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# VOICES OF THE DISPLACED: IDENTIFYING LASTING SOLUTIONS THROUGH THE EXPERIENCES OF IDPS IN AFGHANISTAN\*

## *YERİNDEN EDİLENLERİN SESLERİ: AFGANİSTAN'DA ÜLKE İÇİNDE YERİNDEN EDİLENLERİN DENEYİMLERİ ARACILIĞIYLA KALICI ÇÖZÜMLER BELİRLEMEK*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores potential lasting solutions to the crisis of internal displacement in Afghanistan as identified by Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in the country. The arguments are based on interviews with IDPs, Afghanistan's government officials as well as local and international humanitarian aid providers. Empirical findings indicate that while war had been the main cause of internal displacement in Afghanistan, drought, natural disasters, and a lack of income-generating opportunities also contributed to this complex problem. This situation has caused loss of dignity, poverty and suffering among IDPs across the country. Although various phases of the long Afghan war had caused internal displacement over the past four and a half decades, failure to find lasting solutions to displacement contributed to continued displacement, suffering and to war. We argue that local and international responses to the IDPs problem in Afghanistan have been inadequate, uncoordinated, focused on 'short-termism', and have lacked a long-term vision. We conclude that lasting solutions to the crisis require a combination of sustainable peace, inclusive state institutions, strong political will from the international community and from Afghanistan's ruling authorities as well as targeted development aid. Such efforts must support the dignified return of IDPs and their reintegration into their places of origin, or their permanent settlement in the communities where they currently live.

**Keywords:** Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), war, violence, Indignity, inclusive development, sustainable peace, Afghanistan.

## ÖZET

Bu makale, Afganistan'daki ülke içinde yerinden edilenler (IDP'ler) tarafından belirlenen, ülkenin iç yerinden edilme krizine yönelik potansiyel kalıcı çözümlerini incelemektedir. İleri sürülen düşünceler IDP'lerle, Afganistan hükümet yetkilileriyle, yerel ve uluslararası insani yardım sağlayıcılarıyla yapılan

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görüşmelere dayanmaktadır. Ampirik bulgular, Afganistan'da iç yerinden edilmenin başlıca nedeni savaş olmasına rağmen kuraklık, doğal afetler ve kazanç fırsatlarının eksikliğinin de bu karmaşık probleme katkıda bulunduğu göstermektedir. Bu durum, ülke genelindeki IDP'ler arasında insan onuru zedelenmesi, yoksulluk ve acıya yol açmıştır. Uzun Afgan savaşının son kırk beş yıl boyunca çeşitli aşamalarıyla iç yerinden edilmeye yol açmış olmasına rağmen, yerinden edilme sorununa kalıcı çözümler bulunamaması, sürekli olarak bu sorunun devamına, acıya ve savaşa katkıda bulunmuştur. Makalede, Afganistan'daki IDP sorununa yönelik yerel ve uluslararası müdahalelerin yetersiz, koordinasyonsuz, kısa vade odaklı ve uzun vadeli bir vizyondan yoksun olduğunu savunuyoruz. Sonuç olarak, krize kalıcı çözümler bulabilmek için sürdürülebilir barış, kapsayıcı devlet kurumları, uluslararası toplum ve Afganistan otoritelerinin güçlü siyasi iradesi ile hedefe yönelik kalkınma yardımlarının bir kombinasyonuna ihtiyaç bulunmaktadır. Bu yöndeki çalışmalar, IDP'lerin onurlu bir şekilde asıl yerleşim yerlerine dönmelerini ve yeniden entegrasyonlarını ya da mevcut yaşadıkları topluluklara kalıcı olarak yerlesmelerini desteklemelidir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** IDPs, ülke içi yerinden edilme, savaş, şiddet, onur kırıcı muamele, kapsayıcı kalkınma, sürdürülebilir barış, Afganistan

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH METHODS

Afghanistan had been used as a battlefield by competing regional and global powers since its invasion by the Soviet Red Army in December 1979 until the withdrawal of the US-led NATO forces from the country on 15 August 2021. The long and devastating war resulted in the displacement of several million Afghans inside and outside the country over the years.<sup>1</sup> Internal displacement became a constant feature of Afghan society throughout this period, and yet neither Afghanistan's Government(s), nor international organisations have ever offered lasting solutions. This situation contributed to both continued suffering and continued war(s). In discerning lasting solutions, which are meaningful to the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), this research provides a detailed account of their experiences of violence, displacement, and loss of dignity, as well as national and international responses.<sup>2</sup>

Due to the security situation, the researchers were not permitted to visit Afghanistan, and therefore all data was collected from a distance either via telephone, or using tablets with the assistance of local research facilitators in the country. To ensure a full range of insights, experiences and stories, the research sample included IDPs, humanitarian field staff, and senior professionals (humanitarian and political). The sample was drawn from different provinces, key regions, and cities to ensure data from across Afghanistan was captured. This

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, *Global Focus: Afghanistan Situation* (2025) <<https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/afghanistan-situation#:~:text=In%202025%2C%20UNHCR%20will%20deliver,focus%20on%20women%20and%20girls>> ; UNHCR, *Afghanistan Refugee Crisis Explained* (USA for UNHCR, 19 July 2024) <<https://www.unrefugees.org/news/afghanistan-refugee-crisis-explained/>> ; Schmeidl S, *Four Decades of Afghan Displacement* (German Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung/bpb) 2019) <<https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/laenderprofile/284416/four-decades-of-afghan-displacement>> accessed 5 September 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Palash Kamaruzzaman, Kate Williams, Ali Wardak, Laura Cowley, Mohammad Yaseen Ayobi, Alef-Shah Zadran and Mohammad Ehsanul Kabir, *Evidence on internal displacement in Afghanistan: In search of dignified life, durable solutions, and sustainable development for the Afghan internally displaced people, Field Research Report*, the British Academy and University of South Wales <<https://pure.southwales.ac.uk/en/publications/evidence-on-internal-displacement-in-afghanistan-in-search-of-dig>> accessed 20 December 2025

research adopted a mixed methods approach comprising:

- two surveys (one with the IDPs and the other with staff members working at the frontline of humanitarian organizations) primarily designed to facilitate quantitative analysis of issues related to displacement, experiences of violence and loss of dignity.
- semi-structured interviews (with IDPs, front-line workers, professionals, policy-makers, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and with other members of civil society). These interviews explored the reasons for displacement/migration, the journeys of the IDPs, the meaning of dignity for IDPs, the ways in which loss of dignity had been experienced, the strategies of change/adaptation (both group and individual) and the medium to long-term solutions each group envisaged.
- narrative/storytelling unstructured interviews which provide another, deeper, layer of understanding from the migrants/IDPs perspective.

IDPs and field staff members (working at the frontline humanitarian organizations) were purposefully chosen from specific areas, ensuring a cross-section of types of settlement (camps, settlements, or mixed with host-communities), types of environments (urban and semi-urban), in different parts of Afghanistan. Data was also collected from senior humanitarian and political professionals. The data was collected in areas which were largely government controlled, those largely Taliban controlled, and areas that were contested (where fighting was on-going). Data was collected from 8 provinces: Kabul; Nangarhar; Paktya; Mazar; Kunduz; Herat; Kandahar; and Badakhshan.

The IDPs survey was conducted in one of the local languages, *Pashto*, or *Dari* (dependent on the preference of the IDPs), while the frontline staff survey was conducted in English. Both surveys included closed and open-ended questions on the causes of displacement, available aid, assessments of aid quality and distribution, dignity, hopes for lasting solutions, and a sustainable future. Additional topics included coping strategies, recovery, access to basic and emergency services, and durable solutions

Senior staff were interviewed for their policy and strategic insights into the crisis and possible solutions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with them, alongside 20 in-depth narrative storytelling interviews with IDPs to capture a deeper, more nuanced understanding of their experiences of violence and dignity.

Care was taken to ensure that the views of both men (55%) and women (45%) were captured (see Table 1). Before agreeing to be involved in either surveys or interviews, all participants were provided with detailed information sheets enabling them to give informed consent (or refuse to be involved). The array of participants and geographic spread ensured a more holistic understanding of displaced persons (from a practical, experiential, and strategic perspectives), and ensured that findings were not merely relevant to one community or area.

Research tool	Male	Female	Total
Interviews with IDPs	156	105	261

Interviews with humanitarian field-staff	32	8	40
Interviews with senior staff	8	5	13
Storytelling with IDPs	10	10	20
Surveys with IDPs	239	288	527
Surveys with Staff	82	14	96
Total	527	430	957

Table 1: Data Collection Methods and the Number of Respondents Disaggregated by Gender

All interviews were carefully transcribed in the original language, and those in *Dari* and *Pashto* were then carefully translated into English. At the translation stage, local Afghan experts were hired to ensure that both the verbal and non-verbal contexts of discussions - including vocalisation of the language and discourse - were accurately translated and to ensure that the translation captured nuances in meaning.<sup>3</sup> Surveys were analysed using Tableau software, and qualitative interviews were analysed using thematic analysis and organised via Nvivo.

In order to contextualise the findings of this study, the paper first provides a background to the long war and displacement in Afghanistan before examining IDPs' experiences of violence and indignity, and local and international responses to their plights. The paper then analyses the complex links between resettlement, development and peace in Afghanistan, and provides policy-oriented conclusion.

## 2. RECENT HISTORY OF WAR AND DISPLACEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan with its history of foreign conquerors and rivalries among internal warring factions is a mountainous landlocked country at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, which is referred to as 'the graveyard of empires'.<sup>4</sup> Despite two failed attempts to conquer Afghanistan between 1838–42 and 1878–81,<sup>5</sup> the British managed to enflame tribal divisions by creation of the Durand Line in 1893 that separate it from what is now North- Western Pakistan. The border not only resulted in continuous dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also reduced the capacities of Afghan state institutions to provide necessities and services to all citizens.<sup>6</sup>

While this situation resulted in periodical displacement, it was the Marxist Coup of 1978 followed by the Soviet invasion in 1979 that led to both massive volumes of internal displacement

<sup>3</sup> Abfalter D, Mueller-Seeger J and Raich M, 'Translation Decisions in Qualitative Research: A Systematic Framework' (2020) 24 *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 469.

<sup>4</sup> Hughes RG and Fergusson J, "Graveyard of Empires": Geopolitics, War and the Tragedy of Afghanistan' (2019) 34(7) *Intelligence and National Security* 1070.

<sup>5</sup> Dupree L, 'The First Anglo-Afghan War and the British Retreat of 1842: The Functions of History and Folklore' (1976) 26(3/4) *East and West* 503.

<sup>6</sup> Kaura V, *The Durand Line: A British Legacy Plaguing Afghan-Pakistani Relations* (Middle Eastern Institute 2017) <<https://www.mei.edu/publications/durand-line-british-legacy-plaguing-afghan-pakistani-relations>> accessed 12 November 2025.

and fleeing to neighbouring countries – mainly Pakistan and Iran.<sup>7</sup> Further displacements followed the USA-led NATO military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001. In fact, the period between 1978 - 2021 had seen a series of persistent violence, invasions, internal war proxies and civil-wars, which forced large numbers of Afghans to flee to neighbouring provinces and countries in different phases that are described in this section.<sup>8</sup> With the USA-led NATO intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, and the formation of a USA-supported administration(s) in the country, several hundreds of thousands of returnees arrived back to their villages bringing skills and ideas for building new livelihoods.<sup>9</sup> However, this development had not been sustained because war continued and caused further deaths, displacement, loss of livelihood and dignity.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, due to persistent conflict, poverty and natural disasters – including drought, floods, storms and earthquakes displacement had become a common coping mechanism for many Afghans and an inevitable feature of life for at least two generations. We will examine the IDPs' experiences of violence, indignity, local and international responses to displacement as well as lasting solutions, but first it is important to examine key phases displacement in Afghanistan.

### 3. PHASES OF PROTRACTED DISPLACEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

Despite the evidence of periodic historical displacements, for example during the rule of King Amir Abdul-Rahman Khan and of King Zahir Shah, our study focuses on the past four and a half decades. From 1987 to 2025, displacement had become a complex, acute, fluid and protracted phenomena driven by a variety of factors that were mentioned earlier. Based on key data sources (See Figure 1 below), six loosely demarcated phases of displacement in Afghanistan can be differentiated in this crucial period: Phase one was the Soviet invasion that ran from 1978 to 1989; phase two (1990 – 1995) was the subsequent civil war that erupted when Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan; the third phase was the Taliban first rule (1996– 2001); the fourth phase is identified as the USA-led NATO intervention (2001 – 2021); the fifth phase is the US-led NATO military transition to the (former) Afghan government forces and the eventual withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan (2014 – 2021); phase six represents the Taliban takeover and their new regime in Afghanistan (2021 – present). As figure 1 below illustrates that since boundaries between the six phases of displacement in Afghanistan overlapped and the flows of displacement were fluid, the corresponding figures for each phase represent best estimates that are based on data recorded by reliable sources.

<sup>7</sup> Bhutta ZA, 'Children of War: The Real Casualties of the Afghan Conflict' (2002) 324(7333) BMJ (Clinical Research Edition) 349.

<sup>8</sup> International Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Country Profile: Afghanistan* (2023) <<https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/afghanistan>> accessed 15 March 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Dashti Z, 'Afghan External Migration Movements in the Historical Process' (2022) 6 *Asya Studies* 301.

<sup>10</sup> Kamruzzaman et al (n 2).

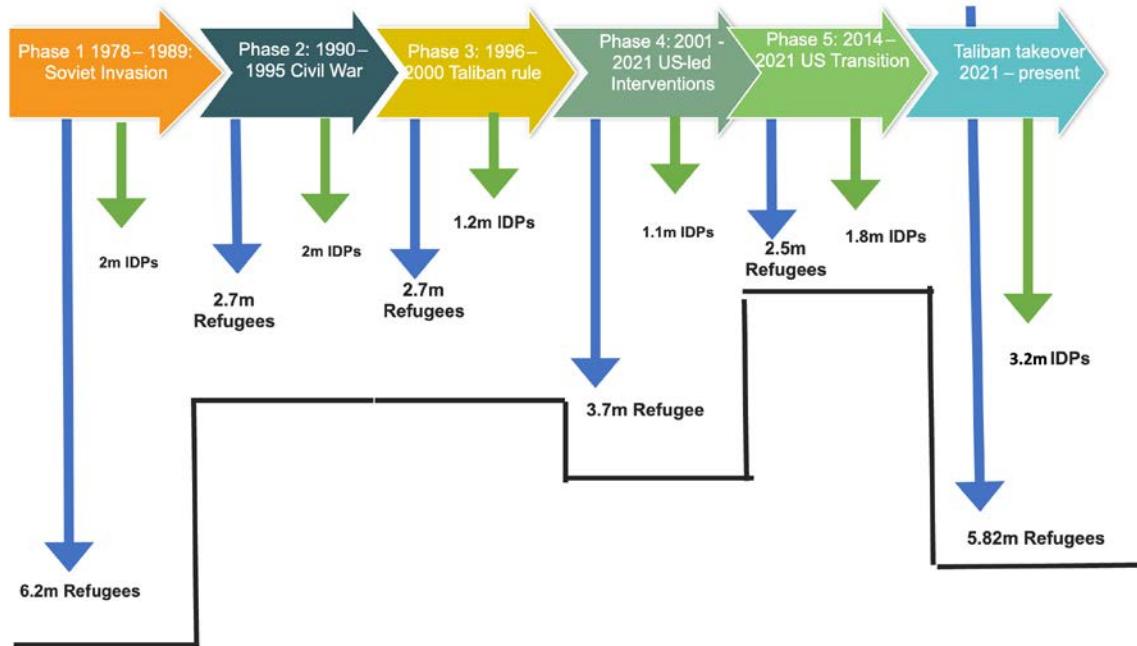


Figure 1: Displacement Journey from 1978 to 2025 in Afghanistan<sup>11</sup>

### 3.1. PHASE I: MARXIST COUP AND SOVIET INVASION (1978 – 1989)

In April 1978, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan toppled the Republic of Afghanistan – a nationalist government of President Mohammad Daoud – through a military coup. This led some Afghan political groups to mobilise their followers to unseat the Marxist regime, which invited the Soviets to send troops for its support. The ensuing long war led to massive destruction of the country's economic infrastructure, and drove over 6 million refugees to flee the country, and two million others displaced inside the country. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) invested in a 10-year multi-billion dollar project aimed to support the displaced refugee communities in Pakistan, from where most anti-Soviet Mujaheddin fighters were recruited:

Despite signs of corruption in both the military and humanitarian aid programs as early as 1982, Congress ultimately provided nearly \$3 billion in covert aid for the mujahidin [largely displaced refugees from Afghanistan], more than all other CIA covert operations in the 1980s combined. By 1987, the United States was

<sup>11</sup> For data sources see Dashti (n 9), UNCHR 2025 (n 1); UNCHR 2024 (n 1); Schmeidl (n 1); and International Displacement Monitoring Centre's report monitors displacement trends and its data is regularly updated, see (n 8) and previous editions.

providing the rebels with nearly \$700 million in military assistance a year, more than what Pakistan itself was receiving from Washington.<sup>12</sup>

This helped to strengthen the military and political campaign of the various Afghan Mujahidin factions against the Soviet forces and the pro-Soviet Marxist regime in Kabul. The Jihad of these groups – alongside that of the Iran-based Mujahideen – led to the defeat of the Red Army in Afghanistan and to the withdrawal of its troops in 1989. However, the war against the Pro-Soviet Afghan regime continued as described below.

### 3.2. PHASE II: CIVIL WAR (1990 – 1995)

Despite the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989, the last Soviet supported government in Afghanistan manged to stay in power until 1992. After the fall of the Marxist regime, fighting over political power among various Mujahideen groups resulted in an intense civil war in the post-Marxist era.<sup>13</sup> During this period, vulnerable displaced people, once again, became a source of recruitment by the various Mujahidin factions backed by different regional and global powers. This situation led to chaos in Kabul: different parts of the capital were controlled by different Mujahideen factions from where they launched attacks on each other. Research indicates that widespread human rights violations such as summary executions, abuse of prisoners, abduction, disappearances, rape, sexual violence, imprisonment, pillage and torture were committed by all factions.<sup>14</sup> These atrocities led to further internal displacement (totalling two million), and drove many others to flee to neighbouring countries, mainly Iran and Pakistan, both of which hosted over two and half millions Afghan refugees in total.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.3. PHASE III: FIRST TALIBAN REGIME (1996 – 2001)

In the early 1990s, a relatively small clerical movement (Taliban) emerged from Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan and positioned itself mainly in Kandahar. Children of many Afghans who were displaced between 1978 – 1995 were admitted to Madrassas (Islamic seminary schools) in Pakistan, or in its border areas with Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> Some of the Madrassas were run by the Taliban who taught young male Afghans their selective version of Islam – a strict, traditionalist brand of Islam based on the *Deobandi* School of Hanafi jurisprudence,<sup>17</sup> in the midst of anarchy created by the infighting among Mujahideen factions, the Taliban started to intervene. Following their success

<sup>12</sup> Galster S, *Afghanistan: Lessons from the Last War* (The National Security Archive 2001) 6 <<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/essay.html>> accessed 12 November 2025.

<sup>13</sup> Ruiz HA, *Afghan Refugees Shunned and Scorned* (United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants 2001). <<https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/3bc1918810.pdf>> accessed 12 November 2025.

<sup>14</sup> Jackson A, The Cost of War: Afghan Experiences of Conflict, 1978–2009 (2009) <[https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file\\_attachments/afghanistan-the-cost-of-war\\_14.pdf](https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/afghanistan-the-cost-of-war_14.pdf)> accessed 12 November 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Sifton J (Human Rights Watch), *Blood-Stained Hands: Past Atrocities in Kabul and Afghanistan's Legacy of Impunity* (Asia: Human Rights Watch 2005) <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2005/07/06/blood-stained-hands/past-atrocities-kabul-and-afghanistans-legacy-impunity>> accessed 12 November 2025

<sup>16</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, The Taliban (Council on Foreign Relations 1999) <[https://www.cfr.org/taliban/#!](https://www.cfr.org/taliban/#/)> accessed 15 March 2025.

<sup>17</sup> Barfield T, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton University Press 2010).

in disarming bandits and criminals associated with some Mujahideen factions in Kandahar in 1994, the Taliban took Jalalabad city in eastern Afghanistan in 1996.<sup>18</sup> The Taliban were embraced by local people and two weeks later they captured Kabul, but the fight continued in northern Afghanistan. The war between Taliban and the Northern Alliance of former Mujahideen warlords led to countless internal displacements from the Shomali plains.<sup>19</sup> Although the Taliban ended the criminalised anarchy created by the Mujahideen and restored order through much of Afghanistan,<sup>20</sup> they are reported to have committed widespread human rights violations including massacres, torture, extrajudicial executions, disappearances, persecution of Shia Muslims, gender-related crimes and practiced institutionalised gender/sexual apartheid in Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> These violations and severe restrictions imposed on individual freedoms by the Taliban regime triggered new wave of displacement: thousands of educated élite, professionals and urbanites, left Afghanistan, or were displaced to the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif, and the total number of both IDPs and refugees is estimated close to four million during this period.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.4. PHASE IV: US-LED INVASION (2001 – 2021)

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on targets in the USA, the Taliban government, which refused to hand over Osama bin Laden, was toppled by the Bush administration (with the help of the Northern Alliance warlords). The US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 started against a backdrop of drought, acute poverty, malnutrition, poor education and poor health services caused by prolonged civil-war in Afghanistan. The overthrow of the Taliban government was initially welcomed by many in Afghanistan as it promised rebuilding the country: reconstruction projects funded by the USA and international donors, employment opportunities, education for girls and boys, advocacy for human rights, development aid and ‘nation-building’.<sup>23</sup> Very importantly, between 2002 and 2015, more than 5.8 million refugees felt able to return to Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> While there was no major internal displacement in the immediate aftermath of the invasion in 2001, aerial bombing by US-led NATO forces in the South and West of Afghanistan continued to cause destruction and internal displacement.

More importantly, as very little was done to enable IDPs a dignified return to their places of origin, (or their long-term settlement in the communities where they lived),

<sup>18</sup> Ruiz (n 13).

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> John Braithwaite and Ali Wardak, ‘Crime and War in Afghanistan: Part I: The Hobbesian Solution’ *British Journal of Criminology* 53(2) (2013) 179.

<sup>21</sup> Grossman P, ‘Truth, Justice and Stability in Afghanistan’ in N Roht-Arriaza and J Mariezcurrena (eds), *Transitional Justice in the Twenty-First Century, Beyond Truth Versus Justice* (Cambridge University Press 2006) 255–77 <[www.restorativejustice.org/articlesdb/articles/7724](http://www.restorativejustice.org/articlesdb/articles/7724)> accessed 12 November 2025.

<sup>22</sup> Dashti (n 9).

<sup>23</sup> Beath A, Christia F, Enikolopov R and Kabuli SA, *Randomized Impact Evaluation of Phase II of Afghanistan’s National Solidarity Programme (NSP): Estimates of Interim Program Impact from First Follow-up Survey* (2010) <[http://www.nsp-ie.org/reports/BCEK-Interim\\_Estimates\\_of\\_Program\\_Impact\\_2010\\_07\\_13.pdf](http://www.nsp-ie.org/reports/BCEK-Interim_Estimates_of_Program_Impact_2010_07_13.pdf)> accessed 12 November 2025.

<sup>24</sup> Crawford N, ‘War-related Death, Injury, and Displacement in Afghanistan and Pakistan 2001–2014’ (2015) Watson Institute for International Studies <<https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/war-related-death-injury-and-displacement-afghanistan-and-pakistan-2001-2014>> accessed 12 November 2025.

over one million people remained internally displaced throughout the country; and 3.7 million Afghans continued to live in refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran. Despite the unprecedented international assistance to Afghanistan during this period, the lack of progress in addressing the IDPs issue was particularly disappointing in light of the 'road-map' for recovery recommended by University of York's Post-war Reconstruction and Development Unit.<sup>25</sup> PRDU recognised the need to: address long-term economic issues of Afghan IDPs; enable both return and reintegration and integration; ensure a co-ordinated multi-agency approach able to deliver on all the needs of returning IDPs; design a system to evaluate success and improve delivery. Despite this, the Afghan government's National Solidarity Programme (NSP) and its Citizen's Charter programme failed to address the IDPs problem effectively.

### **3.5. PHASE V: US-NATO TRANSITION AND WITHDRAWAL (2014 – 2021)**

From 2014 to August 2021, there was a USA-led NATO security transition to the US-supported Afghan government taking gradual control of the country. Despite the return of thousands of refugees and some IDPs, the gradual reduction of NATO forces in Afghanistan, however, led to the intensification of fighting in the country. According to the International Displacement Monitoring Centre, there were three major drivers for an increase in internal displacement during this period: Firstly, the fall of rural and provincial areas to the Taliban; secondly, the emergence of warlords and militias (old and new); and thirdly, armed clashes and localised battles in the south and east of the country. Each of these contributed to the internal displacement of large numbers of people.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, there was a simultaneous reduction in livelihoods and in the capacity of local people to cope with drought and natural disasters. About 319,000 new displacements were recorded in the country in the first half of 2019: 213,000 associated with conflict and 106,000 associated with disasters; and it is estimated that there were 1.8 million IDPs in Afghanistan and over 2.5 million registered Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan during this period.<sup>27</sup>

### **3.6. PHASE VI: THE NEW TALIBAN REGIME (2021 – PRESENT)**

With the return of the Taliban rule to Afghanistan on 15 August 2021, thousands of Afghans who worked for the US-led NATO forces and/or for the deposed Afghan government were assisted to leave the country and to settle in the USA, Canada, Australia, UK, Germany, and in some other countries (wealthy factional political leaders and their followers mainly fled to Iran, Türkiye and Tajikistan). Although no credible data is available, internal displacement has continued and the number of IDPs has continued to rise: Iran and Pakistan have routinely been expelling tens of thousands of unregistered Afghan refugees

<sup>25</sup> Post-War Reconstruction and Development Unit (PRDU), *The Study of NSP's Impact on IDP/Refugee Returnee Reintegration in Afghanistan* (PRDU, University of York, York 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Nichols M (Reuters), 'U.N. Readies for More Displaced Afghans after Troop Withdrawal' (14 June 2021) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/un-readies-more-displaced-afghans-after-troop-withdrawal-2021-06-14/>> accessed 12 November 2025.

<sup>27</sup> IDMC (n 8); Schmeidl (n 1); Dashti (n 9).

most of whom have returned to the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and swollen the numbers of IDPs in camps in Afghanistan.<sup>28</sup> As figure 1 illustrates the number of both IDPs and refugees nearly doubled during this period - an estimated 3.2 million IDP in Afghanistan and an estimated 5.82 million registered Afghan refugees – mainly in Iran and Pakistan. However, these figures are notoriously fluctuating. According to new UNHCR (2025), over 2.5 million of refugees (registered and unregistered) have been forced to return to Afghanistan during the summer of 2025. Many of these returnees, who mainly originate from rural areas in Afghanistan, are returning to the country's urban centres where they have become destitute IDPs with little support from the Taliban rulers, or from the international community.<sup>29</sup>

The second Taliban rule has had mixed effects. A very important positive outcome is that the long war has ended, and for the first time in more than 47 years, the Taliban have delivered security throughout Afghanistan. Regional warlords can no longer fight for their fiefdoms, and it is safe to travel freely in all part of the country. However, this absence of violence ('negative peace') has come at a high price: there are new severe restrictions on women's employment and on girls' education after primary level.<sup>30</sup> These restrictions have impacted negatively on women and girls as they hinder women's personal development and perpetuate cycles of poverty and marginalization. These restrictions also prevent the building of dignity for women and hamper sustainable solutions for all displaced individuals and communities, and thereby they harm the prosperity and development of Afghanistan. All this and worsening economic conditions have prompted more people to flee the country.<sup>31</sup>

However, there are indications that some old IDPs in urban areas have been returning to their places of origin in rural Afghanistan.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, rural areas have not only become safer than cities, they also have more potential to support agriculture and farming-based livelihood. The heavy rainfall in March 2025 in some parts of the country has further replenished the water-table and so resulted in better agricultural farming than the past few years. This situation, along with the sustained nationwide peace, increased regional and

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<sup>28</sup> Refugee Council, *Press Release, Afghanistan* (22 January 2025) <<https://www.nrc.no/news/2025/january/millions-of-afghans-face-expulsion-under-desperate-conditions#:~:text=In%20September%202024%2C%20Iran%20announced,15%2C%202024>> accessed 12 November 2025

<sup>29</sup> Aljazeera, 'Who will save Afghans from hunger?' (Aljazeera, 17 December 2025) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/video/inside-story/2025/12/17/who-will-save-afghans-from-hunger>> accessed 20 December 2025

<sup>30</sup> United Nations, 'The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security', Report of the Secretary-General (2023) <[https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/sg\\_report\\_on\\_the\\_situation\\_in\\_afghanistan\\_december\\_2023.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/sg_report_on_the_situation_in_afghanistan_december_2023.pdf)>; UNAMA, 'Update on the Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan' (May 2025 update) <<https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/unama-update-human-rights-situation-afghanistan-january-march-2025-update>> accessed 15 March 2025

<sup>31</sup> Refugee Council (n 27); United Nations (n 26).

<sup>32</sup> Aljazeera, 'The Opposite Way of Migration in Afghanistan: From Cities to Rural Villages' (YouTube, 2022) <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_YbJk7-KzIA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_YbJk7-KzIA)> accessed 12 November 2025.

cross-country trade and development<sup>33</sup> could encourage even more Afghan IDPs to return to rural areas. Providing inclusive development aid to rural Afghans would significantly contribute to a lasting solution to the country's IDPs problem.

#### 4. IDPS AND EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE BEFORE 2021

In the eyes of most IDPs, violence in Afghanistan occurred because of protracted conflicts between warring parties mainly the USA-led NATO coalition forces, the USA/NATO-supported Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (*ANDSF*), Taliban, the *Islamic State Khorasan Province* (ISIS-K), and other small armed groups. As table 2 indicates, 78% of respondents to our survey indicated that the main cause of their displacement was war/conflict, followed by violence (11%), drought (5%), natural disasters (3%), and a lack of income-generating opportunities (2%, see Table 1).<sup>34</sup> Our qualitative findings complemented the survey data in this respect, but some also mentioned destruction of property and land, difficulty in meeting basic needs, accessing healthcare and educational facilities, and loss of dignity as caused of their displacement.

Main Causes of Displacement	Gender		
	Female	Male	Total
War and conflict	41.9%	36.57%	78.48%
Violence	5.9%	5.33%	11.24%
Drought	2.86%	2.10%	4.95%
Natural disasters	2.48%	0.57%	3.05%
No income-generating opportunities	1.33%	0.76%	2.10%
Other	0.19%	0%	0.19%
Total	54.67%	45.33%	100%

Table 2: Main Causes of Displacement for IDPs in Afghanistan (n= 527)

There was a marked difference, however, among the rural and urban respondents in terms of their reasons for displacement: more rural IDPs were displaced due to war and conflict, whereas almost all of those fleeing natural disasters fled to urban areas.<sup>35</sup> Our field data further reveal that the main causes of displacement varied by province in Afghanistan: those from Kunduz, Kandahar and Nangarhar provinces were largely displaced due to war, conflict, and violence, and tended to be displaced to more rural areas. However, our data indicate that those IDPs who had migrated from Ghor, Badghis, and Badakhshan provinces were largely displaced due to a lack of livelihood opportunities brought about by drought,

<sup>33</sup> Bruce Pannier, 'Central Asian Nations Embrace Engagement with Taliban' (Yorktime Institute, 13 June 2025) <<https://yorktowninstitute.org/central-asian-nations-embrace-engagement-with-taliban/>> accessed 20 December 2025

<sup>34</sup> Note that the IDPs were allowed to interpret these for themselves so there may be some overlap (e.g. in war/conflict and violence may overlap). Also, war/conflict may have caused a loss of income so it may be difficult to tease out the exact meaning but IDPs were asked, for them, what was the cause – it is their interpretation which is therefore important.

<sup>35</sup> Kamruzzaman et al (n 2).

famine, and natural disasters and tended to be displaced to urban areas.<sup>36</sup> Some of these IDPs had been displaced more than once.

IDPs had experienced violence from different actors such as (former) *ANDSF*, USA-led NATO coalition forces, the Taliban, ISIS-K, and from other armed groups. Their narratives of experience of violence were often harrowing and revealed multiple dimensions: “*We decided to migrate because of the severe security situation, war, murders, unemployment, killings, misery, bullying, and oppression that wounded my son and made us despair of being kidnapped*”. (A199, a male IDP, Mazar)

Moreover, extreme violence by the groups such as ISIS-K and Taliban and pro-government militias were quite common. IDPs described how such violent incidents often took place in the midst of dense rural communities populated by civilians, causing high numbers of casualties. Many recounted distressing stories of losing family members.

“*ISIS killed our people with bombs; 7 members of my family including my brother and nephews and 13 of my other relatives. In one day, ISIS killed 120 of us.*” (A136, a male IDP, Jalalabad)

“*I have lost my husband during the war between the Taliban and the government. My brother was killed by the Taliban as well.*” (A108, a female IDP, Herat)

IDPs’ experiences of violence also arose out of repeated raids conducted by the USA/NATO-supported ANDSF and USA-led NATO coalition forces. Civilians were often caught up in these operations and felt forced to migrate elsewhere.

“*Though we had a difficult time with the armed groups, but our biggest problem was with the government as they used to carry out constant bombings and raids on our homes.*” (A227, a male IDP, Nangarhar)

Very importantly, young male IDPs from remote communities described how they were forced by armed groups to join the war against the USA/NATO-supported Afghan government, which led them to leave their homes. Largely consistent with what Drumbl describes as Taliban’s (and potentially other warring parties’) ‘other crimes’, people were coerced to provide shelter and food to the different fighting groups; and there was also pressure from the police to join community based local militias (for example the *Arbakis*, such as the *Khost Protection Force and others*) who were salaried and trained by the CIA.<sup>37</sup> People often became IDPs to avoid these situations.

“*Both armed groups and the Arbakis police forced us to work for them, for example to feed them or to help them construct their police stations.*” (A201, a male IDP, Mazar)

“*The Taliban wanted us to join the war and to provide them with weapons, so we*

<sup>36</sup> ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Drumbl MA, ‘The Taliban’s “Other” Crimes’ (2002) 23(6) *Third World Quarterly* 1121.

*decided to migrate and came with several families to Herat.” (A114, a male IDP, Herat)*

*“The Taliban and ISIS destroyed our houses and lands, and they also took our livestock. They forced us to give them food and water otherwise they beat our father and brothers.” (A123, a female IDP, Jalalabad)*

## 5. LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES AND EXPERIENCE OF INDIGNITY BEFORE 2021

As mentioned earlier, in Afghanistan IDPs are difficult to track some are even not recorded at all, and those who come to the attention of authorities are dispersed through much of the country. From over 500 Afghan IDPs who participated, our research indicates that whilst 62% live in rural or semi-rural areas (mainly in Herat, Jalalabad, Kandahar, Kunduz and Mazar), about 38% of them live in urban centres scattered across cities.<sup>38</sup> At least 50% of IDPs live in a non-camp environment amongst their host communities; many of these live in shared housing (with extended family and/or friends), or rented accommodation. Those in camps tend to be in tents but some IDPs live in private housing and at least 8% are in unofficial settlements.<sup>39</sup> Although some have been IDPs for many years, people were displaced every day (before the end of war in 2021), and therefore the numbers of those in need constantly grew as one respondent put it:

*“IDPs don’t receive what they need because there are too many of them, and the number increases day by day. ... International and local NGOs have been helping them and providing them with health services, educational facilities, shelter, clothes and other things. But these aren’t enough and can’t help them overcome the problems they have.” (AS 301, a local male humanitarian worker, Herat)*

Indeed, while international and local humanitarian organisations – as well as succeeding Afghan governments – have attempted to respond to internal displacement in Afghanistan, they could not address and provide for the complex needs of the IDPs. This situation has had an important impact on the Afghan IDPs’ sense of (in)dignity.

Qualitative interviews with IDPs revealed that dignity has several different meanings to them. Individual perceptions of dignity varied, and many IDPs ascribed multiple meanings to the concept of dignity. The respondents spoke about dignity in terms of mutual respect and understanding, the religious practice of *pardah* for women (maintaining protection and privacy from unrelated males), access to basic facilities, and protection from harassment. It was clear that the concept of dignity was very important to the Afghan IDPs, with many describing it as fundamental to a person’s life and identity.

<sup>38</sup> As mentioned, the data were collected in 2019 from across Afghanistan. They include data from areas which at the time might have been considered as under government control, areas considered as under Taliban control, and areas that were contested between the warring parties.

<sup>39</sup> Kamruzzaman et al (n 2).

*“Honour and dignity mean that others understand us, and that we respect each other. We should forgive others and not be angry with them. Dignity for women means that no one disturbs them or looks at them. .... due to the lack of toilets, we have seen many cases of harassment which damages our dignity; lack of facilities is a lack of freedom.” (A101, a male IDP, Herat).*

Almost all the IDPs expressed a complex, multidimensional understanding of dignity that mainly involved: i) access to basic and life-saving provisions such as food, water, clothes, and medicine; ii) opportunity to prosper in life and to work to move out of poverty; iii) self-reliance and self-sufficiency; iv) protection of life, home and family; v) peace, safety and security; vi) freedom and rights enjoyed by others living around them and elsewhere in Afghanistan vii) mutual respect and compassion and treating others the way in which they would like to be treated; viii) education for girls and boys; and ix) freedom to practice religious (Islamic) values.

To elaborate, the notion of respect (or lack of it) as a multidimensional feature of dignity is largely in alignment with their experiences. In short, the IDPs' experiences of indignity began with the violence that led to their displacement (fleeing from their communities, eviction, forced combat), and was exacerbated by their poverty and the ways in which they lived in displacement – crowded camp environment, no provision or inadequate provision of basic necessities, poor treatment by humanitarian staff and/or others during distribution of needed assistance. All this gave rise to a sense of hopelessness and loss of power and control; they could not return to their own property and community, nor could they improve their present situation. Just as their experiences are complex, so are their conceptions of dignity in light of those experiences.

In comparison, the humanitarian actors and senior government staff had a more limited and narrower view of dignity in relation to IDPs; it mainly involved provision of necessities, respect (culture, religion and values during aid distribution), organisational rules and human rights (equal rights; freedom, privacy, protection, nutrition and shelter). Whilst a few humanitarian actors and senior government staff mentioned the importance of self-sufficiency, most had a fairly narrow view of what was necessary in order to respect the dignity of the IDPs.

However, many humanitarian actors and senior government staff agreed on several factors such as the dignified provision of shelter. As noted above once the IDPs left their homes, they lived in many different types of homes and communities: camps, unrecognised groupings, in already existing communities and in other villages or in parts of larger conurbations, living amongst 'host' communities. Although the (former) Government of Afghanistan<sup>40</sup> purported to advocate "upgrading shelter, housing, water, sanitation and other infrastructure in areas inhabited by IDPs to ensure their safety and dignity", this study reveals that IDPs' experiences of (in)dignity continued. The places where the IDPs lived

<sup>40</sup> Government of Afghanistan, *National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons (Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (2013))* <<https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-national-policy-internally-displaced-persons-25-november-2013>> accessed 12 November 2025.

were often not conducive to their enjoyment of safety, security and respect for their family members, especially women.<sup>41</sup> For example, living in camps they had little safety and no opportunities to provide for their families. Furthermore, they saw no likelihood that their situation will improve soon, nor can they find a place to permanently settle.

Our filed data<sup>42</sup> further indicate that many IDPs are living in existing local communities rather than camps. During the initial settlement, IDPs had different experiences of living in a host community. Many IDPs insisted that they were satisfied with their host communities and felt welcome as the local people provided them with clothes and food, treated them with respect, and provided help and guidance.

*“I have a peaceful relationship with my neighbours. I am sure that my honour and dignity are protected. They do not disturb us. Reputation and dignity are very important for us in order to be safe.” (A06, a male IDP, Badakhshan)*

*“When we came to Herat, we had no life facilities such as land for living or food for eating. The people of Herat helped us, and we thank them. The Herat people behave very well towards us.” (A107, a female IDP, Herat)*

However, others felt they were often badly treated by the members of the host community who did not respect them, or failed to appreciate their culture and thought that IDPs bring insecurity to their area. They were made to feel unwelcome. Many IDPs suffered rejection and discrimination which impacted upon their dignity. “We have no respect here, they call us refugees and even do not give us clean water, but we have no option but to live here”. (A186, a female IDP, Kandahar)

Clearly, many suffer further indignities, which sometimes arise due to their individual circumstances. Much more needs to be done to integrate IDPs into local communities and to explain why they may be living in culturally unconventional ways.

*“I am a widow and a care-taker, I am sick and had a nervous breakdown. I was beaten up by my neighbours just because I wanted to collect water. They insulted and humiliated me and told me to go away, because I am an unattended woman. What can I do with my children and where can I go?” (A84, a female IDP, Herat)*

Another aspect of dignity on which IDPs agreed with the humanitarian actors and senior government staff was the provision of basic necessities. They also largely agree on what the most important of these necessities are: “The basic problems that IDPs suffer are lack of shelter, sufficient food, education, water, hygiene, work, and hospitals”. (AS 287, a local, male humanitarian worker, Herat).

However, there was a huge disjunction between the perceptions of humanitarian and government staff and IDPs on sufficiency of humanitarian assistance as Figure 4 below illustrates: whilst 85% of humanitarian and government staff believed that the aid and

<sup>41</sup> Kamruzzaman et al (n 2).

<sup>42</sup> ibid.

humanitarian assistance provided either completely or mostly covered IDPs' most important needs, only 17% of IDPs say that the aid they receive completely or mostly covers their most important needs.

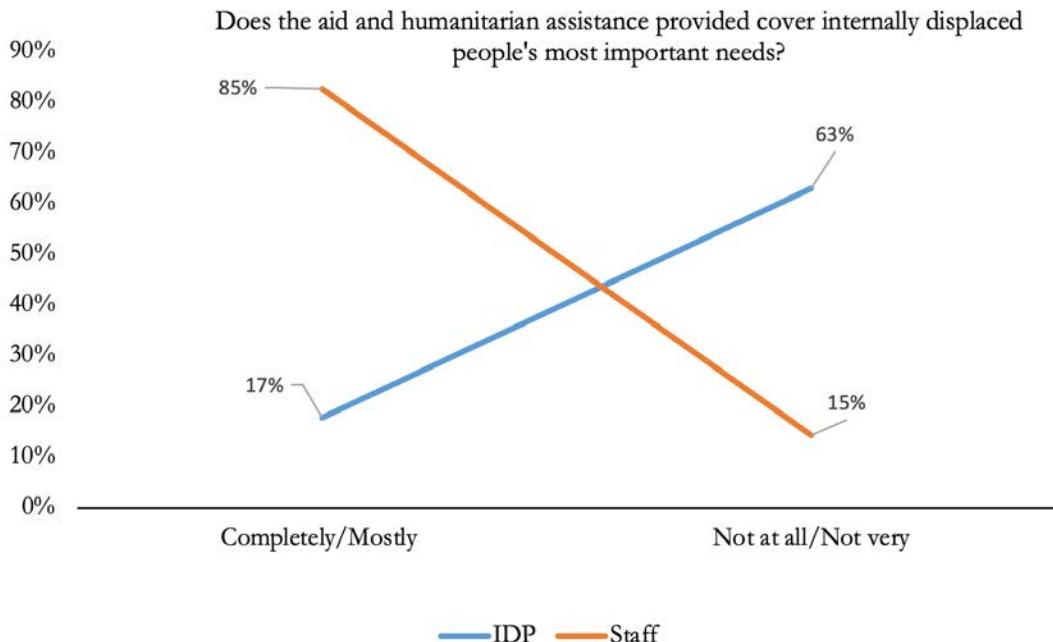


Figure 2: Disparity between the Perceptions of Staff and IDPs Regarding whether Humanitarian Assistance Covers IDPs' Most Important Needs

This disparity clearly indicates that the aid provided is insufficient and many IDPs lack access to the most basic requirements for daily living: clean water, food, adequate shelter, gas, oil, and kitchen equipment/utensils; they also lack adequate clothing, heating for warmth in winter, and electricity. Humanitarian aid providers generally agree, but see insufficient funds and resources as the main problem:

*"It is very difficult to respond to all of the needs of IDPs, returnees, or refugees because this requires integrated and multi-sector interventions that need huge funds and we know how much the funds have been shrunk. So, most of the time, the humanitarian needs provided by the aid agencies are driven by the amount of funding they have."*  
(AS 09, a male, international staff survey respondent, Badghis)

This situation is not dignified, and the problem is not merely one of insufficient aid and working with limited resources. Our data indicates that it is also related to: poor mismanagement, corruption, lack of effective coordination between government and international aid organisations, and cultural and language differences among them; disruption and interference by local strongmen, warlords, and other stakeholders; failure to correctly identify IDPs and those in need; and insecurity and the politicisation of aid.

*"At the start of the project we do a survey to identify the needy people, so we face problems from the warlords and community elders as they want to address their own people. The second main problem is the security concerns. ... For better results, we need better coordination with the government and the local people."* (AS 313, a male

*humanitarian worker, Nangarhar).*

*“The aid does not reach the IDPs who really deserve it, because of poor management.”* (AS 283, a female humanitarian worker, Herat).

*“The most common challenge is insecurity. Due to the lack of security, organisations cannot cover all of the people in need properly.”* (AS 287, a male humanitarian worker, Herat)

*“This has been a war-devastated country for 40 years, there are a lot of remote areas that are not accessible due to security reasons .... These areas are disregarded from assistance, no improvements have been made in the last 16 years - not in education, not in livelihood, not in medicine. No one has thought about these areas, no donors have focused on these areas. ... Donors need to consider these remote areas too”* (AS 292, a male humanitarian worker, Kandahar).

Humanitarian staff and IDPs also agreed that the IDPs should be respected. Most humanitarian workers said they made arrangements at the distribution centres that were consistent with IDPs' cultural and religious values, such as separate queues and distribution times for men and women. Some IDPs accepted that was true, however, many complained that their cultural and religious values were not respected during aid distribution. This suggested that distribution arrangements and processes were inconsistent.

*“Some staff or soldiers misbehave during the distribution of aid, by pushing women, touching them, shouting at them, and so on. This all harms the honour and dignity of migrants, especially women.”* (A101, a male IDP, Herat)

*“..due to the lack of toilets, we have seen many cases of harassment which damages our dignity; lack of facilities is a lack of freedom.”* (A101, a male IDP, Mazar)

*“After the assessment or once the assistance has been provided, they are phoning again and having irresponsible talk, meaning asking for sexual favours in exchange for rewards.”* (A08, a female IDP, Jalalabad)

Furthermore, aid organisations claimed to involve IDPs in aid distribution but the IDPs questioned the extent to which they were listened to in the provision of aid; they were often consulted but ignored.

*“Organisation’s employees came here once or twice and surveyed us, but then they left and we didn’t hear back from them. It has been six months and we have never had any help from any aid organisations.”* (A108, a female IDP, Herat)

*“A while ago they came to consult with us about the construction of a road and a mosque. They asked about our situation, about the value of a concrete road if they were to make one, but then they never came to construct it.”* (A06, a male IDP, Badakhshan)

It is important to point out that due to the long Afghan war, many IDP families were female headed. This situation breaks with traditions in Afghanistan but is increasingly the

reality, and many IDPs recognised that these households and all the children – male and female – deserved to be educated; they deserved to become self-sufficient. This was not, however, an indication that they embraced female rights in any Western sense. IDPs argued for these changes whilst still being led by their deeply-held Islamic faith; so, if there is any feminism in the embracing of these changes, it is Islamic feminism – not Western – as argued by Yamani.<sup>43</sup> Islamic feminism considers the empowerment of women within a modern interpretation of Islam. There are many facets to Islamic feminism, but they all embrace, Islam, draw attention to the rights of women and girls under *shari'a*.

To overcome these challenges it is necessary for the aid community to de-politicise aid; provide increased budgets; improve assessment processes; improve security; improve access to hard-to-reach areas; improve coordination between humanitarian, development, and government organisations; directly supervise aid distribution and/or direct delivery of aid ensuring it is distributed fairly, systematically and transparently; consider and respect dignity, culture and religion in all the aid work; and work together in more effective partnerships. Clearly, de-politicising aid, ensuring it is properly co-ordinated and distributed as well as possibly increased (especially in remote parts of Afghanistan) would help all of this.

*“I request humanitarian organisations to increase their aid and support according to the number of IDPs and returnees.” (AS 284, a local female humanitarian worker, Nangarhar)*

*“I suggest that the interference from warlords and stakeholders must be stopped and that budgets are increased due to the large number of IDPs. I suggest that the government supervises all of the organisations through their relevant sectors, to keep the process of distribution more transparent.” (AS 293, a local male humanitarian worker, Kunduz)*

*“I suggest that the government coordinates with every department and supports the local NGOs in Afghanistan.” (AS 302, an international male humanitarian worker, Herat)*

*“A proper survey is required, and the aid ought to be distributed to those who really deserve it. Also, the aid should be directly delivered to IDPs and returnees.” (AS 305, a local male humanitarian worker, Nangarhar)*

More importantly, the IDPs stressed the need for long-term solutions: they wanted mainly high-quality education and employment opportunities leading to self-reliance and self-sufficiency, which they considered as crucial to restore their dignified resettlement.

*“When a person becomes self-sufficient, he can regain his dignity.” (9A209, a male IDP, Mazar)*

*“Providing a working environment can restore a person’s lost dignity. In my opinion, honour and dignity mean being financially self-sufficient.” (A199, a male IDP, Mazar)*

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<sup>43</sup> Yamani M, *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives* (Berkshire: Ithaca Press 1996).

What has been examined in this and in the previous section indicates that Afghan IDPs face serious problems in protecting themselves and their dignities in displacement. Although immediate, short-term and mid-term humanitarian assistance is essential for dealing with some of these problems, it is inclusive development and sustainable peace that promise lasting solutions to Afghanistan's chronic IDPs crisis.

## 6. LINKING INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT, RESETTLEMENT AND PEACE: TOWARDS LASTING SOLUTIONS

As evidenced above, while humanitarian assistance to IDPs in Afghanistan is very important, the lack of strong elements of long-term and inclusive development has been and is seriously problematic. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for Ukraine defines inclusive development as supporting the economic recovery of war-torn communities, further accelerating decentralization and healthcare reforms in these regions, and strengthening community security and social cohesion in its target communities.<sup>44</sup> In this paper, we adopt this concept, as scholars have identified that it encompasses multiple dimensions of development, including social, political, relational, well-being, and ecological aspects.<sup>45</sup> This broader perspective moves beyond a narrow focus on economic development and short-term humanitarian aid; it aligns comprehensively with the findings of this study, as demonstrated above.

Our research reveals that the focus on short-term humanitarian aid was and remains damaging both the future of IDPs and Afghanistan's path to lasting peace: short-termism prevents long-term resettlement and re-integration of the Afghan IDPs; it sustains a dependency culture and diminishes the IDPs' dignity; it prevents Afghanistan from advancing its sustainable development goals and impedes sustainable positive peace in the country. To move away from these limitations, it is vital to focus on provision of dignified, inclusive development and re-settlement opportunities that can illuminate the lived experiences of displaced people in Afghanistan – opportunities that are closely linked to lasting and sustainable peace in the country. Our research findings show that sustainable development in the form of job opportunities, permanent housing within new supportive communities with education and health care has been and is essential for the restoration of IDPs' dignity and lasting peace. In order to enjoy long-term solutions to the Afghan IDPs' complex problems, they recognized that peace and security were essential, but emphasized

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<sup>44</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Ukraine, Inclusive Development, Recovery and Peacebuilding (2025) <<https://www.undp.org/ukraine/inclusive-development-recovery-and-peacebuilding>> accessed 5 September 2025

<sup>45</sup> Rammelt CF and Gupta J, 'Inclusive is Not an Adjective, It Transforms Development: A Post-Growth Interpretation of Inclusive Development' (2021) 124 *Environmental Science & Policy* 144; Gupta J and Vegelin C, 'Sustainable Development Goals and Inclusive Development' (2016) 16 *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 433; Pouw N and Gupta J, 'Inclusive Development: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach' (2017) 24 *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 104.

on the importance of inclusive development support in the areas below:<sup>46</sup>

1. provision of land and sustainable shelter
2. construction of clinics, schools, capacity building centers
3. construction of roads, factories, and power stations
4. restoration of houses, roads, and land
5. large scale agricultural assistance in rural areas
6. education for all children – girls and boys
7. the provision of employment opportunities – men and women
8. capital for business investment (focused on small community/village projects rather than large scale projects)
9. skills development and training/retraining for men and women
10. Peacebuilding

Indeed, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons specifies that lasting solutions for IDPs can be achieved through (1) return to the place of origin; (2) settlement elsewhere; or (3) integration into the host community.<sup>47</sup> Our research indicates that most conflict-induced IDPs in Afghanistan are interested in returning to their places of origin. Of those IDPs who participated in the survey, over 70% reported that they wanted to return to their homes (see Figure 5)

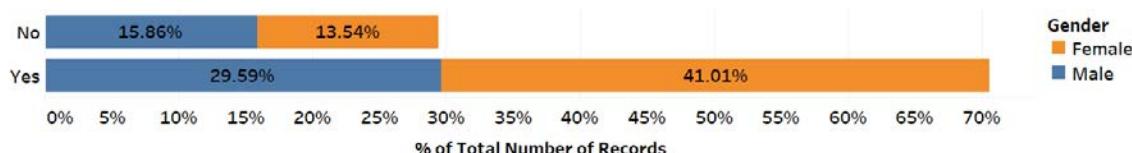


Figure 3: IDPs' Responses to the Question "Do You Want to Return to Your Place of Origin?"

However, these respondents called on the government and aid organisations to assist them in their efforts to return home by providing multidimensional development support in their places of origin, in the 10 areas mentioned above. Very importantly our data also indicate that, in contrast, the majority of disaster-induced IDPs (displaced by natural disasters and drought) wanted sustainable integration into their host communities as they have limited livelihood opportunities in their places of origin.<sup>48</sup> They emphasised, however, the urgent need for multidimensional support from the government and humanitarian actors in order to achieve this (the ten points above). Many of these IDPs reported that if they had access

<sup>46</sup> Kamuruzzaman et al (n 2).

<sup>47</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons (2010), The Brooking Institution – University of Bern, Washington DC <<https://www.unhcr.org/50f94cd49.pdf>> accessed 12 November 2025.

<sup>48</sup> Kamurazzaman et al (n 2).

to employment opportunities and basic facilities to improve their lives, then their dignity would be restored.

*“They should build schools for our children so they can gain knowledge. We want support, work for our males and females, schools and clinics for our children. If we have these facilities available here, we will not return to our original place” (A191, a female IDP, Kandahar).*

*“If the government and the institutions decide to build a house for us and provide us with jobs, we would not want to return home. Our request from the government and organisations is to build a school for our children in this camp, a health centre, and shelter us.” (A111, a male IDP, Herat).*

*“There is a need for sustainable solutions in the field of IDPs’ integration, but there is a lack of budget, lack of good coordination, and a lack of donors in this area, as most donors provide funding for IDPs emergency needs - not for their integration into society. There is no problem with the amount of land; the land is available now but there is still a need for international donors in the field of construction and shelter” (AS 330, a local male senior staff member, Kabul).*

While multidimensional inclusive development is central to the dignified resettlement of IDPs, the two are also intractably linked to inclusive and sustainable peace in Afghanistan.<sup>49</sup> As displacement had been both a consequence of the long Afghan war and contributor to its continuation, IDPs can play an important role in sustainable peace-making and peace-building in Afghanistan. The USA and Taliban peace agreement of 29 February 2020 failed to include IDPs, and they were also absent from the intra-Afghan Doha talks in 2021. As each party to the agreement accuses the other for violating its terms, it seems redundant since the Taliban took over in 2021. The Taliban announced amnesty to all its former adversaries (government soldiers, officials, and all those who collaborated with the USA/NATO occupying forces), formation of an ‘inclusive’ *shari’ā*-based government, and promised that women could continue attending their jobs and education.

However, despite strong opposition from key members of the caretaker Taliban administration, religious decrees by the Taliban clerical leader – Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada – have resulted in the exclusion of women and non-Taliban citizens from participation in politics; they have also resulted in severe restrictions on women’s employment and on girls’ education after primary level.<sup>50</sup> To pressurise the new regime, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) blocked \$460 million in funds that were scheduled

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<sup>49</sup> Yaseen Ayobi, Kate Williams and Ali Wardak, ‘Afghanistan: Stuttering Peace Process Leaves out Millions Displaced by 40 Years of War’, (*The Conversation*, 28 May 2020) <<https://theconversation.com/afghanistan-stuttering-peace-process-leaves-out-millions-displaced-by-40-years-of-war-135605>> accessed 20 December 2025

<sup>50</sup> The Diplomat, ‘Advantage Akhundzada in Taliban Factional Fight in Afghanistan?’ (5 March 2025) <<https://thediplomat.com/2025/03/advantage-akhundzada-in-taliban-factional-fight-in-afghanistan/>> accessed 7 September 2025.

to be sent to Afghanistan during August 2021.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, the US froze *Da Afghanistan Bank*'s \$9.5 billion assets held in American accounts (\$3.5 billion moved to a Swiss-based trust fund), and the World Bank suspended its crucial development aid to the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.<sup>52</sup> Blocking these vital funds to Afghanistan hurts ordinary Afghans, especially the IDPs. Reinstating these funds will require a delicate and complex engagement between the international community and the Taliban.

The dominant, but mistaken presumption is that the victorious Taliban, non-Taliban political elites, faction leaders and former warlords are the only stakeholders who can advance the intra-Afghan peace process. Our research, however, indicates that the experiences of IDPs and other victims of the war – especially women – not only need to guide the peace process, but they are central to sustainable peace-making and peacebuilding in Afghanistan. Including the voices of IDPs could both create an environment conducive for their dignified return and/or their permanent resettlement.<sup>53</sup> The voices of ordinary Afghans – including the IDPs – can be influential in forming an inclusive government in Afghanistan that help to both maintain the nation-wide security the Taliban have managed to deliver, and to build sustainable growth for local communities in the country. Without a sustainable future and an inclusive government in Afghanistan, sustainable peace is likely to be fragile as some people may continue to be attracted to, or forced into militancy.

While recognising the value of humanitarian aid to Afghan IDPs, this study also shows the negative opportunities offered by the undignified social and economic environment of displacement that short-termism has created. The traumatised and desperate IDPs who live in this environment continue to be vulnerable to the exploitative agendas of new extremist militant groups and old warring factions; young IDPs are particularly vulnerable to indoctrination with extremist views, and to recruitment as foot-soldiers by these groups.

Although nationwide security has returned to Afghanistan since August 2021, the Taliban's new theocratic dictatorship that bans political participation and oppresses women provides new opportunities for discontent and even militancy. To prevent this happening in post-war Afghanistan, sustainable peace-building efforts will require delicate and sustainable international investment and inclusive development assistance. This would help contribute towards a lasting solution to Afghanistan's IDPs complex issue, and would ensure that Afghanistan is at peace with itself, its neighbours and the world.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in this paper clearly shows that IDPs in Afghanistan face complex problems in protracted displacement. Although provision of short-term and mid-term humanitarian assistance is very important, it is more important to focus on the provision

<sup>51</sup> Mordock J, 'IMF to Withhold \$460M in Funds from Afghanistan after Taliban Takeover' (Washington Times, 19 August 2021) <<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/aug/19/imf-withhold-460m-funds-afghanistan-after-taliban-/>> accessed 12 November 2025.

<sup>52</sup> Politico, 'World Bank Suspends Aid to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan' (2021) <<https://www.politico.eu/article/world-bank-suspends-aid-taliban-afghanistan/>> accessed 17 March 2025.

<sup>53</sup> Ayobi et al (n 49).

of long-term inclusive development that would enable sustainable peace in the country. International and local humanitarian organisations as well as the Taliban administration need to focus on inclusive development and on creating income-generating opportunities in rural poverty-stricken areas in order to prevent people from migrating to the increasingly crowded urban centres. This aid would be more effective when shaped by the actual needs of local communities (mainly agricultural villages), where the overwhelming majority of Afghanistan's population live.

Aid needs to begin providing permanent homes and communities for IDPs to live in either rebuilding old ones or constructing new ones. To achieve this, all actors need to ensure that land is given to IDPs to facilitate their successful reintegration and settlement. Sustainable communities will also require reskilling of workers with skills relevant to their environment and their communities, and the building of essential infrastructure – such as small work units or, factories near urban centres; new farms; roads; dams; and markets to provide both employment opportunities and a place to trade goods. Particular attention should be paid to building schools and to overcoming current barriers to ensure education for girls at middle, secondary and higher levels. These sustainable solutions are necessary, in order to provide the robust basis on which positive peace can be built.

This interdependence between inclusive development and sustainable peace means that the latter cannot be delivered without the support of all the people in Afghanistan, especially the IDPs. It cannot be imposed from outside, or by one Afghan group using force to control the rest of society. National and intentional development actors need to recognise that Afghanistan is a complex society with very different constituencies, each of which needs to be heard and included – men and women; the rural and the urban; the IDPs in camps, in rural communities and cities; those returning from being refugees. Lasting peace in Afghanistan is intricately linked to inclusive development and must have all the population who will live with it at its core.

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