

# Returnee reintegration – What are the standards?

## MoRR Reintegration Workshop December 13-14

By Ms. Nassim Majidi, [nassim.majidi@samuelhall.org](mailto:nassim.majidi@samuelhall.org)

### Introduction

Voluntary repatriation, as defined in UNHCR's *Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities* (2004), entails a process beginning with return and the restoration of national protection and culminating, through the **reintegration process**, in the ability of returnees to maintain sustainable livelihoods, access basic services and fully reintegrate into communities and countries of origin. Almost 10 years after the start of the Afghan repatriation campaign, several key questions remain:

1. *What does reintegration mean in the context of Afghanistan and how can it be translated, as a concept, into an operational reality?*
2. *What have the 4.6 million returned refugees become? Have they reintegrated successfully into Afghan society, or are they facing acute vulnerability?*
3. *How can stakeholders define their role in monitoring, protecting and advocating for returnee rights given the unstable and deteriorating security environment in Afghanistan?*

These are some of the concerns that this workshop is seeking to address, not to find clear answers or solutions, but to engage on a dialogue with all the important government, national and international stakeholders. I will do my part by drawing on my recent research on reintegration, and provide some elements to answer question 1, detailed above. I will do so in three parts: (1) defining reintegration, (2) understanding reintegration as an operational strategy, and (3) presenting existing research and studies on reintegration.

### I. Defining reintegration

This presentation is framed as a question - “**What are the standards?**” – because there are not, in reality, any international standards on reintegration. There are international standards of humanitarian response, as you know, (SPHERE and the so called companion standards) that contribute to reintegration. The only reference to a proper ‘reintegration framework’ can be found in policy statements from UNHCR – and their own reintegration handbook.

The *UNHCR Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities* defines reintegration as “a process that should result in the disappearance of differences in legal rights and duties between returnees and their compatriots and the equal access of returnees to services, productive assets and opportunities”<sup>1</sup>; and one that should lead to “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”<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities, UNHCR, Geneva, 2004, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities, UNHCR, Geneva, 2004, p. 4.

This is an important reference as it defines reintegration as a process that should result in the disappearance of differences between returnees and local populations, and the equal and sustainable access to the same services, productive assets and opportunities – in operational terms, covering humanitarian and development activities, and requiring a broad institutional coordination and oversight.

It sets reintegration as a collective responsibility under government leadership, reinstating the role of humanitarian agencies (such as UNHCR) in the earlier stages of return, while leaving other actors (development agencies) to play a greater role in the reintegration process.

As a result, the handbook definition provides clear standards to use for policy making:

- First, that reintegration is an **institutional process to be led by the national government**,
- Second, that there needs to be a **division of responsibilities between humanitarian and development actors** with a timing of assistance to address different stages and needs of return,
- Third, a reintegration strategy has to provide a comparative outlook to understand not only the needs of returnees, but **their relative situation compared to that of the host population**, and
- Fourth, that the broader situation in which returnees come back to should be addressed, in part through a **situational analysis of local conditions** – to see how sustainable reintegration can be with regards to political, economic, legal and social conditions in the country of return. These last two points highlight the need for the situation of the *rest* of the population to be assessed and well understood – are returnees faring better, worse or the same as returnees? Is there a downward pressure on all (with the economic and political transition for example), or is there an upward pressure bringing these populations to a higher level of welfare?

This has been echoed in the past in Afghanistan; but as this workshop illustrates, there is still a need to discuss the major standards and a way forward to facilitate reintegration in Afghanistan. There has to be, first and foremost, recognition of the numbers of **highly decentralized actors** that constitute one of the main challenges of conducting fully functioning and efficient programs for reintegration. It seems difficult to know who to turn to when talking on reintegration these days, as it falls within all humanitarian, development and national responsibilities; many organizations might argue that they are effectively ‘doing’ reintegration – and in many ways all contributions to Afghan communities can be seen as a contribution to reintegration given the fact that returnees represent 20% of the population. But there needs to be a lead – a national lead – and for actors to follow these lead focusing on their own specific spheres of expertise – be it emergency, shelter and protection work for humanitarian agencies, and livelihoods for development agencies.

**But all of this has been said before.** In Afghanistan, the existing standards can be linked back to the *National return, displacement and reintegration strategy for the year 1382*, drafted by the transitional Islamic state of Afghanistan in Kabul in March 2003, which restates the responsibility of the government to promote ‘safe and sustainable return of Afghan refugees and internally displaced persons to their areas of origin’<sup>3</sup>. The strategy includes as its objective a coordinated response in a range of sectors – agriculture, water and sanitation, health, education, natural resource management, transportation, macro-economic policies, etc. – with the intention of mainstreaming reintegration in government and development programmes. It identifies the role of UNHCR as the main agency in charge of strengthening

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<sup>3</sup> National return, displacement and reintegration strategy for the year 1382, Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, Kabul, March 2003.

the capacity of MoRR, and with an objective of transferring resources (both human and material) from UNHCR to the Ministry. Although formal leadership for IDPs and returnees rests with MoRR, the national reintegration strategy recognizes the need for coordination with MRRD and MUDH (Ministry of Urban development and Housing), among others, to address the rural and urban needs in terms of housing, water and sanitation, food security and income generation. The standard here is of mainstreaming returnee needs through National Programmes.

**So what has gone wrong?** Why are we still talking about reintegration in 2011 and what ‘failures’ can we admit to when it comes to reintegration of refugees? This is a debate that can be interesting to have if it unveils lessons learned. What it shows in any event is the complexity of reintegration – a complexity that can be linked to the fact that, as other issues in Afghanistan, the issue of reintegration is highly political; that reintegration has been often politically driven. How can we ensure that we avoid the instrumentalization of reintegration today? One of the ways may be to ensure that each agency understands its mandate, focuses on its expertise, and delivers on what it can deliver – beyond any risk taking, to actual concrete results. With transition around the corner, and a certain donor fatigue, we should not be looking for big promises. We cannot go back in time and facilitate the reintegration of 5.6 million refugees – they did not wait ten years for the assistance community to get to them, they have in many ways found their own coping strategies, and that often entailed further displacement and migration.

**What can we do about this now?** What are some of the operational standards? This first section highlights important conceptual and contextual components that we need to keep in mind when we talk about reintegration – with different key steps: the government should take the lead, through existing structures and national programmes, to help returnees reach the same level of rights as the host population. Reminding ourselves of these tenants will help us to avoid ‘reinventing the wheel’ and to **ensure that reintegration is not a strategy on its own, but a strategy within broader development strategies.**

## II. Operationalizing reintegration

The operational side of this first conceptual conclusion is that the population of interest in the reintegration process becomes the population as a **whole** not just returnees. This seems obvious but it turns out to be counterintuitive at times when in some circles, the focus is still very much on ‘target populations’ and on categories of beneficiaries, when these categories may be a creation, and not the natural process of return. Here, I emphasize that, when we talk about reintegration, the target we are considering should be the community, to see returnees as part of a whole in which they live and evolve.

What are some of the operational standards or best practices of reintegration that we see in Afghanistan? What are some of the efforts that have directly or indirectly impacted returnee reintegration? Here, I would like to take an example of a national programme’s work in rural areas, and a second example of an NGO-led reintegration programme’s work with a highlight on urban areas.

### 1. MRRD’s National Solidarity Programme: Directly and indirectly contributing to reintegration

National reintegration activities in Afghanistan have been implemented, directly and indirectly, through the existing National Solidarity Programme (NSP), through Community Development Councils (CDCs) that can provide basic infrastructure and services, shelter upgrading and livelihoods support, for households throughout the country. Districts have been prioritized for participation by MRRD on the basis of vulnerability factors such as poverty levels, drought risk, or security food supply, the number of

returnees or internally displaced persons, and security conditions. The NSP was created in 2003 by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) to develop the ability of Afghan communities to identify, plan, manage and monitor their own development projects. The development paradigm of NSP rests upon the assumption that local communities can make important decisions regarding their local priorities, and contributing their own resources. NSP distributes block grants, up to a combined value of \$200 per households and a maximum of \$60,000 per community, for project implementation. Under this umbrella, reintegration assistance has been channelled to CDCs nationwide, for communities to solve their own problems, including reintegration problems.

**The assumption behind the NSP approach to returnee reintegration is that you may not need to directly focus on returnees but you can still indirectly work towards achieving a reintegration objective.** Instead of over-privileging a specific segment of the population, here returnees, reintegration is seen as a natural organic process that takes place through the development of whole communities that can provide equal opportunities to villages. This is a natural form of reintegration when opportunities are provided to all village members.

Now there may be some limits to the model that have been highlighted in the past. The first round of NSP's block grant was decided and distributed before the massive repatriation of refugees took place; some villages were impacted by an influx of returnees when the aid provided to them was calculated based on the initial calculation of the host population, prior to the return influx. Some of the high return areas may have not been sufficiently considered into the planning of NSP in its first round because the reality of return was then not known. This opens an avenue for action and advocacy, to match standards of reintegration with operational strategies: MRRD and MoRR can collaborate more closely to ensure that the second round of the NSP block grants is attuned to high return areas. Support to the NSP will positively, directly and indirectly benefit returnees in rural areas through a natural development process that will integrate returnees in communities, naturally, organically, and not mechanically; hence avoiding any tensions but working instead directly through the communities' own social fabric and decisions. By support of NSP I also mean directing more funds to NSP – as it cannot be expected to take on most of the burden of reintegration if it does not have a larger budget to draw on. The expectations of NSP should take into account its existing funds and the 'terms of references', so to speak, of the program that cannot be molded to target returnees; but they can target return communities.

This leaves us with another issue to be addressed, now that we have talked about the rural framework – that of standards of reintegration in **urban areas**. Research conducted by UNHCR and others suggests that returning refugees increasingly choose to return to urban centers. Such research and studies have widely acknowledged that (i) urban migration is one of the most prominent trends for Afghans in rural areas, and that (ii) the majority of Afghans in Iran and Pakistan live in urban areas, with the assumption and correlation that (iii) they will likely not be able to resettle back into a subsistence farming existence and decide to settle in urban areas instead – immediately upon return or as a consequence of secondary displacement trends. The challenges that returnees in urban areas face are not entirely different from those of rural areas – the same challenges recurrently surface: (1) housing, land and property issues, (2) access to education, (3) access to livelihood opportunities and services. With rapidly growing urban populations, and limited absorption capacities, problems of undurable housing, informal settlements and insecure tenure, have widely been reported on in Afghanistan. This is worsened in urban areas because of a lack of familiar social networks, particularly for those who had not lived in urban areas prior to their asylum. Family or tribal connections may no longer be existing – “if returnees to urban areas cannot meet the higher rent payments or have no family or social network with whom to share living space,

they then risk becoming homeless or taking up tenuous existence in slum dwellings” according to a 2009 report by UNHCR on return and reintegration in urban settings<sup>4</sup>.

What are the standards to be applied for reintegration in urban areas? What are some examples of best practices to be kept in mind in discussions on reintegration?

## 2. An urban example from Herat: HELP’s Reintegration programme for returnees from Iran

A practical example may be that of the NGO Help, active in Herat with a reintegration program co-funded by the European Commission and the Government of Germany. What HELP shows, and what my own research with recent and new returnees from 2011 has shown, is that returnees are not always well-informed – they often have a distorted picture about the situation in Afghanistan. Coming back to urban areas that are reaching their limits in terms of absorption capacity, adds to the confusion about their future in Afghanistan. The assistance that HELP provides mirrors the challenges that UNHCR highlights in its 2009 research on urban reintegration. This illustration may help think about what already existing programs can be further analyzed and replicated to address reintegration needs in urban areas.

There are 3 standards that HELP applies to its reintegration work with vulnerable returnee households, by addressing their needs with regards to:

- **Shelter:** HELP offers beneficiaries temporary shelter and improvements of existing shelter. They have developed the concept of hosting-families with good results of faster re-integration over the past 3 years. They encourage decent Afghan families, residents in towns, to host returnees who wish to settle permanently, while they are being trained. As a reward, they are offered with a free participation in a training program run by the NGO. HELP also operates a Family Centre in Herat City that has revitalized the LAS in Saodat Town / Herat province in cooperation with DoRR.
- **Education:** the focus here is on ensuring that children up to the age of 14 are enrolled in school to provide a prospect for evolution for the second generation of returnees, and
- **Training and linkage to the local labor market** with the help of their reintegration and job-placement teams. Based on newly acquired skills, certificates of training and a suitable toolkit, graduates are introduced to potential employers. These combined efforts have help them place at least 75% of all trainees in employment within the 2 months of supported reintegration with the goal that 1 bread-earner in every family among returnee-beneficiaries has a solid and permanent income.

You can have a more thorough discussion of this program with Alfred Horn and Naser of HELP, who are present at this workshop today.

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<sup>4</sup> The full study can be accessed on UNHCR’s website using the following link: <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=4b0d502c9&query=urban%20reintegration> (2009).

### III. Looking ahead: Building on existing research and studies

These were some of the conceptual and operational standards of reintegration in Afghanistan. They address the needs – both community-level and returnee household-needs – that impact reintegration in the long term. Various research studies have to this day shown that the immediate needs of returnees are land, shelter, and employment. However, no systematic study on reintegration has been completed yet.

I draw here your attention to two important and ongoing studies:

**The first is an evaluation of the impact of NSP on the reintegration of returnees and IDPs by York University<sup>5</sup>**, which is in its final completion stages. This study focuses upon the role, impact, and effectiveness of the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) to facilitate the reintegration of returning refugees and IDPs into targeted communities. It will also seek to establish how reintegration, particularly ‘sustainable’ reintegration, is understood and defined by NSP stakeholders and returnee populations. To achieve these aims, the research team has developed a methodology that addresses both the aspects of the NSP’s design that relate to returnee reintegration as well as the direct impact of NSP project implementation on returning refugees and IDPs.

**The second is a *Migration & Development Survey*, led by the University of Maastricht with the cooperation of the Central Statistics Office (CSO) with funds from The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and IOM, in 2011.** The team of researchers at our research company has led the fieldwork for this survey in four provinces, namely Kabul, Kandahar, Nangarhar and Balkh. Our fieldwork covered returnee, non-returnee and current households to be able to **compare** their living situations across a wide range of indicators – social, economic, demographic, etc. The results of this study will be released in 2012 and will help policy makers understand, with evidence-based conclusions and recommendations, the situation of each of these population groups and their relative situation.

These and other studies will answer some of our questions on the relative situation of returnees compared to non returnees, it will help us understand if there are indeed such specific needs over the entire returnee population or whether these are needs across the board for all Afghans in the country. They will highlight where the humanitarian and development needs are for, evidence-based policy making, as there are, for the moment, no other such references or studies to turn to.

I hope that this presentation has helped clarify what reintegration means conceptually, what it can mean operationally through national programmes and existing NGO programmes, and third, what level of information and research is needed at the planning stages of any reintegration strategy. Our presentation, with Susanne Schmeidl of TLO, later this afternoon will help clarify what the research gaps and needs are, ahead of any conversation about a reintegration strategy for Afghanistan.

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<sup>5</sup> York University’s Post-war Reconstruction & Development Unit (PRDU), *Study of NSP’s impact on IDP/Refugee returnee reintegration in Afghanistan*, MRRD/NSPII/CN/305, 2011.