

A photograph of a person in a blue and white patterned shirt carrying a large, silver, textured suitcase on their head. They are walking through a refugee camp or settlement. In the background, there are other people, some sitting on the ground, and a building with a sign that says "LOCAL ASSISTANCE CENTER". The scene is outdoors under a clear blue sky.

Unprepared for (re)integration

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

PART C: Conclusions
and commitments for
sustainable (re)integration

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Steering Committee



Research Team



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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*

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.

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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.

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.



PART C

Conclusions and commitments for sustainable (re)integration

Conclusions and commitments for sustainable (re)integration

While millions of refugees return to contexts of poverty, conflict and insecurity in Afghanistan, Somalia and, possibly, in Syria, a tunnel focus on returns rather than on (re)integration, and a process led by humanitarian actors, have resulted in a short-term vision of (re)integration. Stakeholders, including communities and returnees themselves, have been unprepared for what happens post-return. As a result, this research asked a key question: “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 findings are presented as a set of ten lessons learnt, which, together, provide a roadmap for how (re)integration programming can be conceived differently across the three phases below.



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



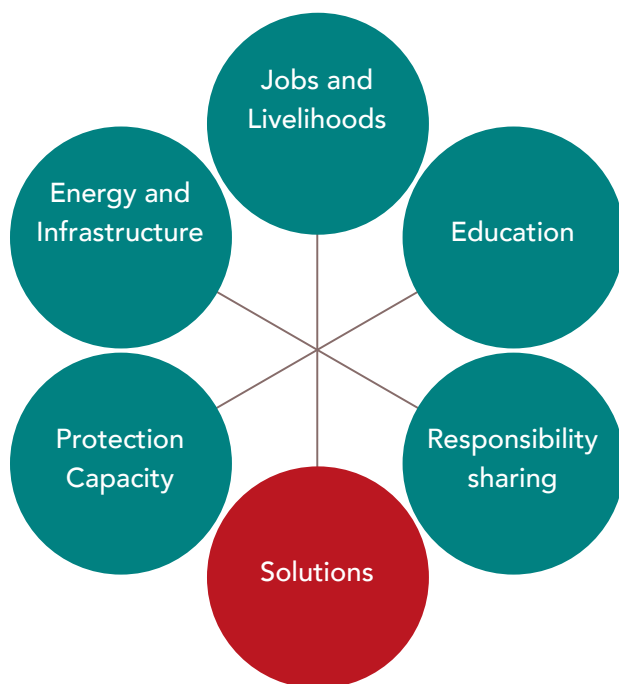
Longer-term support to sustainable (re)integration

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

Implications for global discussions

Our research, focused on (re)integration, points to the importance of engaging early on and enhancing preparedness, while ensuring that preparations do not overtake the need for sustained protection in refugee-hosting countries. We conclude 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 in terms of looking at processes, such as (re)integration, from the very beginning.

This report is relevant to all six themes of the Global Refugee Forum. (Re)integration is not only a discussion about solutions, it is also a discussion about jobs and livelihoods, education, energy and infrastructure, protection capacity and responsibility-sharing. This report addresses these themes, highlights a range of long-term thinking and planning required, and recommends steps needed to follow through, prepare and shift the thinking on (re)integration.



Theme 1: Jobs and livelihoods

Our research calls for a focus on strengthening social capital as an integral part of jobs and livelihoods programming for (re)integration, enhancing skills training in exile with skills adapted to return settings,

and building national structures for TVET in countries of return. It calls for joint approaches to labour market assessments by humanitarian and development organisations, to put an end to single-agency approaches to jobs and livelihoods.

Theme 2: Education

Our research calls for financial constraints to enrolment to be addressed, especially given the rise of private-sector-led education services. Working with youth and education service providers (both public and private) will be essential as youth need to adapt to the new curricula and language of instruction. It also calls for ensuring that access to documentation is facilitated in return processes, so that the lack of documentation does not become a barrier to children’s integration in the education system. Special provisions and waivers are needed to allow for enrolment, even without documentation, and to protect the right of all children, regardless of status, to education. A good practice was put forth by the Afghan Ministry of Education in 2016 in response to the mass returns from Pakistan.

Theme 3: Energy and infrastructure

The report highlights the gaps in urban planning in contexts to which refugees return. Greater planning and support to local return responses are needed to avoid unmanaged urban growth, pressures on limited absorption capacities and unplanned informal settlements. Across all contexts, few urban plans have integrated the displaced or the informal settlements in which they live. The affordability of electricity and water continues to be a key constraint for returnees, requiring greater planning on public–private partnership to bring the cost of basic services down. Urban upgrading and integrated settlement planning, under the leadership of the UN and governments, can ensure that the arrival of returnees is seen as a benefit to communities of return.

Theme 4: Protection capacity

The research emphasises the importance of engaging early on and enhancing preparedness for return and (re)integration, while ensuring that preparations do not overtake the need for sustained protection in refugee-hosting countries, and that standards for conditions and modes of engagement are agreed. A good practice

is found in the protection thresholds set in the Syrian context to clarify engagement on returns. The research also calls for an expanded returnee definition in return processes to allow for the inclusion of individuals and groups who do not have formal refugee status for flawed technical or procedural reasons, and for others who may be entitled to international protection under human rights norms, such as the principle of non-refoulement to torture or inhuman and degrading treatments.

Theme 5: Responsibility-sharing

(Re)integration is, fundamentally, a development process. The research calls on development actors to work with the humanitarian sector to reinforce (re)integration prospects. Financial commitments for (re)integration will be needed, mirroring those for refugees and communities in hosting settings (IDA-18 sub-window). The process of restructuring and rebuilding services and infrastructure to ensure returns are sustainable can take years and come at an extremely

high cost, going beyond the timeframe and financing attached to return programmes. Echoing research, this report calls for spaces to be created for dialogue on financing (re)integration and financing refugee participation in return and (re)integration responses. Good practices, such as go-and-see visits and cross-border programming, require donor support.

Theme 6: Solutions

The research calls for improved and enhanced information-sharing with refugees and returnees, and for refugees' voices to be included in quadripartite agreements so that they are part of the decision-making process that will ultimately impact them. It also calls for return packages that currently offer cash assistance to be reviewed, and to be adapted to include more information, counselling, legal assistance (ICLA) and support. Lessons can be learnt from emerging practices on rental subsidies and adapted to refugee return settings.

Recommendations

The recommendations below mark a difference to how reintegration is managed today. Given the range of stakeholders involved in making (re)integration an achievable outcome, this section targets the recommendations to specific audiences.

1. Allow for phased, circular and staged returns and cross-border programming.

Recommendation to UNHCR: Facilitate systematic go-and-see visits and design repatriation schemes suited for those returning to areas that are not their areas of origin, and tailor (re)integration programmes for women and youth as specific target groups.

Recommendation to hosting country: Remove conditionality clauses in return arrangements to allow refugees to test the viability of return, especially in light of protracted displacement situations and in the case of young refugees born in exile.

Recommendation to humanitarian and development actors: Design cross-border initiatives to work with the same cohorts across borders, improving referral systems, coordination and communication across borders.

Recommendation to donors: Continue to fund cross-border initiatives that have the capacity to contribute to hosting and origin countries, and that can be best adapted to regional mobility patterns.

2. Ensure affected communities participate meaningfully in return and (re)integration processes.

Recommendation to UNHCR: Include refugees in return processes planning and opt for quadripartite rather than tripartite agreements. Manage expectations by communicating systematically and transparently with refugees and returnees.

Recommendation to hosting country: Go beyond tripartite agreements that have proved limited in their outcomes, instead thinking of regional response plans like IGAD's Nairobi Declaration and Plan of Action on Durable Solutions for Somali Refugees and Reintegration of Returnees in Somalia and building on the learning from Syria's Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) as possible models for coordinated and inclusive regional planning and support to return movements.

Recommendation to humanitarian and development actors: Include participation systems and processes in all programming, with specific guidelines for staff to make the voices of returnees and hosts heard by decision-makers and ensure efficient communication loops to manage expectations.

Recommendation to countries of origin (CoOs): Local government should be supported (whether municipal or district authorities), as well as private service providers to engage in a dialogue on durable solutions with returnees and their communities in order to better understand the profiles and needs, alongside the contributions of returnees to their communities.

Recommendation to donors: Provide funding support for community engagement processes and social accountability mechanisms and platforms as part of (re)integration programming.

3. Factor in reintegration in development planning – most notably urban planning.

Recommendation to humanitarian and development actors: Jointly pilot programmes for rental subsidies in urban contexts, design housing rather than shelter programmes that are adapted to the social and cultural expectations of returnees, and plan for access to services and markets in areas that are not returnees' areas of origin.

Recommendation to donors: Design funding windows for returnees and hosts in (re)integration settings, mirroring the IDA-18 sub-window.

Recommendation to countries of origin (CoOs): Local government should be supported (whether municipal or district authorities), as well as private service providers to engage in a dialogue on durable solutions with returnees and their communities in order to better understand the profiles and needs, alongside the contributions of returnees to their communities.

4. Empower refugees and returnees socially and economically pre- and post-return.

Recommendation to UNHCR: Revise the approach to return packages to include a stronger link between assistance and information and to go beyond cash assistance. Pilot initiatives with other UN agencies, NGOs, governments and civil society actors to build upon the lessons learnt in this report. Offer possibilities for information-gathering and family reunification as a way of better informing return and (re)integration prospects and minimise protection risks.

Recommendation to hosting countries: Allow refugees rights, and eliminate related restrictions and barriers, to freedom of movement and access to work. Uphold standards equivalent to those in the 1951 Refugee Convention or more favourable ones afforded by other applicable international or (sub)regional agreements.

Recommendation to humanitarian and development actors: Foster social capital in contexts where returnees are returning to a new area and as a way of complementing jobs or livelihoods programming. Adapt programming to fit in with social norms and develop strategies to address situations where social norms act as a barrier to the economic participation of specific groups – in particular, women and youth.

Recommendation to countries of origin (CoOs): Include returnees in national development planning processes through local community structures and address situations where gatekeepers may be an obstacle to returnee (re)integration.

Recommendation to donors: Provide incentives for countries that pair social and economic rights and specifically allow for men, women and youth to work and exchange knowledge, information and practices to strengthen their protection.

5. Monitor and learn from (re)integration outcomes.

Recommendation to UNHCR: Revise the 2004 definition of (re)integration to account for the changes in theory and practice in the last two decades, including the IASC Framework on Durable Solutions and the requirements for multilevel planning and multidimensional well-being. Update the repatriation handbook to put refugee participation at the centre of quadripartite agreements on repatriation, return and (re)integration.

Recommendation to humanitarian and development actors: adaptive programming, to mitigate unintended negative impacts and to strengthen positive impacts on development and peace. Conflict sensitivity must be mainstreamed throughout all (re)integration programming. Utilise conflict and context analysis to inform joint programming, and to establish (re)integration strategies and coordination platforms. At a global level, build on opportunities such as the UNHCR–World Bank Group Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement to enhance evidence on (re)integration outcomes.

Recommendation to academia and researchers: Build upon standards and indicators for the measurement of (re) integration, based on inter-agency work in progress, to hold governments/authorities to account as the duty-bearers, as well as to have agreed standards and indicators on which coherent and coordination action can take place. These standards need to be a balance between global/international and context-specific indicators.

Recommendation to donors: Include, with any return programme, systematic funding for learning and monitoring efforts to ensure that refugees are not returning to situations of harm and are provided with adequate prospects for (re)integration. Commit to make monitoring and evaluation of (re)integration projects public to enhance accountability and learning for all.

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