Protection Interventions for Afghan Returnees from Pakistan

April 2024 to December 2025

Introduction

In the wake of prolonged conflict and displacement in Afghanistan, many civil society organizations and community structures in return areas have dissolved. It is thus imperative to prioritize investment in communities and empower displaced and returnee populations to take ownership of their own protection. Embedding protection work within the communities, including among returnees, contributes to the sustainability of interventions and peaceful coexistence, a key factor facilitating their reintegration. Upon their return, returnees often grapple with limited resources, information and barriers to accessing basic needs and services, given that knowledge around this is primarily embedded within community-based structures.

Economic hardship and limited livelihood opportunities stemming from the ongoing humanitarian crises are exacerbating protection risks for the affected populations. The influx of Afghan returnees from Pakistan added significant strain to already deteriorated protection services. Through protection monitoring, humanitarian stakeholders are observing increased numbers of affected families adopting negative coping mechanisms, which result in further exploitation of vulnerable groups, especially children. Increased pressure on the host communities not only compromises their ability to welcome Afghan returnees, but also exacerbates the overall protection environment in Afghanistan for displaced people, returnees and host communities alike. Women and girls, constrained by severe restrictions of movement and participation in education, employment or public life, face particular challenges in meeting their basic needs. They often rely on family or community networks to access aid, services and information.

Returnees have often experienced rights' violations by different actors during these journeys and remain particularly susceptible to harm given their precarious situation and limited support available in areas of returns. While multi-sectorial services are accessible at border points, such provisions are ad-hoc and are not as systematized in return areas. Therefore, establishing entry points for protection response, such as through protection information desks and integrated services with livelihoods, legal aid and health are essential to mitigate risks and deliver a comprehensive response to address the protection needs of returnees.

Overview of challenges and needs

Community-Based Protection: Strengthening community-based protection programs is key to ensure that vulnerable returnees and host community members, especially women and girls, have access to services, information, and assistance as well as to build community resilience. This includes working with trained community outreach volunteers, community representation structures, and community-based organizations/entities to promote access to information about services, identify and refer persons with specific needs and promote community empowerment/mobilization. It also involves two-communication with communities, including through feedback and response channels, which informs program development. Strengthening complaint and feedback mechanisms in return areas is essential to ensure that partners are made aware of relevant concerns or challenges that communities face and to respond effectively,

including through protection case management. Various engagement methods should be employed, such as setting up information desks and complaint boxes in key areas and locations, as well as face-to-face interactions and referrals by volunteers and other community-based mechanisms.

Direct Protection Assistance: response to rights violations and continuity of care for returnees, including those at-risk, in their area of returns is essential to support their wellbeing and reintegration needs. Limited availability of entry points for protection services exacerbates returnees' ability to access care in time and, as such, requires the set-up of both static and mobile protection service points in addition to existing mechanisms. Protection Monitoring with returnees consistently highlights the significant challenges they face in accessing services and basic needs, particularly for households led by women, older persons and persons with disabilities. This indicates the urgent need for integrated protection responses in area of returns to address the complex and interesting vulnerabilities experienced by different segments of the population.

MHPSS: Data collected through UNHCR's Community Based Protection Monitoring with returnees reveals alarming statistics regarding their mental health and well-being. An overwhelming 87% of respondents reported experiencing stress that substantially impairs their daily functioning. Furthermore, behavioural changes were noted among family members, with 88% appearing sad, 75% stressed, 50% exhibiting changes in appetite and social withdrawal, 38% displaying aggression, 25% engaging in self-harm, and 13% expressing suicidal thoughts. The mental health and psychosocial needs of Afghan returnees from Pakistan are significant. Upon arrival at the borders, individuals, including children, are exhausted and desperately require assistance and psychosocial support. Interviews with returnees reveal a notable uptick in the arrest rate of Afghan nationals in Pakistan, with Afghans bearing the brunt of this increased

insecurity. This heightened sense of vulnerability has likely exacerbated stress and trauma among the returnee population, intensifying their mental health needs.

Civil documentation and legal aid: The lack of civil documentation among displaced populations, especially those in vulnerable situations or residing in remote areas, presents a significant barrier to their access to fundamental rights and essential social, protection, and humanitarian services. This challenge is particularly acute in Afghanistan, where over four decades of conflict have led to disruptions in governance and administration, as well as inconsistent practices in registering births and other vital events. These obstacles, coupled with increased mobility, entrenched poverty, and recurrent natural disasters, have left many Afghans without legal identity documents across multiple generations. The return of Afghan refugees from countries of asylum presents added complexities to the civil documentation landscape, exacerbating challenges related to documentation gaps, validity of documents, and legal status and citizenship. Many returnees may lack essential civil documentation, such as birth certificates or national identification cards *(tazkiras)*, either due to displacement or the validity of documents obtained in countries of asylum. According to the 2023 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), a mere 45 per cent of children under the age of 5 in the country have a birth certificate. This can lead to barriers in verifying their identity and legal status upon return, potentially impeding their access to vital services and rights. Furthermore, returning Afghans may encounter uncertainty regarding their citizenship status in Afghanistan, which adds additional challenges to their reintegration process.

Protection monitoring: Given the sudden influx of returnees to Afghanistan, dedicated assessments are required to ensure a better understanding of their protection and assistance needs and priorities, as well as to identify priority areas of intervention for humanitarian and development actors, advocacy and strategic decision making. Protection monitoring thus provides a systematic process for assessing and analyzing this data, which is then used to inform our programmes and policies.

Persons with disabilities: Four decades of war have left Afghanistan with one of the world's largest populations of persons with disabilities per capita.[1] These include persons with amputations, vision or hearing disabilities, and psychosocial disabilities, which are often a direct result of the protracted conflict. Other Afghans have pre-existing disabilities, such as those caused by polio. The exact size and conditions of Afghanistan's disabled population remain uncertain, often impeding policymaking due to the lack of reliable empirical data. Despite their heightened vulnerability, assistance for Afghans with disabilities is scarce, and political instability, insecurity, poor economic conditions further undermine efforts to address their needs. Furthermore, disability inclusion is still insufficiently integrated into humanitarian programming. Persons with disabilities must be able to access humanitarian assistance and interventions on the same terms as other members of the population. To this end, humanitarian programmes and interventions must be planned, designed and implemented inclusive of persons with disabilities as well as address the specific requirements of persons with disabilities through targeted interventions.

[1] *Human Rights Watch, '"Disability is Not Weakness": Discrimination and Barriers Facing Women and Girls with Disabilities in Afghanistan', April 2020, available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/disability-not-weakness-discrimination-and-barriers-facing-women-and-girls*

Child protection: Previous studies on children's return to Afghanistan, the majority conducted prior to the political transition, highlight some of the broad challenges they face upon return to the country, including lack of access to services such as education, risk of recruitment into armed groups and discrimination as a result of being 'returnees'.[2] Furthermore, children also face serious protection risks during the journey – both to and from – neighbouring countries, including risk of physical threats to their safety; exploitation including hazardous labour, trafficking, and sexual abuse; family separation; risk of arrest and detention of children, including detention with adults; limited/no access to child-friendly justice system when detained due to irregular entry and before deportation; and re-migration due to lack of services and support once returned to area of origin. Existing analysis also points to a persistent lack of assistance for longer-term reintegration of children who have returned, including inadequate focus on the psychological and social dimensions that constitute sustainable reintegration.[3]

[2] *Save the Children, 'From Europe to Afghanistan: Experience of child returnees', https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/sc-from_europe_to_afghanistan-screen_1610.pdf/.*

[3] Samuel Hall, 'War Child - Coming Back to Afghanistan: Study on Deported Minors' Return and Reintegration Needs in the Western Region', https://www.samuelhall.org/publications/war-child-coming-back-to-afghanistan-study-on-deported-minors-return-and-reintegration-needs-in-the-western-region.

In 2022, UNICEF conducted a comprehensive study[4] on the experiences and perceptions of Afghan children around reintegration following their return to Afghanistan. According to findings, nearly all respondents (93%) claimed that poverty, lack of work and desire to support their families were the key reasons for leaving Afghanistan to neighbouring countries; these reasons are compounded by intersecting drivers such insecurity linked to conflict, violence and natural disasters. Only one in three children and young people said they were satisfied with their life after returning to Afghanistan; they remained haunted by the distress of their migration experience. In particular, girls were less satisfied than boys. Unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) are at even higher risk. The situation is aggravated by the limited resources and enabling policies; limited capacity of service providers; and low prioritization of Afghan children in contexts of high protection concerns among governments as well as host populations. Child protection remains a major concern in Afghanistan broadly, with 88% of children (age 1-14 years) having experienced some type of violent disciplining in the month prior to the survey and nearly 20% of children (age 5-17 years) having engaged in child labour.[5] Further, there are more than 1,200 children placed in Juvenile Retention Centres across the country, who are deprived of liberty and highly vulnerable.

Protection of women: The protection of women remains a critical concern among returnees, with statistics indicating that 80% consist of women and children, 48% are specifically women and girls, and 13% are women who are heads of households. Returnees face a dire economic scenario, lack of livelihoods opportunities and mental health struggles. While staying with relatives in the short term, they report being concerned about becoming a burden to their families and lack a secure plan for the medium and long term. With returnee families averaging six children, there are heightened protection risks for girls, both among returnees and host families. These risks include inadequate safe spaces for sleeping and bathing, compounded by the current constraints on women and girls in Afghanistan, which further restrict their movement and activities. The MRAT data[7] shows that women and girls are viewed by survey respondents as the most vulnerable, noting women and girls had also seen significant behavioural shifts following their return to Afghanistan. Most households across regions reported exposure to various risks including physical violence, harassment, threats, service denial, limited rights, discrimination, early marriage, and abuses.

Perceived vulnerability among women and girls ranged from 27% to 50.8% across regions, whereas vulnerability among men and boys ranged from 5.3% to 21%. The uncertainty around their future in Afghanistan, combined with the dire conditions of return have also affected women and girls' mental health. Apart from the stress linked to the situation of displacement, many women express having lived through distressing experiences, including being victims of illegal detention in Pakistan, witnessing their spouse or family members getting arrested or being separated with their family members as they were forced to return without them. These women often face severe trauma and worry about their return, requiring specialized support and care.

[4] *UNICEF, 'As They Move: Child and youth experiences of migration, displacement and return in Afghanistan', UNICEF-As-They-Move-Afghan-Reintegration-2023.pdf.*

[5] *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)*

Women protection is thus an important component as it not only addresses immediate safety concerns but also promotes long-term empowerment and resilience.

Mine Action: Afghanistan has one of the highest levels of explosive ordnance (EO) contamination in the world. Between January 2023 to March 2024, 821 casualties were reported to be caused by EO, and of those 669 were children (81%), ie 8 in every 10 casualties reported in the country. 93% of the child casualties, the majority boys, were from Explosive Remnants of War detonated while playing or collecting scrap metal to support the livelihood of their families. This deadly legacy threatens the safe movement of people from 1,704 communities and blocks access to basic services, such as healthcare and education. The vast majority (70%) of 500,000 Afghan returnees who have crossed the border from Pakistan since October last year plan to resettle in districts where explosive hazards exist. Returnees are vulnerable to the risks posed by EO as they were living in exile for decades lacking knowledge on how to live in explosive hazard contaminated areas.

Overview of Response

Community-Based Protection

- Expanding community outreach programs by increasing the number of community outreach volunteers embedded in returnee communities. Activities will include mobile information desks and targeted outreach in return communities, where community volunteers will play a key role in awareness raising and information sharing, provision basic counselling and psychological first aid and the initiation of referrals.
- Expand communication channels with the community and make sure that information is accessible to all. This will be achieved through the employment of a variety of audio and visual resources as well as communication tools in line with community preferences and specific needs of different population groups and in close coordination with the AAP Working Group.
- Strengthen two-way communication with communities and complaints and feedback mechanisms. This will ensure that community feedback is duly considered when prioritizing programming interventions and to close the feedback loop by responding to their questions and needs. This is of crucial importance to maintain the trust of communities that partners seek to engage with.
- Activate established community centers and structures in return areas by providing space and support to community organizations to engage.

Direct Protection Assistance

- Strengthen dedicated protection case management programs for persons at heightened risk and with compounding vulnerabilities in return areas. These may include persons with legal or physical safety needs or older persons or persons with disabilities who face protection risks. Protection case management may be provided at community center or other facilities that provide a safe space for counselling, case management and initiation of referrals to other specialized actors, including child protection, specific programming

for women or livelihoods and legal support. It may also include the provision of cash for protection.

- Positioning of static protection desks and services within existing multi-sectoral service areas, particularly, community response centres (CRCs), which will enable returnees to seek assistance in a timely manner in areas of returns.
- Where feasible, establish and deploy mobile protection teams, integrated with health and MHPSS, to enable outreach and serve the population in the catchment area around service points.
- Conduct a mapping of local civil society organizations and organizations for persons with disabilities, that could be strengthened with joint work to enable returnees access to information, social networks and integration, with an aim to eventually handover static protection facilities to such actors.

Target number of beneficiaries (sex and age disaggregated): 60% of the total target population (644,000 individuals) to be reached through community outreach, information desks, protection case management and complaints and feedback mechanisms, amounting to 386,400 women, men, girls and boys reached through these activities. IDP and host community members will be benefitting from the same activities.

MHPSS

- **Awareness Raising and Psychoeducation:** Conducting sessions to raise awareness about mental health issues and provide psychoeducation to communities, promoting understanding and destigmatization.
- **Individual Psychosocial Counseling:** Offering one-on-one counseling sessions to individuals experiencing mental health challenges, providing personalized support and coping strategies.
- **Group Psychosocial Support:** Facilitating group counseling sessions to create a supportive environment for individuals to share experiences and receive peer support.
- **Protection and promotion of psychosocial well-being:** Integrating life skills sessions into various community-based activities such as arts-based programs, sports and play activities, and interest groups.
- **Referral to Specialized Services:** Identifying individuals in need of specialized mental health services and facilitating their referral to appropriate professionals or organizations for further assessment and treatment.

Target number of beneficiaries (sex and age disaggregated): According to the World Health Organization (WHO), it is estimated that one in five people or around 20% of individuals in situations of displacement and conflict suffer from mental health and psychosocial problems. Based on this understanding among the total population approximately 128,896 will need MHPSS services.

Civil documentation and legal aid

- **Legal awareness:** Legal awareness initiatives aim to empower individuals and communities by providing them with knowledge and understanding of their legal rights, responsibilities, and avenues for seeking redress. These initiatives involve the

dissemination of information on a wide range of topics relevant to the local context, including administrative and legal procedures for obtaining civil documents, access to justice and the significance of possessing valid civil and legal documentation.

- **Legal counseling:** Legal counseling provides individuals with personalized guidance and advice tailored to their specific legal concerns and circumstances. Through one-on-one consultations, individuals receive support in understanding their rights, navigating complex legal processes, and exploring available options for resolving their issues.
- **Legal aid:** Legal aid provides individuals with extensive support throughout the administrative process, ensuring access to justice regardless of financial constraints. In addition to offering financial assistance to cover case processing costs and fees, legal aid programs may encompass a wide range of expenses, including standard legal fees, photocopying expenses, transportation costs, and other related expenses incurred during legal proceedings.
- **Legal representation:** Legal representation involves the provision of professional legal services by qualified attorneys or lawyers to individuals involved in legal proceedings related to complex cases concerning the issuance of civil documentation.

Target number of beneficiaries (sex and age disaggregated): According to UNHCR return and border monitoring data, approximately 60% of returnees, considering the total targeted population of 644,484 persons, have expressed the need to seek legal assistance services to facilitate their access to civil documentation. This translates to a total of approximately 386,691 individuals in addition to 106,339 children aged under 5 who may require birth certificates.

Protection monitoring

- Protection monitoring tools, including household assessments, key informant interviews as well as focus group discussions help to generate reliable qualitative and quantitative data on protection risks and trends across all population groups and provinces.
- Diversifying communication channels with the community is crucial to mitigate the risk of selection biases or excluding certain members of the community. To this end, partners will strengthen efforts to get direct feedback on the protection risks and needs of women and girls who face restrictions in their freedom of movement as well as other marginalized and hard-to-reach communities in remote areas. Protection monitoring will also support the referral of protection cases to specialized service providers for multi-sectoral assistance.

Target number of beneficiaries (sex and age disaggregated): It is expected that protection monitoring should cover at least 60% of the total target population of 644,000, with the selection of households, key informants and focus group participants aiming for equal distribution between male and female participants. IDPs and host community members in the area will also be included in the assessment.

Persons with disabilities

- The IASC Guidelines on Disability Inclusion specify four 'must do' actions (MDAs) to be applied by all stakeholders in every sector and all contexts if persons with disabilities are to be included successfully in all phases of humanitarian action. These include

meaningful participation, the identification and removal of barriers, empowerment and capacity development of persons with disabilities and humanitarian stakeholders and the collection of disaggregate data, including through the usage of the Washington Group Set of Questions.

- In close coordination with the Afghanistan Disability Inclusion Working Group, trainings for all partners on disability-inclusive humanitarian action and the usage of the Washington Group Set of Questions, as well as trainings for organizations of persons with disabilities and other community members should be prioritized.

Target number of beneficiaries (sex and age disaggregated): The target audience are humanitarian partners, organizations of persons with disabilities and other stakeholders that are responding to the needs of returnees and host communities in key return areas.

Child protection

- Provision of child protection services, including case management to children in their areas of return: Placement of social service providers (i.e., social workers and para-social workers) for conducting basic case management including referrals to other essential services and tailored support such as livelihood opportunities and cash assistance based on vulnerability and needs assessments. Establishment of community-based child-friendly spaces (CFS) for the provision of age-appropriate activities and services.
- Promotion of knowledge and awareness among families and caregivers on child rights violations as well as risks: Facilitation of community dialogues in select districts to promote positive norms and positive parenting practices in communities that enable children's protection and well-being. Conduct targeted awareness raising activities on the prevention of harmful coping mechanisms such as child labour and unsafe (re)migration, as well as the risks of explosive ordnance and remnants of war through explosive ordnance risk education (EORE).

Target number of beneficiaries (sex and age disaggregated): It is estimated that 60% of the total target population of 644,000 would be children (under 18 years of age), equating to 386,870 individuals with equal sex disaggregation (194,435 respectively). Of them, the vast majority (99.5% - 384,936 boys and girls) would be accompanied, while a small proportion (0.5%) would be comprised of UASC totaling 1,934 (1,900 boys and 34 girls).

Protection of women and girls

- Provision of trauma informed psychosocial support psychosocial support and other services to women and girls in areas of returns. Referrals of women and girls to existing services and establishment of additional mental health and psychosocial support services for women and girls, including through support to women led organizations. Provision of essential services, including health and livelihood opportunities based on vulnerability and needs assessments.
- Establishment of additional women safe spaces and referral to existing women centers and safe spaces for women to access multi-sectoral services.
- Awareness raising and community engagement on rights of most vulnerable populations, and related access to services and participation. Conduct awareness raising activities with women on PSS and multi-sectoral services available. Facilitate community dialogues

in targeted districts, including with men, boys and community leaders to discuss women's participation, map barriers to access and enable women's safe access to services.

Target number of beneficiaries (sex and age disaggregated): 320,000 women and 100,000 men girls, men and boys.

Mine Action

- Activities will support the safe resettlement of Afghan returnees in the districts with the highest rate of recorded civilian casualties and EO contamination through the provision of quick response and demining clearance capacity and the delivery of Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE).

Target number of beneficiaries (sex and age disaggregated): 201,078 men and 185,612 women.

Financial requirements

Total Sector Budget	Budget per year (1 May - 31 Dec 2024)	Budget per year (1 Jan - 31 Dec 2025)
US$ 82,475,378	US$ 32,990,151.26	US$ 49,485,226.89

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