

01 October 2020

INVESTING IN COMMUNITIES AND BUILDING HUMAN CAPITAL IN AFGHANISTAN - ALTERNATIVES TO IRREGULAR MIGRATION

by Marija Raus

While Europe is holding its breath in anticipation of another COVID-19 related lockdown, with people still adapting to closed borders and movement restrictions, the people of Afghanistan are all too familiar with this situation. For Afghans, the pandemic is merely one additional threat to health and life to cope with. Taking a holistic approach, this article will look at how COVID-19 might affect the migration patterns of Afghans, and which new threats and opportunities will develop.

The global pandemic has brought with it immense insecurity and something unfamiliar to most Europeans: movement restrictions. As the lockdown was imposed in the first half of 2020, people were asking when they would be able to travel again, when they could go on holiday and what will happen to their jobs as well as their everyday way of life. Today, with another potential lockdown on the horizon, people are fearful about how this may affect businesses and work opportunities, and how economies will survive.

This ‘new normal’ is anything but ‘new’ for people living in Afghanistan. The movement restrictions, extremely limited legal migration options, and randomly self-imposed lockdowns due to the volatile security situation, is sadly part of everyday life when you are an Afghan. This mix of factors contributes inevitably to unemployment and the overwhelming poverty of the Afghan population, half of which is living [below the poverty line](#).

Following the first wave of COVID-19 hitting Iran, more than a quarter million Afghans [returned to their home country](#). There is much speculation as to why this has happened: an overburdened health care system in Iran, fear of infection, economic losses due to the spread of the disease and lack of economic opportunities in Iran may perhaps play a role. These returnees, however, are not facing better security or protection from the disease in Afghanistan while economic opportunities have virtually dried up locally.

Reintegration of returnees and displaced citizens has long been a priority of the Afghan government, even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. In this area, the support of international

partners has been instrumental. The reality is, however, that reintegration efforts have rarely moved beyond immediate humanitarian assistance.

A new wave of returning Afghans

As Intra-Afghan peace talks are picking up and gaining strong momentum, there is an anticipation of more returns from countries hosting large numbers of Afghan refugees and migrants, such as Iran and Pakistan. The estimates are that 1.5 to 2 million people may be returning to Afghanistan in the coming years. This will most definitely require a large-scale across the board effort to not only facilitate returns, but also to ensure a sustainable reintegration. To this, one needs to add the paramount importance of strong reintegration programmes for former Taliban fighters, in order for peace to be preserved and the country to pursue its development agenda.

The country seems ready to take on this challenge, and the new political leadership in country - established following the 2019 elections - is taking up the migration management agenda as one of its priorities. The Government clearly sees that a humanitarian and reactive approach is not providing sustainable answers, and is setting up a more comprehensive approach to migration management that acknowledges interlinkages between different sectors, and the relevance of good migration management for the country's peace and development, as well as the importance of the national policies reaching through to the people and making a positive change.

The need to approach reintegration differently, focusing on tailor-made service provisions as well as better access to economic, social and cultural - but also civil and political - rights is a prominent feature of the Comprehensive Migration Policy developed by the Government with expert support from ICMPD. Similarly, the new Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDFII) 2021-2025 notes that reintegration must go beyond a cash allowance and food during the first phase.

Successful and sustainable reintegration is closely tied to the incidence of irregular migration. Having viable options and opportunities for people to establish their lives in their communities is a prerequisite for them not leaving the country irregularly.

By way of an example, a young Afghan asked our Migrant Resource Centre colleagues in Kabul: 'I returned from Europe five months ago, and I need to go somewhere again. I don't have work or a house here in Afghanistan. My family needs me to support them. A guy asked for 30,000 USD to take me back to Europe by plane, or 7,000 USD if I go by land. I would go to Iran first.

From Iran they would give me new documents. I would go irregularly again. I can't make up my mind. I don't want to go but I have no way of feeding my family here. Can you please tell me what to do?'

Irregular migrants from Afghanistan made up a large share of the 2015 migration crisis, and the chances are high that this situation will be repeated. Closed borders, stringent travel controls and restrictions imposed by COVID-19 have temporarily placed a lid on the problem, but it is far from a sustainable solution.

Causes of irregular migration

To paint the full picture of the causes of irregular migration we should add the following: an overwhelming lack of work and income generation opportunities; weak access to health, education, and social security; very limited number of countries to which Afghans can travel without a visa, or for which they can get visas easily; almost non-existent opportunities to be educated or work abroad; low competitiveness of the Afghan labour force; etc.

It should thus not come as a surprise that many Afghans will continue to seek options for a better life outside of Afghanistan, and if this cannot be achieved through regular migration channels, then the smugglers offering services - as the testimonial above would suggest - will most likely prevail as an option.

For the international development partners of Afghanistan, especially in the EU, this situation requires them to widen the scope of the focus beyond return and reintegration, to encompass investment in human capital among returnees as well as potential migrants in Afghanistan. This entails mobilising relevant partners, and especially the private sector, as well as concerted skills and talent building.

This approach is also in line with the Global Skills Partnerships foreseen in Objective 18 of the Global Compact on Migration as well as with the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum that has announced the launch of EU Talent Partnerships (EUTP). Even though the latter is intended to focus primarily on the EU's immediate neighborhood and Africa, considering the respective needs of Afghanistan as well as the stated role of EUTPs to be part of the EU's toolbox for engaging partner countries strategically on migration, it should not take too long before they are extended to Afghanistan and other countries along the Silk Routes which are among the most important migration countries for the EU.

Migration management challenges in Afghanistan have to be addressed where they start, and that is in the very communities Afghans are compelled to leave. Opportunities to build and re-build lives have to be made available. Afghans need to be provided with the chance to exercise their full potential and rebuild their country, and this is where the efforts to combat irregular migration should start and end. A radical move from solely reactive measures at the borders to community investment measures to tackle irregular migration is needed, since investing in communities and people across Afghanistan is the only feasible and sustainable way forward.

Contact Information

For more information please contact:

Policy Unit

International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)
Gonzagagasse 1, 5th floor
1010 Vienna, Austria

Email: Policy_Unit@icmpd.org

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