

# Briefing

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Protracted displacement in an urban world

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## Policy pointers

**Ethical and inclusive humanitarian efforts**, with appropriate safeguards, should extend beyond immediate crisis response to embrace sustainable urban planning for long-term recovery and resilience.

**Focused economic help** integrating health services in cities is required, given the sharp decline in city residents' livelihoods and psychosocial indicators since 2021.

**A gendered lens is key.** Interventions to support home-based livelihoods and spaces for women to socialise should be prioritised.

**Spaces for engagement** are needed. Our participatory forum process sets an example to build on localised urban planning and durable solutions discussions.

## Displaced people in Afghanistan's cities need support

There are over 3.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Afghanistan, along with a large number of returnees: half a million Afghans were forcibly returned from Pakistan between October and December 2023 alone. Forced evictions have also impacted IDPs in informal settlements across Afghan cities. The pressures to return call for new approaches to durable solutions. In this context, stakeholders must invest in urban planning for cities to become spaces of inclusion. In 2021 and 2022, we conducted two rounds of research in Kabul and Jalalabad, which revealed an economic collapse that is forcing displaced men, women and children to work longer hours to survive. This takes a toll on social relations, and bodily and mental wellbeing, reflecting a loss of hope for the future. In light of these findings, urgent humanitarian aid is required, alongside continuous monitoring, to adapt to emerging needs.

Afghans have survived displacement and returns for decades. The prevailing response has been either encampment or forced evictions, overlooking the significant contributions displaced Afghans have made to the growth of the cities where they have resided, be it in Afghanistan or abroad.<sup>1</sup>

Afghanistan has one of the largest populations of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world. Nearly 6.6 million people were living in internal displacement in Afghanistan as of December 2022,<sup>2</sup> a number that has decreased to 3.2 million according to the latest UNHCR estimates.<sup>3</sup> Pressure by the de facto authorities for IDPs to return to their areas of origin and departures by IDPs to neighbouring countries contributed to the drop in numbers.

Multiple disasters have impacted those already displaced and created new displacement patterns: the deportation of Afghan nationals from Pakistan continues, after half a million were deported in the autumn/winter of 2023 alone, and a series of earthquakes in Herat province in October 2023

directly impacted the many IDPs and returnees who had been displaced due to previous disasters and conflict. They now have to start over again. More displacement is projected, given the decision by the Government of Pakistan to return all Afghans in a phased process and the threats of eviction handed to IDPs in informal settlements across the country.

In Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, camps or designated areas have multiplied in an effort to manage a growing population of displaced people. When millions of refugees returned to Afghanistan after the US-led invasion of 2001, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, with international support, responded by creating a land allocation scheme to be set up by the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation to address landlessness and provide a home for Afghans to return to. Presidential Decree 104 was meant to legalise the distribution of government land to landless returnees and IDPs, but as research has shown, these areas turned into new forms of camps without access to

## *Our participatory forum revealed the possibility of planning for local integration*

sustainable water, electricity or basic services.<sup>4</sup> The growing population of IDPs also led to the creation of informal settlements around the country's major cities.

The purpose of our research was to compare the lives of those living in these camps and those living in informal settlements in urban areas (see Box 1).

The research findings are structured around the frameworks of wellbeing and displacement economies.<sup>5</sup> We broke down the concept of wellbeing into five components — bodily, social, economic, political and psychosocial — and derived scores for each component for people who participated in the survey. We also developed a displacement economies framework to assess the collective economy created by displaced persons through their livelihood activities, enterprise, need for services and consumption, and through their mutual support and diaspora inputs. We gathered qualitative and quantitative data from Afghan IDPs, returnees and hosts from two sites:

- Majboor Abad, a neighbourhood in Jalalabad city near the border with Pakistan, and
- The displaced settlement of Barikab near Kabul.

We collected the first round of data from 889 households in the winter of 2021, and the second round targeted the same respondents, reaching 524 households in August 2022. We supplemented the surveys with qualitative interviews and analysis of wellbeing and livelihoods.

### What did we find?

#### Widespread needs across all locations and groups

Our data shows evidence of a generalised deteriorating financial situation: 52% of the urban displaced in 2022 reported a very difficult situation, against only 14% in round 1 (see

#### Box 1. Out of camp or out of sight?

Protracted Displacement in an Urban World (PDUW) was a comparative mixed methods research project focusing on the wellbeing and livelihoods of displaced people in camps and urban areas in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Kenya and Jordan. It had three main aims:

- To build an evidence base on the opportunities and challenges of hosting displaced people in camps compared with urban areas
- To assess current responses to protracted displacement in towns and cities and to raise awareness of unmet needs and economic contributions of refugees and IDPs, and
- To support municipal authorities and other local actors to use participatory planning to co-produce innovative and inclusive solutions to forced displacement in cities.

Figure 1). We observed a decrease in the stability of household income: 60% of the displaced report an always unstable income in round 2, against only 30% in round 1. At the same time, their ability to borrow has also substantially decreased, leaving them with no options to cover basic needs.

More people in households are working, and not all of these additional earners are adults. Households increasingly rely on children as income earners to cope with economic challenges. This trend was particularly pronounced among displaced urban households, where 12% of households included children among their income earners in 2022. Women often rely on their children to sell their products outside their homes, and minors are also paid for small tasks in workshops and other businesses, such as obtaining customers for rickshaw drivers. These tasks may involve children accompanying their mothers and assisting with marketing and sales activities.

#### Reduced and unstable income, more dangerous jobs

While people report working more to cope with the challenging economic situation, the data shows that it might not be enough: fewer people are likely to report being able to cover their household expenses with income from work. The situation is particularly alarming in the city, where only 7% of the displaced and 12% of hosts report being able to cover expenses with income from work in the second round of data collection — a stark decrease from 2021.

The data reveals a significant shift in employment dynamics, characterised by an increase in labour participation among men and women in 2022. This surge indicates a determined effort by the population, especially women, to seek economic opportunities. Men have lost their jobs and shifted to informal jobs like selling vegetables or driving, often resulting in unstable incomes. Women, constrained by educational and sectoral limitations, express a desire to start home-based enterprises despite the challenges.

The Livelihood Outcomes Index, which combines objective data like working hours and contract status with subjective assessments of job satisfaction, points to a general decline in job quality. This is particularly evident in our data in the Majboor Abad settlement in Jalalabad, where dissatisfaction and unsafe working conditions have increased. Dissatisfaction among workers has risen sharply, with 34% of urban displaced and 24% of hosts reporting dissatisfaction with their jobs. Declining job quality is further evidenced by increased reports of unsafe working conditions, especially among the urban

displaced. The sense of unfair remuneration is widespread; a significant majority of urban displaced (65%) and hosts (68%) feel underpaid in 2022, a dramatic increase from the previous year. The analysis reveals deteriorating job security as the proportion of employed respondents with work contracts in Barikab settlement plummeted, and reports of workplace abuse rose across all groups.

### Declining health and growing pessimism

The hardships endured by respondents, coupled with limited financial capacity, have led to a marked deterioration in their overall health. This trend is particularly pronounced among male respondents in Majboor Abad, where self-reported poor health status has more than doubled, from 15% in the first round to 36% in the second. For women, the situation was already grave in the first round, with over half of displaced women in Majboor Abad reporting poor or very poor health.

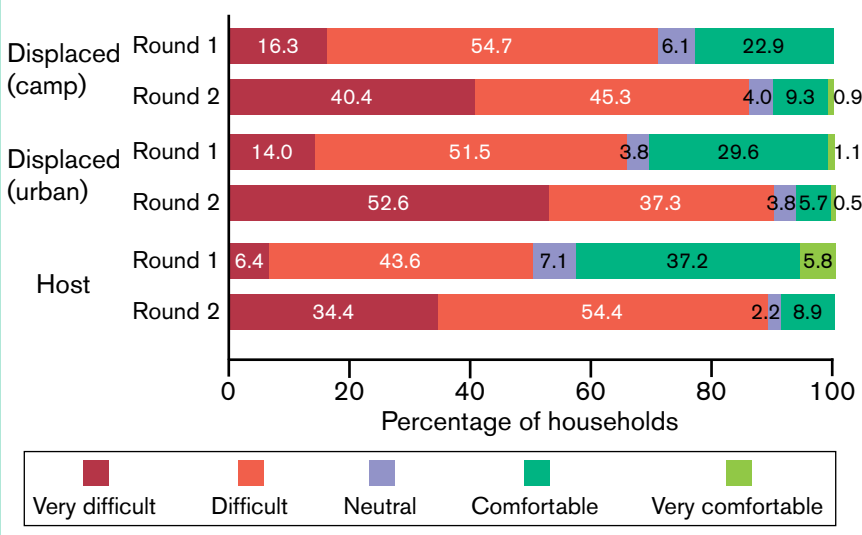
Healthcare accessibility and affordability are significant concerns, both in the camp and urban settings, as residents grapple with worsening health conditions. Many individuals do not have enough income to buy the medication they need, leading to the neglect of essential medical treatments. In Barikab settlement, the only health clinic available is inadequately equipped and has reduced operational hours, further exacerbating healthcare challenges.

Respondents are pessimistic about their future. In the first round, female respondents were more optimistic, with only 10% anticipating a decline in their quality of life, compared to 26% of men. However, this outlook had shifted dramatically by 2022, with 56% of women and 49% of men expecting their lives to worsen in the coming year. The data reflects a deepening despair regarding the future of children; in 2022, 35% of both men and women feared worsening living conditions for their children, a significant increase from the first round. This loss of hope and the prevailing belief that their situation will remain unaddressed reflect the profound impact of the ongoing crisis on the community's mental and emotional wellbeing.

### Increasing female workforce (before further restrictions)

More women were working in 2022 than in 2021: In Barikab, only 4% of female respondents worked in the pre-Taliban period, compared to 17% afterwards. In Majboor Abad, 7% of female respondents worked in the pre-Taliban period, compared to 14% afterwards. While this data predates the Taliban's increasingly severe restrictions on women's employment, the data

Figure 1. Current household financial situation



also indicates the informal character of work in Afghanistan will continue, as survival is at stake.

Women make less money, have lower income stability and are financially worse off. They are much less likely to be able to cover their household expenses through income from work. In 2021, 78% of female-headed households from our data reported being able to borrow money — this number dropped to only 36% in 2022.

The impact of limiting livelihoods and entrepreneurship extends beyond economics to social and psychosocial effects. Male entrepreneurs reported that their businesses were community hubs for interaction and discussion, often with community leaders. Female entrepreneurs experienced reduced isolation, forming networks and gaining community respect. Women's businesses foster community among women, although they face stricter scrutiny, as evidenced by an IDP representative's account of public criticism of young girls visiting a shop without observing traditional hijab, leading to a shift in clientele to married women only.

### Female livelihoods are not 'crisis-proof'

In areas like Barikab, women's livelihoods have historically relied on loans from neighbours and relatives, supplemented by NGO support. This support, once a cornerstone of their economic stability, is diminishing. NGOs previously provided business and skills training tailored to gender-specific professions — women learned tailoring, while men trained in mechanics. Small grants and initial supplies for business start-ups were also part of this support system. However, these measures have proved insufficient for ensuring business sustainability, with many women entrepreneurs seeking more extended support.

In Barikab, the dependency of female entrepreneurs on male relatives for purchasing supplies and selling products underscores a significant challenge. Women face difficulties in negotiating contracts due to restrictions on their mobility, including prohibitions on travelling or visiting the market alone. This not only increases transportation costs, as they must pay for both themselves and an escort but also limits their operational scope and profitability. The absence of female staff in administrative institutions effectively bars women from accessing essential business services, such as registering their enterprise or obtaining permits. Taliban laws further restrict their travel, particularly impacting displaced female entrepreneurs in remote settlements.

However, the barriers faced by these women are not solely institutional. Societal norms and family dynamics also play a crucial role in limiting women's economic activities. Many are confined to working within their homes, subject to the dictates of male relatives who determine the type and scope of permissible work, often to the detriment of business potential. Educational limitations further restrict women's access to essential resources, such as the internet and basic business management knowledge and tools.

While the Jalalabad authorities have expressed interest in establishing a women-only bazaar to facilitate the selling and purchasing of goods, this initiative must be critically assessed. It needs to consider women's limited financial capabilities, the need to balance productive and care work, and the existing mobility limitations, to evaluate the sustainability and effectiveness of such segregated solutions.

## Looking forward: engaging in a pragmatic search for local solutions

Our research reveals that the situation for displaced persons in Afghanistan, particularly in urban settings, demands urgent and pragmatic action.<sup>6</sup> We brought together municipal stakeholders in participatory planning forums to discuss solutions for better inclusion of the displaced in the city.

The participatory planning forum participants highlighted three critical messages:

### Rethinking aid in times of widespread need.

The deteriorating financial and psychosocial wellbeing of city residents, especially women, underscores the urgency of reevaluating current

aid strategies. The focus must shift to providing immediate economic assistance and healthcare access to all, particularly those whose livelihoods are not 'crisis-proof'. This includes women who have historically relied on dwindling NGO support and now face increased barriers to sustaining their businesses.

**Enhance urban planning and inclusion.** A collaborative and realistic approach with municipalities and de facto authorities, together with humanitarian and development agencies, is essential to improving urban planning. Our findings indicate a sharp decline in job security, income stability and health, compounded by an increase in unsafe working conditions and a growing sense of hopelessness about the future. In this context, urban planning should prioritise creating economic and social spaces that actively engage women and youth, acknowledging their unique needs and contributions. The proposed women-only bazaars, for instance, could be a step towards this, provided they are effectively integrated into broader city planning and economic strategies.

### Advocate for the rights of displaced people.

The de facto authorities' emphasis on evicting and relocating IDPs highlights the need for a dialogue encompassing all stakeholders, including displaced people, to ensure their rights to legal documentation and housing. While return remains a preferred policy for those in power, our participatory forum revealed a consensus among IDPs and municipal stakeholders on the viability of local integration. Technical support to develop local integration plans is crucial to turn consensus into reality. This should not only focus on immediate relocation plans but also on long-term strategies to monitor the rights of IDPs, assessing the social and environmental impacts of such initiatives.

We conclude with a final call for a more pragmatic approach to working with municipalities and the de facto authorities to enhance urban planning and plan for economic and social spaces to engage with women and youth. Technical support is needed to develop these plans further, to build alternative plans for those being displaced, and, more broadly, to monitor their rights and assess the social and environmental impacts of these initiatives.

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## Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges.

Samuel Hall is a social enterprise that conducts research in countries affected by issues of migration and displacement.

PDUW is a comparative research project on the wellbeing, livelihoods and enterprises of displaced people in urban areas and camps in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Kenya and Jordan.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alimia, S (2022) Refugee Cities: How Afghans Changed Urban Pakistan. University of Pennsylvania Press. / <sup>2</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Country Profile: Afghanistan. [www.internal-displacement.org/countries/afghanistan](http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/afghanistan) / <sup>3</sup> UNHCR Operational Data Portal, Afghanistan. Total IDPs in Afghanistan as of 30 June 2023. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/afg> / <sup>4</sup> Majidi, N (2013) Home sweet home! Repatriation, reintegration and land allocation in Afghanistan. *REMMM*. 207–225. DOI: 10.4000/remmm.8098 / <sup>5</sup> Barratt, S, Majidi, N, Trigo da Roza, M, Garcia Amado, P and McAteer, B (forthcoming) Afghanistan's unfolding crisis: displaced wellbeing and livelihoods before and after the regime change. IIED, London. / <sup>6</sup> Samuel Hall (2023) City note: Jalalabad. Urban solutions for local integration.

