The transition from rural to urban economy is difficult for migrants and IDPs from agricultural villages. The majority of male respondents to this research possessed skill sets entirely developed around animal husbandry, or arable farming; untransferrable to the urban context. Finding a stable or sustainable source of income proved to be difficult; a female business owner in Nangarhar described how migrants struggle to find jobs in their first few months in a city – sometimes they need several months to network, form relationships, understand the culture of the city, and access employment opportunities.<sup>21</sup>

Prior to August 2021, construction was the dominant field of employment for urban migrant men, providing both building and sales-related jobs. The majority of respondents interviewed said that the employment sector has changed dramatically since then. The takeover of the DfA and the resulting economic downturn triggered many construction projects being put on hold, resulting in loss of income for construction workers. These workers were often employed on a daily-wage basis without any form of labour security.

In a similar vein, several respondents pointed to how, prior to August 2021, the Afghan military represented an important sphere of employment for rural families with low household incomes. However, these forces have been disbanded under the DfA. A third popular source of income for urban migrant men prior to August 2021 was factory work, but due to the rapid economic decline over the past year, many factories have closed, rendering a significant number of migrants unemployed.

In the current humanitarian crisis, the formal/informal distinction is losing its relevance and giving way to a form of generalised casualisation of employment: the informal sector is fast the only avenue for income generation for IDPs and migrants from rural areas. Employers who would fall under the formal sector, such as government institutions and large companies, apply an informal approach to hiring urban migrants. As a key informant explained, urban migrants are almost uniformly viewed as cheap labour to the extent that even if employed by the government, they will be subcontracted and thus comprise part of the informal sector. Finally, among the forms of income generation most frequently reported in urban centres and peripheries since autumn 2021, the most extreme forms of harmful coping strategies have now been widely developed. In a context of an aggravated humanitarian crisis, families are prepared to do anything to survive, particularly when the mechanisms for socialising migrants and IDPs are eroded, which makes integration more difficult.

Many women who had previously worked were relegated to unemployment with a series of DfA edicts that have limited women’s ability to care for themselves. In instances where the women who participated in this research have continued to work, the amount they make is often meagre and acts as a supplementary income to whatever their husbands, and increasingly also children,<sup>22</sup> can generate.

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations focus on facilitating the integration of migrants and supporting the environmental, social, and economic sustainability of urban areas and avoid the fragmentation of communities. This requires specific knowledge of urban fabrics and contexts, to build, enable and support existing social commons. Recommendations include, among others detailed in the full brief, the need to organize the informal sector via groups or committees and to revive traditional forms of apprenticeship and mentorship (such as ustad shegardi) to ensure the maintenance of traditional skills and of bridges between groups and generations.

<sup>21</sup> SSI4, female business owner, Nangarhar, 11 May 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Pamela Constable, ‘Boys in Afghanistan are Becoming Breadwinners for Their Families’, Washington Post, 23 April 2022; and Save the Children, ‘Afghanistan: A Fifth of Starving Families Sending Children to Work as Incomes Plummet in Past Six Months’, 14 February 2022.

# III. IMPACT OF BASIC SERVICES ON MIGRATION

## BASIC SERVICES AND INFRASTRUCTURE IN MIGRATION DECISIONS

Infrastructure and the provision of basic services have changed profoundly in Afghanistan over the past two decades. The fall of Kabul in the summer of 2021 resulted in far-reaching changes in the way Afghans access basic services, and where they seek to access them. The change of power and subsequent drying up of international support impacted all sectors from healthcare to education, mobile phone networks and electrification, water and roads. A brain drain further aggravated the crisis in service provision: research participants interviewed for this brief spoke of health centres no longer receiving support through medicines and equipment, and of qualified doctors and teachers leaving the country. At the same time, there is a trend of people leaving the cities, where basic services are traditionally better. This makes it necessary to rethink the principles of hierarchical service provision in the healthcare sector, for instance. More broadly, the deterioration in access to infrastructure and basic services has had an impact on many aspects of Afghans' lives, and on the lives of the displaced, and on their chances for (re)integration.

In 2022, with millions of Afghans on the move during a humanitarian crisis, finding a place to call home will depend on the quality and accessibility of services offered. It is critical to hear from Afghans about their needs and decisions surrounding access to services, to develop opportunities for sustainable connectivity – to develop infrastructure policies and projects with societal and environmental goals which meet the needs and preferences of different groups in society.<sup>23</sup>

### 1. An increase in infrastructure is associated with an increase of incoming IDPs and urban migrants

The data analysis for this brief shows a **significant link between the quality of infrastructure, basic services and inflows of displaced people**: a 10% increase in infrastructure score is associated with an increase of about 16 incoming IDPs per 10,000 people per year,

with the impact increasing in size as infrastructure improves. In other words, the better the infrastructure, the more significant the effect of further improvement on incoming IDP populations.

Yet, **choosing one's destination based on the quality of infrastructure and basic services is not a luxury many Afghans have had since August 2021**, at a time when survival and feeding one's family are the utmost priority. In the first half of 2021, between January and July, there was a reversal of the correlation, at the district level, between the average infrastructure scores and the inflow of IDPs. The reasons are multiple and compounding: in a time of food insecurity, access to farming land becomes newly appealing (despite the impact of climate change, as floods and droughts decrease yields and cause conflict over increasingly scarce available resources). Furthermore, as urban livelihoods have suffered in the wake of the withdrawal of international assistance, many now struggle to afford the higher costs of living in areas with better basic services. Last but not least, the DfA has reportedly actively encouraged returns from urban to rural areas.

### 2. Infrastructure gaps now limit access and connectivity to services

With key sectors suffering from a lack of funding and capacity, evidenced by both healthcare and education: this research finds that households avoid smaller clinics under the assumption that their services will not be adequate. The closer or more basic service provider is often skipped, while private and central or larger facilities are preferred even if they are further afield. **The accessibility of these preferred service providers depends on the state of the roads, which is poor especially in rural areas.** Differences in access to basic services are due to connectedness and locality, gender, networks, and disposable income. These attributes are often intertwined with migration status. Distance can have compounding negative effects: affordable transportation may not be reliable, and the cost of accommodation can also be prohibitive.

As with healthcare, those who can afford to send their children to private educational institutions. When these

23 OECD, 'Sustainable connectivity – closing the gender gap in infrastructure?', 2019



are unavailable, the only options are public institutions, that are under-resourced, and lack basic supplies and qualified teachers. One community leader recounts:

*“We have only one primary school in the village, it does not have enough chairs. The children study on plastic mats. There is a shortage of books, half of the students do not have one. The teachers are not experienced, and we also do not have enough of them.”*<sup>24</sup>

Travelling to these education facilities can be difficult, if they are far away, with some children having to walk over an hour to school (and are then too tired to focus.) As boys and girls are educated separately, getting to school becomes a practical concern for girls who need to have a male chaperone (a *mahram*). **Safety is a major concern for many families who send their girls to school.** The change in regime upended the education sector, beginning with the prohibition of girls attending school beyond the primary level.<sup>25</sup> Many teachers left the country, and those that remained are strongly encouraged by the DfA to keep teaching, but have not been paid in months.<sup>26</sup>

The roads which are in adequate conditions today are largely a result of international cooperation. The Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) alone was tasked with the expansion and maintenance of over 2,200 kilometres of new roads, 3,000 metres of bridges and improvement of 6,000 kilometres of existing roads. Parts of the infrastructure was destroyed during the Taliban advance. **After the fall of Kabul, the DfA announced several major road construction projects. All of them depend on donor funding which has not been forthcoming.** Afghanistan’s roads are often unpaved and can become impassable, due to snow or rain in the autumn and winter. In rural areas, where roads are often in poor condition, accessing healthcare and other basic services located further afield is challenging and in some cases impossible.

**Infrastructure and services are the missing keys to (re) integration.** Access to infrastructure and basic services is crucial to wellbeing among the displaced. Examining data from a separate project on displaced persons in urban and camp environments, respondents in Jalalabad and Barikab settlement who were more satisfied with their access to basic services had on average higher

overall wellbeing scores and greater life satisfaction.

**Women’s access to healthcare greatly depends on distance.** Women have long suffered unequal access to basic services, a situation aggravated by the Taliban takeover of the country. For women, it is harder to find healthcare services that fulfil the larger array of women’s healthcare needs (including maternity care), at a local level. **Travelling to larger (more urban) centres can be expensive. Their access is also constrained by the need to travel with a male family member.** Many households wait until women’s ailments are particularly severe to access healthcare, as travel and costs, and sometimes accommodations costs, can be prohibitive to healthcare access.

**Entire communities’ (and women’s) safety is at risk due to limited electricity.** Under the DfA, respondents reported that the grid power had become less reliable. Solar panels and generators are now reserved for those who can afford them, and were often among the items to be sold off as the crisis worsened. The worsening situation of electricity provision has knock-on effects on safety, health provision, schooling, livelihoods – as many clinics in rural areas are non-functional without power. In some areas with industrial infrastructure, manufacturing sites are prioritised for electrical grid access over communities.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

There needs to be a two-pronged approach to improving hierarchical service provision in Afghanistan: addressing the service provision at a local level (basic clinics, for example) and accessibility of central options by improving road infrastructure. A focus on area-based solutions is necessary alongside gender-mainstreaming in all basic services and infrastructure programming. The brief presents measurement tools (such as the Multi-dimensional integration index or MDI) and community-based monitoring and planning mechanisms to increase the quality of services provided, and ensure they fit with what local populations need, to also reinforce social cohesion. These tools and models have been tested in Afghanistan and can be revived.

24 SSI 1: Rural Community Leader, Injil, Herat

25 Farr, G (2022), Female Education in Afghanistan After the Return of the Taliban

26 FGD 1: Female returnees, migrants and displaced persons in PD 13, Kabul; SSI 5: Rural Community Leader, Kama, Nangarhar; KII 1, NGO Worker, Kabul

# IV. COMMUNITY AND HOUSEHOLD RESPONSES TO CLIMATE CHANGE

## CLIMATE CHANGE AS A THREAT MULTIPLIER IN AFGHANISTAN

Climate change acts as a ‘threat multiplier’ by compounding existing vulnerabilities among the population. The main sources of income – agriculture and livestock – are increasingly threatened by the direct and indirect consequences of climate change, and by environmental degradation, with serious implications for health, communal living, education, and protection. In Afghanistan, 85% of the population is dependent on agriculture. In a context where water systems are affected nationwide, experts have declared climate change a threat that displaces more people than conflict.<sup>27</sup> A current severe, multi-year drought has exacerbated acute food shortages experienced by more than half of Afghanistan’s population, and severely impacted their livelihoods; in rural areas, many are limited in their ability to diversify their income sources.<sup>28</sup>

The experience of disasters and catastrophes has become part of the lives of Afghans with increasing frequency and recurrence, especially in rural and peri-urban areas. Respondents established direct correlations with deforestation and disasters. They report that there are no longer trees in their communities, and animals have been taken away by floods, or sold to survive. Winds often destroy gardens where fruits and other plants have been planted. Mud houses have been destroyed by either earthquakes or floods. Wells have gone dry, causing a shortage of drinking water and a rise in health problems. **Participants’ hierarchy of risks brings together both climate change stressors (slow-onset, happening over time), and ad-hoc shocks (such as floods and rising temperatures).**

Respondents echoed the feeling that rains happen in “inappropriate seasons,” destroying wheat fields, causing floods in communities with no retaining walls, where trees, entire fields, and homes are quickly destroyed. Floods have life-threatening consequences in a country that has few reservoirs. These stressors have been part of community lives for years, and are multiple and often

layered. As one participant explained: *“The problems occur one after another like the children born on their turns.”*<sup>29</sup>

There is an overall lack of data correlating displacement and slow-onset climate change, which makes measuring the relationship between climate change and displacement in Afghanistan difficult. **The tipping point comes when households and sometimes entire communities have no choice but to abandon their homes, rendered uninhabitable, and move unprepared, without assets and skills to other areas.** This type of forced displacement is irreversible, as returning to land that is no longer productive is not an option. Households often adopt diversification strategies, such as sending young people to Iran and Pakistan to work in construction or agriculture. This splintering of the household nucleus, often followed by multiple displacements, is a traumatic experience. **At the same time, Afghanistan’s poorest and most vulnerable have been made less mobile.**<sup>30</sup> Women and children in Afghanistan are disproportionately affected by the effects of climate change, acting as “shock absorbers” by, for example, forgoing their education to bolster lower household income levels or cutting back on their caloric intake when crop yields are reduced.<sup>31</sup>

### 1. Adaptative and maladaptive strategies

Some communities have developed responses to prevent, adapt, and cope with the impact of climate change:

- **Planting and cultivating alternative crops.** The cultivation of poppies was mentioned by several interviewees, as poppies require less water and care, and can generate enough income for families for daily expenses. For many interviewees, it was the only available solution to them outside of migration to another province or city. However, this solution may be in jeopardy, as one of the Taliban’s key promises was to eliminate opium poppy cultivation.

27 NPR, ‘Changing Climate Parches Afghanistan, Exacerbating Poverty’, December 23, 2021; WFP, UNEP, NEPA, ‘Climate Change in Afghanistan’, 2016

28 Omerkhil N. et al., ‘Climate Change Vulnerability and Adaptation Strategies, Takhar, Afghanistan’, p. 105863.

29 KII2

30 UK Government Office for Science, ‘Migration and Global Environmental Change: Future Challenges and Opportunities’, 2011.

31 ActionAid and CANSA, ‘Invisible Women: A Gender Analysis of Climate-Induced Migration in South Asia’, 2021.

- **Decreasing surface-area of land used for irrigated cultivation to reduce water usage, or digging deeper wells and powering them with solar panels** – however, it should be noted that this strategy was not available to most people, given the high cost associated with this practice, and the deteriorating economic conditions under the DfA. In flood-prone communities, some people dug ditches and canals in order to prevent destruction of homes and land.
- **Selling assets to mitigate lost income due to drought, flooding and other weather events.** Many people sold livestock and other assets such as gold, silver, and cars in order to purchase tools and water supplies that could sustain livelihoods after climate events. Others also took other jobs outside of the agricultural sector – due to the volatile nature of employment, many were forced to find other jobs, often outside of their community, in order to provide for themselves and their families.
- **Maladaptive strategies.** These included using contaminated water due to limited options or shortages – which resulted in destroyed crops and public health issues for community members,

who experienced increased illness on a regular basis, due to drinking unsafe water. Cutting down forests for their resources was also used as a way to generate income. However, this often had negative consequences for communities later on, as deforestation increased the level of strong winds, previously quelled by the trees.<sup>32</sup> Selling assets and expanding debt levels, as reported in Kabul, Herat and Nangarhar.<sup>33</sup>

## 2. Key challenges that communities face in developing sustainable mechanisms

Afghan civilians’ capacity to respond to climate change has decreased. Their asset portfolio – that is, the physical, financial, human, social, and natural capital available to them in their communities – impacts their inability to adapt to climate shocks. Recommended adaptation measures vary, depending on the capacities and context of communities and countries – ranging from planting drought-resistant crops to building flood defence systems. Successful adaptation depends on governments, active, long-term engagement of regional, national, and international stakeholders, as well as knowledge sharing and capacity building.<sup>34</sup> Traditional

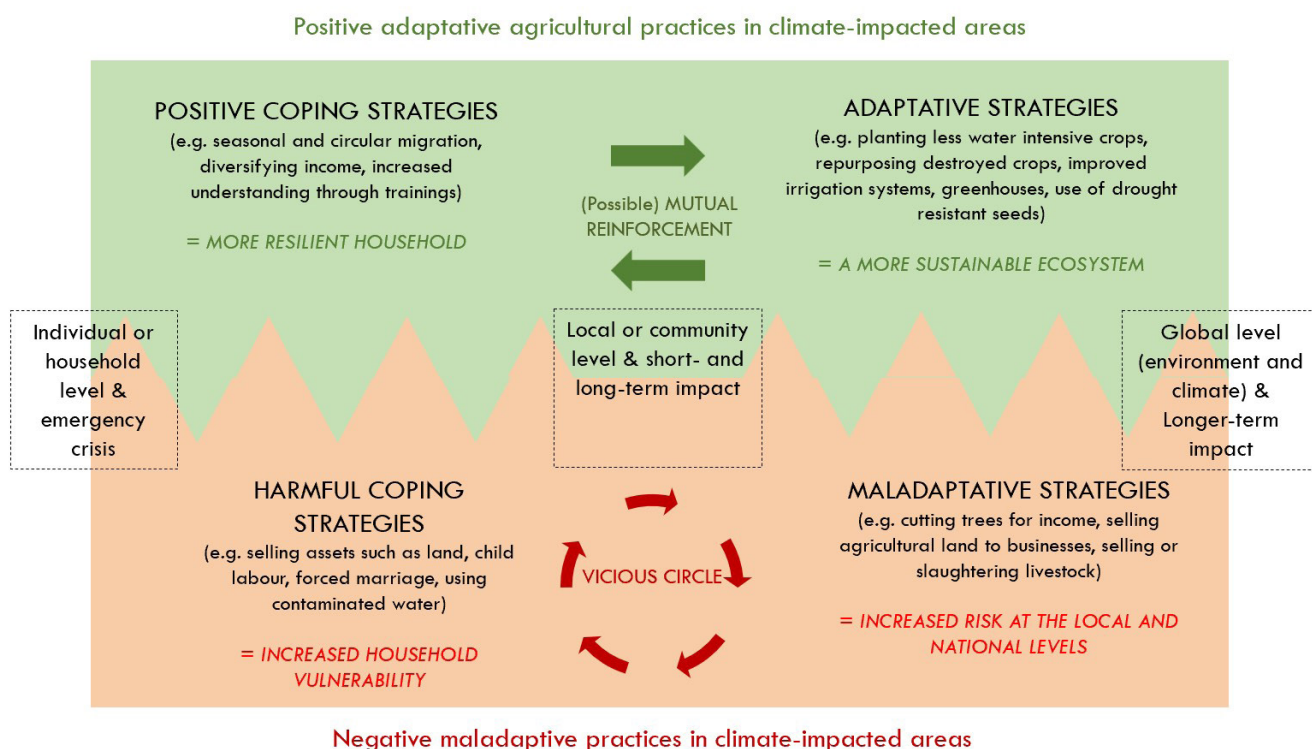


Figure 1. Adaptive and maladaptive strategies in climate-impacted areas

32 FGD3, Male Community Members, Nangarhar Province, May 26, 2022.

33 Magnan A., 'Avoiding maladaptation to climate change: towards guiding principles', S.A.P.I.E.N.S, 2014: "Maladaptation is a process that results in increased vulnerability to climate variability and change, directly or indirectly, and/or significantly undermines capacities or opportunities for present and future adaptation."

34 UN Climate Change, 'What do adaptation to climate change and climate resilience mean?'



adaptation strategies include implementing water-saving techniques, making use of traditional well systems, or changing planting times.<sup>35</sup>

The research highlights the **secondary impacts that climate change has on women and children, on their mental health and education, as they often are more vulnerable to disasters. The impacts are at the household and community levels.** At the household level, splitting households (with members migrating to find livelihood opportunities) is often easier than, for instance, switching crops. Rich households can change crops, while the poor migrate. Wealthier households could lose one harvest, such as wheat, but cultivate corn or melons that were less affected by climate change events and that require less water. However, for poor households, changing crops was not an option. Migration to Kandahar, Herat, Pakistan or Iran was the most feasible option as dry farming lands can only be cultivated once a year.

At the household level, most respondents reported relying on multiple coping mechanisms:

- **Child labour** has increased as children are sent to work for daily wages, or to learn a profession for the future to be less reliant on the land. Households in all provinces reported bringing their children into their agricultural practice, as a result of youth having left the communities.
- **Out of school children** are on the rise, because of the time spent working. Teachers interviewed reported that their children were mainly busy working in the fields. Community members identified drought as the cause of the drop in school attendance in their communities.
- **Medical needs have increased**, as households do not consume nutritional intake comparable to pre-drought periods. The situation has become more difficult for women who reported no longer being able to afford to visit a doctor when ill. Children's health suffered the most.
- **Disabilities** are uncared for – respondents focused on the damages to disabled persons who are left with no one to take care of them, due to relatives' joblessness.

At the community level, in disaster-affected communities, respondents reported:

- **Conflicts over lands**, alongside rising levels of disappointment between people over issues of land irrigation, or individuals changing the direction of the water stream from one land to another. Instead of consulting each other, decisions were made individually and often, against each other.
- **Social marginalisation:** One respondent explained that the drought and poor harvest had negatively impacted his social capital. He explained being unable to invite others to his house for food, or to be able to go to relatives or friends' parties. Not having funds to spend on transportation, clothes or food for household members meant a level of shame and hiding from others, and decreased participation in social activities.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Reforestation is a key objective all stakeholders agree on in Afghanistan. Some estimates are that more than a third of forests were lost between 1990 and 2005 and up to half between 1975 and 2015. The Taliban have as early as 2017 made reforestation a key objective in Afghanistan. Accounting for the decrees, reforestation plans, and government resolutions, between 2002 and 2021, there is a real awareness of the problem of climate change in Afghanistan to build on at a national level.

At the community level – strengthening of knowledge and practices around sustainable resource management is a priority, with community campaigns to bolster preparedness and response capacities at a grassroots level. Community and religious leaders should be part of this process and be encouraged to participate. Investment in traditional (such as the Karez well system) and cost-effective modern irrigation systems will be key.

Finally, awareness raising is needed among the donor community for a long-term commitment to the above and to targeted research on the links between displacement and climate change in Afghanistan.

35 Neil Adger W. et al., 'Adaptation to climate change in the developing world', *Progress in Development Studies* 3:3, 2003 pp. 179-195.

# STRENGTHENING SOCIAL COHESION FOR (RE)INTEGRATION AT A TIME OF FRACTURE

## IMPACT OF DISPLACEMENT ON SOCIAL COHESION

Displacement from provinces impacted by drought, flooding, and extreme weather has led to increased levels of social tension over already strained resources. In some cases, people have used available natural resources as leverage, such as banning water from flowing downstream.<sup>36</sup> One IDP in Kabul spoke of conflicts in his village related to control over water resources. When people were financially stable, conflict with the community was limited. However, after floods or drought led to decreased profits and unemployment in the agricultural sector, conflicts arose over control of springs between village residents to use for drinking and irrigation:

*“For example, one group might say that a spring belongs to us and another one might say that the spring is their possession, thus a conflict arises over it among them. When people have financial capability, there is also harmony and peace among the people. However, if there is no water for drinking and irrigation, and no animals to use for day-to-day life, in such places a conflict will certainly arise in the family and in the village.”<sup>37</sup>*

Within the current context, challenges have increased for all – urban migrants, the displaced and hosts. There is increased competition for work in both the formal and informal sectors. City-based employers often prioritise hiring migrants from their own ethnicity on the basis that they will understand each other better in terms of culture and work expectations. Additionally, in the increasingly fractured social context, respondents stated that it is easier to trust people from their ethnic identity group. This is reflected in the fact that many migrants and displaced groups face discrimination in new urban locations because of their ethnic and linguistic differences.

For many respondents, the combination of precarious shelter and absence of livelihood prevents them from being able to imagine (re)integration, especially given the tensions between host and displaced communities

expressed by many displaced interviewees. Social concerns about (re)integration often centred around the host community’s negative perceptions of displaced populations in conjunction with a broader fracturing of society. This social fracture sometimes rests upon ethnic, tribal, or linguistic lines, but at other times it exists as a result of the host community also experiencing desperation resulting from poverty and limited resources.

Migrants moving to urban areas for the first time reported facing social challenges that their predecessors did not face. They reported feeling lost: the absence of documentation, limited or no local connections with community leaders, and discrimination from hosts contribute to their vulnerability and prevent them from fully integrating into urban areas. Interviewees spoke of being viewed as *dehati*, a derogatory term to define rural people. Many urban migrants are discriminated against and often taken advantage of, due to their unfamiliarity with city rules and life, with some reporting neighbours or employers viewing them as a burden.

Generally, IDPs and returnees interviewed for this research study did not feel positively about returning to their communities of origin due to the lack of employment opportunities. Natural resource shortages – such as water and land (arable, housing) – as well as food insecurity are widespread across Afghanistan, with many agrarian communities requiring external assistance to ensure the survival of their families and their crops. There is a need for stronger management of the agricultural sector and natural resources – otherwise, levels of food insecurity and poverty will continue to increase across the country, especially in rural farming communities.<sup>38</sup> If conditions in areas of origin do not improve – especially in areas of Afghanistan that have experienced drought over multiple years – people are unlikely to return voluntarily and in safety, especially as since August 2021, people’s ability to implement adaptive strategies to mitigate the impacts of climate change events has reduced considerably. Furthermore, the many displaced people interviewed had sold their possessions – land, livestock, farming equipment,

36 KII3, Climate Change.

37 SSI4, Male IDP, Kabul Province, 15 May 2022.

38 SSI8, Community Leader, Herat Province, 26 May 2022.

household items. This made returning impossible, as there was nothing for them to return to.<sup>39</sup>

## SOCIAL COHESION AND COMMUNITY HEALTH AS BASIC NEEDS

Donors are currently operating under a basic needs mandate – a concept that has not been defined and can be operationalised in different ways. While it excludes financial transfers to the DfA, any inclusion of the DfA in the planning of projects, or provision of technical expertise to the DfA, it can open and focus on community consultations, knowledge, building of practices to respect these red lines while protecting the lives of the displaced and of communities across Afghanistan.

It is time to engage with communities on the crucial issues outlined in these briefs, with civil society, with community and religious leaders, with women, to ensure that social cohesion is upheld at a time when it is under threat. Many of our recommendations center on community campaigns, community awareness, community adaptation strategies, to first listen to

communities, consult them to determine the best means of delivering support, then intervening to support them. This includes supporting traditional, community-based, self-protection mechanisms, but also providing the resources and capacities for longer-term action.

This research shows a rapid decline in mental health among Afghan society – at individual and community levels, extremely hard hit by the deterioration of the Afghan economy and corresponding humanitarian crisis. In a context where climate change and environmental protection are not prioritised and often poorly understood at the grassroots level, many of the strategies developed in response to the poverty conditions experienced by many Afghans, especially those dependent on agriculture, do not result in solutions.

These research briefs provide a set of recommendations forward to ensure that donors can prioritise, within a basic needs mandate, the provision of infrastructure, services, mental health support, and climate change responses:

Mental Health	Urban migration	Infrastructure and services	Climate change
i) Integrated MHPSS support in all forms of assistance. ii) Integrating MHPSS in community development. iii) De-stigmatise mental health conditions through local-level community campaigns. iv) Integrate conflict and gender sensitivity in implementation and evaluation. v) Train communities and individuals in anger management training and provide drug rehabilitation interventions.	i) Facilitate anonymised data collection on urban migration. ii) Ensure participatory planning processes with community representatives. iii) Improve the working conditions of urban migrants, provide training and workshops for them. iv) Organise the informal sector via groups or committees of informal workers. Re-ignite past initiatives that worked such as <i>ustad shagerdi</i> . v) Coordinate a principled response for safe, voluntary and dignified IDP returns.	i) Establish a two-pronged approach to improving hierarchical service provision: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>improving local service provision,</li> <li>improving road infrastructure.</li> </ul> ii) Focus on supporting the energy sector to ensure that the safety of communities and of women is ensured. iii) Use existing integration measurement tools such as the MDI to support the search for durable solutions. iv) Set up community based monitoring and planning mechanisms.	i) Strengthen sustainable community-based resource management. ii) Develop community campaigns to bolster preparedness and response capacities at the grassroots level. iii) Identify and train community members in addressing local (root) causes of disasters. iv) Invest in traditional well systems and modern irrigation systems. v) Raise awareness among the donor community of the need for long-term commitment to supporting adaptation strategies.

39 SSI9, Community Leader, Herat Province, 24 May 2022.



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Public clinic, Kabul (Credit: Samuel Hall 2022)

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