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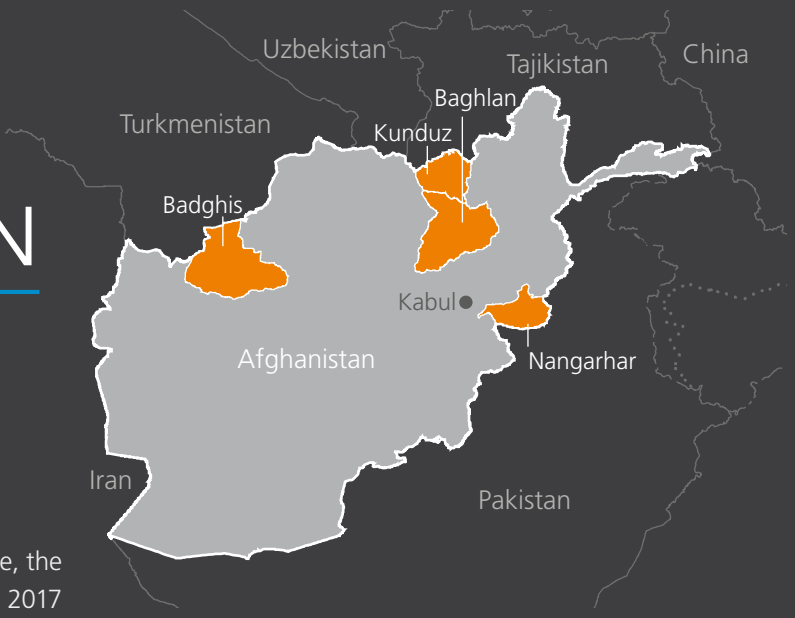
SPOTLIGHT

AFGHANISTAN

Moving from humanitarian to development planning



After almost four decades of conflict and violence, the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated in 2017 and the country was reclassified from post-conflict to one of active conflict again.[162] The year was marked by a shift in conflict dynamics as the military moved to secure urban areas.[163] This left a vacuum in rural areas that allowed the Taliban to consolidate control over 16 new districts.[164]

Large numbers of people fled these areas toward urban hubs in search of safety, aid and government services. At the same time sectarian violence surged in Kabul, where a truck bomb in May and a string of smaller attacks in June killed hundreds of civilians.[165] The attacks triggered protests against an already fragmented government and led to the announcement of elections set for July 2018.[166]

Displacement has become a familiar survival strategy and in some cases even an inevitable part of life for two generations of Afghans faced with continuous violence and insecurity and recurrent disasters. There were 474,000 new displacements in 2017, and as of the end of the year there were 1,286,000 IDPs in the country.[167] Nangarhar province was hosting the highest number as of mid-November, followed by Kunduz, Badghis and Baghlan.[168] More than 50 per cent of people displaced by conflict in Afghanistan have now been forced to flee twice or more, compared with seven per cent five years ago.[169]

Despite the worsening security situation, more than 560,000 refugees and undocumented migrants returned from neighbouring Iran and Pakistan.[170] The voluntary nature of these movements is questionable, however, and many of these returnees went back to a life of internal displacement because insecurity prevented them from returning to their place of origin or achieving a durable solution elsewhere.[171]

This trend will grow while insecurity and a struggling economy continue to make it difficult for the country to absorb and reintegrate returnees.[172] Afghanistan's 2014 policy on IDPs grants returning refugees the same right to petition for assistance as their internally displaced counterparts, but like other IDPs they tend to lack information on the process or are unable to afford to travel to government offices to register.

Responsibility for putting the policy into operation has been largely decentralised to provincial Directorate of Refugees and Repatriations (DoRR) offices, but they receive little or no support from stakeholders to ensure its successful implementation.[173] With 30 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces affected by renewed or ongoing conflict in 2017, many DoRR offices have also had to switch their focus from development and planning for durable solutions back to meeting immediate needs.[174]

IDPs' needs have changed little over the past five years, and returnees who go back to life in internal displacement face similar challenges.[175] Some aspects of their situation have improved, but their most important reintegration needs remain the same: safety and security from conflict and violence, housing and shelter, and decent jobs.[176] Many, however, continue to struggle to meet even their most basic needs for food and water, the result in part of significant aid reductions. Many also lack the information and documentation required to access education and other services.[177]

Without safe and reliable job opportunities or the information needed to make well-informed and dignified choices about their future, displaced people in Afghanistan are unable to lift themselves out of cycles of vulnerability and poverty.[178] It is also clear that these challenges

An internally displaced man from Ghor Province collects scraps and clothes to burn during the winter to keep his home warm and cook food in Police Rah camp on the outskirt of Herat city, Afghanistan. Photo: NRC/Jim Huylebroek, May 2017

cannot be addressed by humanitarian interventions alone.[179] A shift from humanitarian to development planning, and from national to local implementation is not just a generic recommendation but an urgent priority.[180]

The country made some policy progress in 2017. It was one of 43 to present a voluntary national review of its implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that year, which echoed the need for the localisation of development efforts.[181] It also raised challenges associated with data availability and management, and the need for a comprehensive database that pools all information related to the SDGs and facilitates disaggregation.[182]

The review also gave specific mention to internal displacement as an impediment to the economic growth and poverty reduction envisaged under SDG 1. As it stands, the national policy framework considers measures to include returnees and IDPs in local community development councils, handled by the national Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations (MoRR).

Once IDPs' immediate assistance needs are met, transitions already underway toward localised and longer-term development planning should be bolstered as the foundation for a stronger collective response with rights-based outcomes.[183] This also means spreading awareness of returnees' and IDPs' rights under the constitution and the national policy on displacement, so they are better positioned to pursue durable solutions.