



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Unprepared for (re)integration

Lessons learned from Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria
on Refugee Returns to Urban Areas

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Front cover photo: A man prepares to load his luggage to leave the reception center in Berbera, Somaliland 2015
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Key concepts and definitions

Displaced persons are persons or groups of persons, including asylum seekers, refugees and internally displaced persons, who are outside their homes or places of residence for reasons related to fear of persecution, conflict, generalised violence or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order.

Durable solution is achieved when displaced persons no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement. It can be achieved through sustainable (re)integration at the place of origin (voluntary return), local integration in areas where displaced persons take refuge or in another part of their country based on their choice. For refugees, it can also be achieved through resettlement in a third country. (ReDSS)

Host community refers to the community within which displaced persons reside. (GCER)¹

Internally displaced persons are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular, as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised state border.²

Non-refoulement is the cornerstone of refugee protection. Set out in Article 33(1) of the 1951 Refugee Convention, it requires that *“no contracting state shall expel or return a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his (or her) life or freedom would be threatened”*.³

Preparedness refers to a proactive and planned response to emergency, disasters or, in the context of this study, to situations of return. The IASC speaks of preparedness as an inter-agency, common and planned approach. Preparedness is multidimensional and multilevelled, at individual/household, community, organisational or state levels. (IASC)⁴

Refugee is a person who, *“...owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his (or her) nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself (or herself) of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his (or her) former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it”*. (Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention) **1951 Convention** refers to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (also known as the 1951 Refugee Convention).

Sustainable (re)integration – There is no universal definition of the term “(re)integration”. The IASC Framework highlights eight criteria to be used when considering whether durable solutions have been achieved, namely: safety and security; adequate standard of living; access to livelihoods; restoration of housing, land and property; access to documentation; family reunification; participation in public affairs, and access to effective remedies and justice.⁵ Meanwhile, UNHCR sees (re)integration as *“equated with the achievement of a sustainable return – in other words the ability of returning refugees to secure the political, economic, (legal) and social conditions needed to maintain life, livelihood and dignity, (and) a process that should result in the disappearance of differences in legal rights and duties and the equal access of returnees to services, assets and opportunities”*.⁶

Voluntary repatriation is the return to country of origin *“on refugees’ free and informed decision”*.⁷ The essential requirement for repatriation to be voluntary is the counterpart of the principle of non-refoulement. The facilitation of voluntary repatriation is one of the basic functions of UNHCR.⁸

Youth is defined by the UN as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24.

1 Global Cluster for Early Recovery (2017). Durable Solutions in Practice.

2 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. UN Doc. E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2.

3 1951 Convention, Article 33(1). A similar formulation is also found in Article 3(i) of the UN Declaration on Territorial Asylum adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1967.

4 See IASC (2015) Early Response Preparedness. See also Cassarino (2014) A Case for Return Preparedness.

5 Brookings Institution – University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement (2010). IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons.

6 UNHCR (2004). Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities.

7 Adapted from IOM (2019) Glossary on Migration.

8 UNHCR (1980). Note on Voluntary Repatriation. EC/SCP/13.



Executive Summary

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This study informs programming and policies in relation to refugee returns and, specifically, with regards to their (re)integration within urban areas, with a focus on Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria. While millions of refugees return to poverty, conflict and insecurity in all three settings, a tunnel focus on returns rather than on (re)integration has limited value for long-term planning. Stakeholders, including communities and returnees themselves, have been unprepared for what happens post-return.

In this context, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) have drawn lessons from recent responses to refugee movements in Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria. Return trends have shifted in each of these contexts in recent years, driven by changing governmental priorities and conditions in host and origin countries. Although return contexts are diverse, some patterns are common, and refugees' own priorities and actions need to be considered in order to build the way for effective programming.

Objectives and methodology

The main report supports the thinking and planning around (re)integration by examining patterns of return and identifying obstacles, including operational, policy and knowledge gaps, to support better preparedness for (re)integration. It asks: *"How can returnees, receiving communities, governments and organisations be more effectively prepared so as to lay the ground and work towards sustainable (re)integration? What has worked and what could work?"*

The research team interviewed over 100 key informants in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Jordan, Kenya, Somalia and globally; it led 21 focus group discussions, produced 14 household case studies and 4 operational case studies, integrating all levels of policy, programme and community stakeholders. The research builds on a literature review of 150-plus sources to investigate (re)integration dynamics and inform future responses.

Report overview

The report examines findings, paradigms and blind spots that can inform designers, implementers and funders of return and (re)integration programmes, policies and frameworks on how to support returnees, countries of origin and countries of asylum. It examines how preparedness and response can be conceived differently, in order to support the achievement of benchmarks for durable solutions through sustainable (re)integration. The report outlines the following:

- **Trends and factors** – which stakeholders do not sufficiently understand or consider in current return and (re)integration programming – about the profiles, aspirations and decision-making strategies of returnee populations in urban areas, implications for returnees who are not in their places of origin, female returnees and youth returnees.
- **Literature and data gaps** in monitoring, methodology, trend analysis and geographic coverage, which undermine knowledge about how returnees fare and what type of support may be most beneficial for their (re)integration. These knowledge gaps must be closed in order to inform changes in the way policies and programmes have been conceived to date.
- **Ten lessons**, which take into account the outlined trends, factors and information gaps, to provide a roadmap for how (re)integration programming can be conceived and prepared earlier and differently across three phases:
 - return processes
 - immediate support
 - long-term support for (re)integration
- **Conclusions and recommendations** for global discussions, including the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR or compact) as a framework through which multi-stakeholder refugee response can be approached in holistic and more structured ways, including on early preparedness for (re)integration.

10 Lessons for prepared and sustainable (re)integration



Preparedness for returns

1. Defining who is a returnee and when a situation is conducive to returns
2. Improving information-sharing with refugees and returnees
3. Better hosting for better (re)integration



Support to immediate return movements

4. Building on regional agreements to bolster responsibility-sharing
5. Designing cross-border approaches
6. Planning local responses with a focus on HLP



Longer-term support to sustainable (re)integration

7. Prioritising urban and community plans
8. Investing in locally led approaches to economic (re)integration
9. Closing monitoring and data gaps after return
10. Defining the nexus between humanitarian action, development and peacebuilding in return settings



Preparedness for returns

A consensus among key informants is that (re)integration programming starts after return, with insufficient consultation taking place before refugees return. The report presents three lessons learnt to reinforce preparedness for returnees.

1. Defining who is a returnee and when a situation is conducive to returns

Who qualifies for assistance as a refugee returnee?

Political and legal factors often determine the timing of returns, who qualifies as a returnee and who qualifies for assistance. In countries where refugee registration has been stopped, or where the refugee status determination system is weak, many who need support may be ineligible to receive it. Iran, Lebanon, Pakistan and Kenya are examples of settings where a gap in registration has resulted in populations of undocumented refugees. Return movements to Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria show the need for an **expanded returnee definition**, going beyond refugees with formal status. NRC¹ highlights three categories of returnees who should be supported before, during and after return:

- individuals and groups who do not have refugee status due to national legislation in the hosting country, but who may meet criteria for refugee status under international law
- individuals and groups who have received protection in a host country through temporary schemes, but whose right to stay under those schemes has expired
- individuals who do not qualify as refugees but who may require protection under the human rights principle of non-refoulement.

This expanded definition is critical in the development of global return operations. The lack of equity in return operations is currently evident in the unequal level of assistance provided to documented refugees, while others, who may have lost their refugee status or documentation, receive less support.

In recent return movements, Afghan refugees have received different aid packages, depending on their asylum and documentation status, determining whether their support would come from UNHCR or IOM, based on whether they were registered, card-carrying refugees. This distinction created confusing administrative rifts and exacerbated vulnerability. What should have been a single group – that of

1 NRC (2017a). Operationalising Returns in the Global Compact on Refugees: Supporting State Action to Ensure Refugee Returns Are Safe, Dignified, Voluntary and Sustainable.

refugees – became two groups: the documented and the undocumented.

When is a situation conducive to returns?

Principled return processes entail supporting refugees' informed choice to return to their home countries in and to conditions of dignity and safety. Operational agencies face a recurrent dilemma to determine when conditions of voluntariness, safety and dignity have been met for them to assist refugees in countries of asylum to return, and how to support both spontaneous and assisted returns.² The importance of avoiding premature and/or forced returns, and of UNHCR's role in influencing these processes, cannot be underestimated. Evidence shows that prematurely induced returns result in increased needs and exposure to risks among returnees, such as cycles of displacement and exile.³ Decisions require a balance of humanitarian principles – ensuring a rights-based, people-centred and principled approach that takes into consideration humanitarian agencies not being instrumentalised by political interest.

UNHCR's publication of 22 protection thresholds to be met before repatriation is seen as a principled step in relation to Syria, and a model to be replicated across other return settings. They are a product of strong inter-agency advocacy against premature, forced or unsafe returns and serve as a common basis for collectively safeguarding these benchmarks.

2. Informing returns: improving information-sharing with returnees

One key informant in Afghanistan comments that, "people... think everything is ready for them, that they will easily receive support and financial help. There is not enough information." In order to make a voluntary decision to return, refugees need accessible, tailored and unbiased information on conditions in the country of origin to compare this with the information they get from their own sources. There is a discrepancy between what refugees are told, by governments and international agencies, and the reality on the ground. Returnees also need better awareness of and assistance with documentation and bureaucratic processes.



Boy leans over balcony Lebanon, 2015. © Eduardo Soteras Jalil

2 Human Rights Watch (2016). Kenya: Involuntary Refugee Returns to Somalia; see: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/14/kenya-involuntary-refugee-returns-somalia>

3 World Bank (2017d). Forcibly Displaced: Toward a Development Approach Supporting Refugees, the Internally Displaced, and Their Hosts.

Return packages can address these needs, if reviewed, to act as a link between assistance and information – and not only as a source of cash assistance. Accessible, tailored and unbiased information is crucial in order to:

- Increase opportunities for refugees to see first-hand the situation in their country of nationality, to learn whether these conditions would suit them and their families, to allow them to ask questions at the source, and avoid potential inaccurate relays of information.
- Prepare returnees for the possible significant risk of internal displacement upon return and to the realities of fragile urban contexts.
- Inform returnees of their right to have rights; many returnees are not aware of the importance of documentation or how to obtain it. A political, legal and humanitarian imperative in refugee contexts is the recognition and documentation of refugees' status, and greater information on the legal processes to secure their access to services upon return.

In 2018, the Jordanian interior ministry and UNHCR launched a regularisation campaign to legalise the stay of Syrian refugees in urban areas. The initiative, funded by ECHO and led by six NGOs, provided legal assistance and information for almost 20,000 families.⁴ The same steps are needed in all refugee settings to avoid unregistered populations. These can then be completed, prior to and after return, with information for refugees on how and where to access services.

3. Better hosting in countries of asylum for better (re)integration

The relationship between the quality of asylum and the quality of (re)integration remains insufficiently integrated in planning. Focus group participants in Afghanistan and Somalia comment that those with greater financial, human and social capital – that is, those who fared better in their host country – often fare better on return. The types of skills and experience gained in asylum influence their access to opportunities at home. This relationship is often overlooked in both policy and practice.⁵ Feedback from refugees in countries of asylum indicates that they want to learn about and acquire skills that may be relevant upon return. Strategic, policy and programmatic engagement tends to separate these into distinct and disconnected processes, supported by different stakeholders in

different countries. More work is required to make the link between better hosting and better (re)integration, and to make it a priority for development actors.



Support to immediate return movements

Refugees speak of push factors in the hosting context, the fears and difficulties of crossing the border safely, as well as concerns that their assets, mainly land and housing, would be gone. As a result, what happens during the return process also requires attention. The report focuses on the role of regional, national and local actors in ensuring a safe and dignified return process.

4. Building on regional agreements to bolster responsibility-sharing

Regional approaches are crucial in order to facilitate plans that ensure refugee protection before and during return.⁶ Tripartite agreements between hosting countries, origin countries and UNHCR provide the legal framework to facilitate return; however, they only cover those with formal refugee status. Tripartite agreements also have other shortcomings, such as the lack of refugee representation. The UNHCR handbook on voluntary repatriation published in 1993 explains it would be “possible and even desirable to include the refugees and establish a quadripartite commission”.⁷ However, more often than not, commissions are tripartite, are bound to governments and to UNHCR, and are the only legitimate forum for discussing major repatriation issues. In 1996, the revised handbook merely mentions that “the refugee community should be kept informed of the progress of repatriation negotiations. Formal representation of the refugee community can be considered.”⁸ This is especially relevant in the context of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), which emphasise the importance of representation. This change needs to be reflected in supporting return movements.

The Nairobi Declaration and Plan of Action and Ethiopia's implementation of the Nine Pledges and the Kampala declaration provide an opportunity to

4 DRC (2018). Helping Syrian refugees in Jordan in legal documentation; see: <https://drc.ngo/what-we-do/stories-from-the-field/helping-syrian-refugees-in-jordan-in-legal-documentation>

5 Harild, Christensen and Zetter (2015). Sustainable refugee return: triggers, constraints, and lessons on addressing the development challenges of forced displacement.

6 Harild, Christensen and Zetter (2015); NRC (2017a).

7 UNHCR (1993). Protection Guidelines on Voluntary Repatriation.

8 UNHCR (1996). Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection. UNHCR Handbook, 34.

integrate and align standards on durable solutions as part of legal changes required within each member state. More needs to be done to integrate refugee representation, voices and influence in the decisions made that impact them.

5. Designing cross-border approaches

While refugees and returnees cross borders, (re)integration assistance has not kept up with mobility dynamics. Cross-border approaches can ensure that interventions are flexible and aligned with people's mobility, instead of being bound by state demarcation lines. Lessons learnt point to the need to set standards for what cross-border programming can achieve. Building on such experiences, in 2011, ACTED and CARE released a set of principles for effective cross-border programming. With regard to return movements, these may necessitate:⁹

- Joint cross-border programming in which a programme is designed to support a specific cohort of refugees or returnees and is undertaken on both sides of the border. For example, livelihoods programming focused on skills relevant in countries of origin, livelihoods-matching schemes, and support for individuals with specific needs (often related to health).
- Coordinated or consistent cross-border interventions in which a programme is designed to support people on the return journey and to (re)integrate them on their return.

Recognising that support is more effective when it is consistent and coherent along the return journey, WFP Somalia deployed staff to its Kenyan team in Dadaab to facilitate a joined-up approach. WFP staff indicated they were better able to plan and respond to return patterns of refugees, as well as to trace specific refugee needs along the journey. This included both their ability to address specific vulnerabilities as well as to monitor the nutritional status of refugees before and after return.

6. Planning local responses with a focus on housing, land and property

Housing, land and property (HLP) assistance needs to be implemented in order to prevent land-related conflict and to support inclusion for returnees. Studies find that access to HLP is central, both to refugees' decision-making about whether and when to return, and to prospects for (re)integration. Many returnees have spent years, even decades, in relatively cosmopolitan and urbanised

environments in exile and have adapted their livelihoods accordingly. Expectations have also changed: the lack of opportunities and services in villages of origin prompt many returnees to go to cities.¹⁰ The importance of HLP for (re)integration has prompted increased attention at the policy and programme levels, but it nevertheless remains a critical issue for returnees.¹¹

A pilot programme on rental subsidies in Mogadishu is underway to tackle challenges of access to housing and forced evictions by improving rental security. The aim of the project is to ensure that enhanced livelihoods generate enough income for returnees to pay their rent on their own.



Longer-term support to sustainable (re)integration

While recognising that returns happen increasingly to urban areas that are not returnees' areas of origin, and that women and youth face specific problems in these locations, the final section of the report sets out lessons for longer-term (re)integration programming.

7. Prioritising urban and community plans

With pressure mounting on available land and returnees often facing the prospect of displacement on return, shortcomings in integrated settlement planning have, in turn, become constraints to (re) integration. While the provision of land or shelter is part of the solution, this, on its own, cannot ensure durable solutions or sustainable (re)integration. International humanitarian organisations – rather than civil society organisations or the private sector – continue to provide services. This runs counter to the objective of (re)integration: that returnees should be integrated not only into their societies but also into the systems that support them. This will require regulating engagement with private sector actors that can, in the meantime, provide access to services such as electricity and water. From a sustainability and affordability perspective, exploring the public–private partnership option should be a systematic endeavour of area-based, durable solutions planning. Other steps

⁹ These practices are echoed in the literature on vulnerable dryland communities. See ACTED and CARE (2011) Draft good practice principles for cross border programming in the drylands of the Horn of Africa.

¹⁰ World Bank/UNHCR (2019). Living Conditions and Settlement Decisions of Recent Afghan Returnees: Findings from a 2018 Phone Survey of Afghan Returnees and UNHCR data.

¹¹ Harild, Christensen and Zetter (2015).



Local market in Garowe, Puntland, Somalia, 2014. © Axel Fasso / DRC 2014

will need to be prioritised based on how communities prioritise their needs.

The establishment of a common social accountability process in Somalia is one of the initiatives underway to strengthen the voices and inclusion of displacement-affected communities, and to make those voices heard by the decision-makers.

8. Investing in locally led approaches to economic (re)integration

Economic (re)integration programming has focused disproportionately on technical and vocational education and training (TVET). While a link to the education system is clear, links to market systems have often been overlooked. In Afghanistan and in Somalia, TVET programmes are delinked from other variables, which can, together, result in greater well-being. For instance, the link between TVET and socioeconomic inclusion requires greater attention. In both contexts, there is a strong correlation between available social capital and access to opportunities upon return. Returnees – particularly youth – point to the need for connections to get placements. An overview of previous and existing interventions finds that programming focuses neither on the potential of social networks to sustain livelihoods nor on ways of enhancing TVET in exile.

In 2019, the World Bank, together with the Afghan government, launched the EZ-KAR project with five components to support 13 cities over five years. The project aims to develop market-enabling activities and interventions that are both community-driven and supporting city-level involvement. While the project is still in its inception phase, it provides a development-focused economic (re)integration agenda that other agencies, including NGOs, will be able to contribute to.

9. Closing monitoring and data gaps after return

Monitoring and accountability have to be reinforced in order to ensure that refugees are not returning to situations of danger, and that communities are supported to absorb return flows responsibly and sustainably. There is still a lack of evidence and learning, or clear understanding among aid actors, of the quality and impact of their (re)integration programming.

Durable solutions analysis is a multi-stakeholder exercise that seeks to monitor progress towards durable solutions based on the IASC Framework on Durable Solutions. Operationalised in regional framework indicators¹² and globally in an inter-agency indicators library,¹³ this collaborative process integrates learning as an essential component of (re) integration programming. In

12 See: <https://regionaldss.org/index.php/research-and-knowledge-management/solutions-framework/>

13 See: <http://inform-durablesolutions-idp.org/>

*Somalia, the integration of a learning partner within durable solutions consortia has been identified as a key achievement for collective outcomes and coordination between donors, practitioners and government.*¹⁴

10. Defining the nexus between humanitarian action, development and peacebuilding in return settings

Urban services are lacking for everyone – not just for the displaced. This brings national governance and planning to the fore. The issue here is not simply one of limited capacity or services that are not integrated; areas of return require investment in services and infrastructure. Governments need support to take the lead in facilitating broad access to services. Understanding the interrelationships between humanitarian action, development and both peacebuilding and state-building efforts can be key to durable solutions. As humanitarian needs are often a result of the absence of peace, and as protracted conflict hinders development, integrating discussions with peace actors has to be part of the durable solutions conversation in any conflict context.

Conclusions with global implications and recommendations

Our research, focused on (re)integration, points to the importance of engaging early on and enhancing preparedness, whilst ensuring that preparations do not overtake the need for sustained protection in refugee-hosting countries. We conclude, here, on the links with

global discussions. The GCR is framed as the vehicle through which refugee response can be approached in a more holistic, structured way when looking at processes – such as (re)integration – from the very beginning. This report is relevant to all six themes of the upcoming Global Refugee Forum. (Re)integration is not only a discussion on solutions, it is also a discussion on jobs and livelihoods, education, energy and infrastructure, protection capacity and responsibility-sharing. The report addresses all these themes, highlights a range of long-term thinking and planning required, and recommends steps to follow in order to shift the thinking on (re)integration.

The compact implicitly suggests that solutions are static and does not give due deference to the fact that effective (re)integration must take account of the evolving goals that refugees have for their lives. The compact aims to measure the impact of hosting refugees. This exercise, however, is delinked from the issue of (re)integration, while the compact does not define what kind of outcomes should be collectively pursued in support of refugees' return. Our research calls for greater commitment from host states towards (re)integration and sets out five recommendations that mark a difference from how reintegration is managed today.

1. Allow for phased, circular and staged returns and cross-border programming.
2. Ensure affected communities participate meaningfully in the return and (re)integration process.
3. Factor in reintegration in development planning – most notably, urban planning.
4. Empower refugees and returnees socially and economically pre- and post-return.
5. Monitor and learn from (re)integration outcomes.

¹⁴ ReDSS/Samuel Hall/SDRI (2019). Somalia Solutions Analysis Update 2019: <https://regionaldss.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/FINAL-SA.pdf>

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