

AS THEY MOVE:

Child and Youth Experiences of Migration, Displacement and Return in Afghanistan



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Executive summary

Migration and forced displacement is a reality for a significant number of children and young people worldwide, including 41 million who are forcibly displaced.¹ While the Convention on the Rights of the Child provides a global framework for the rights and care of all children regardless of migration status, movement creates both opportunities and challenges that have particular relevance in the application of this framework. Therefore, support and services need to be tailored to the specific vulnerabilities, experiences and circumstances of children and young people impacted by migration.

UNICEF Afghanistan Country Office, in partnership with UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight (UNICEF Innocenti), conducted evidence-based research on children and young people living in Afghanistan who have been impacted by migration. Building on a previous study of children moving in the Horn of Africa,² this study focuses on those who have returned, or been forced to return, to Afghanistan from other countries, and those who are internally displaced within the country. Using a mixed-methods approach from surveys and interviews with more than 1,500 children, youth, families, communities and practitioners, the study highlights children’s experiences of displacement, migration, return and reintegration, and how best to support and protect them.



Many who have been internally displaced within the country or have been forced to return to Afghanistan have experienced a downward spiral of harm and neglect.

The first section of this report details the sample profile of the children, young people and their parents interviewed in the research. The sample was designed to achieve a good cross-section of different types of children and young people impacted by migration, including returnees, those who are internally displaced, girls and boys, and those currently living in different parts of Afghanistan. Nearly all child respondents were living with a responsible adult.

This research is situated in the broader context of a humanitarian crisis, in which all those living in Afghanistan face acute challenges as a result of state failure. At one level, therefore, significant support and help are required for the majority of children and young people in Afghanistan who are living in a context of political, economic and humanitarian crisis, irrespective of whether they have moved originally from their home area or not.

The research also recognizes that migration carries significant risk. While many who migrate find opportunities for increased access to livelihoods and safety, others – in particular those who have been internally displaced within the country or have been forced to return to Afghanistan – have experienced a downward spiral of harm and neglect and have had their resources and coping mechanisms further depleted as a result of moving. Furthermore, many are returning to situations in which the drivers of movement have not been resolved – or have possibly got worse. This reality has a significant impact on opportunities for returnees to integrate back into Afghanistan.

Interventions need to recognize this dual reality: That on the one hand, life is hard for the majority of those living in Afghanistan, yet at the same time, those who have moved face specific challenges and need specific and contextualized support as a result. Programmatic design, therefore, needs to consider the impact of geographical and urban/rural differences in risks and urgent needs. These findings are relevant not only within Afghanistan, but also in other analogous contexts featuring high rates of migrant and displaced return and reintegration.

KEY FINDINGS

The experience of children and young people who have undertaken migration journeys – especially those who have been forced to return to Afghanistan – can be conceptualized as a spiral of harm and neglect.

The children and young people interviewed in this study consistently describe in extremely negative terms the reasons they left their homes, and their experiences in transit, upon returning to Afghanistan, and their current attempts to reintegrate. This is especially the case for children and young people forced to return to the country.

Leaving Afghanistan

- Poverty, lack of work and desire to support their families are the key reasons children say they leave Afghanistan for neighbouring countries; these reasons are compounded by intersecting drivers such as insecurity linked to conflict, violence and natural disasters.
- The journey out of Afghanistan exposes children to abuse, harm and economic exploitation, often requiring the aid of smugglers, who charge oppressive prices for dangerous transit and expose their clients to heightened risk of trafficking.
- Children and young people who cross the border to neighbouring countries face significant risks including fear, insecurity, violence, a lack of housing, detention by law enforcement, abuse by traffickers and exploitation from employers, many of whom have hired them illegally.

Forced return

- Most children and young people who return to Afghanistan were forced to do so through overt or implicit pressure by state authorities often leading to deportation; they were also forced to move because living conditions were not conducive to earning money or to their well-being.
- Children forced to return had often been detained and mistreated by law enforcement agents.
- Children discovered to be working illegally in a host country were treated like criminals and deported; they faced risks of abuse and were often denied the money they had earned.
- The conditions children experience on immediate return and the challenges in reintegrating can be devastating.
- Many children and families said they felt worse off on return than before they moved, citing physical hardship and psychological distress.
- Children and families said that, if they were to migrate again, economic conditions would drive their move.

Discontent after return: experiences in a host community

- Only one in three children and young people said they were satisfied with their life after returning to Afghanistan; they remained haunted by the distress of their migration experience.
- The lowest levels of satisfaction were reported with school and work; family and friends were ranked higher for levels of satisfaction.

KEY FINDINGS

- Girls were less satisfied than boys; and children living in Nangahar and Kabul seemed to be less satisfied than children who returned to other parts of the country.
- Distress linked to violence, threat, and personal and household finances were reported by children and young people, regardless of their gender and migration status.
- Location played a large role in children and young people's experience of distress. Children and young people living in Kabul and Nangahar were much more likely to report feeling unsafe.

Lack of support and services on return

- Access to a place to live and water, sanitation and hygiene services are critically lacking.
- On return, one out of three children do not have access to drinking water and washing facilities; girls have less access than boys and only a small proportion of them have access to feminine hygiene products.
- Education was out of reach for many children and young people because of economic hardship and years of missed schooling while away.
- Girls were particularly impacted by a lack of access to education because of government restrictions, school closures or unsupportive families.
- Only a small proportion of boys take part in organized group activities including sports or religious events; girls are twice as likely to be excluded from group activities. Indeed, most girls are excluded from community life completely.
- Many more girls than boys do not have a safe place to play, particularly in Herat and Nimroz.

Dire needs

- Most respondents felt that the services provided by the international community were insufficient to dissuade children and young people from attempting to migrate again.
- Cash support, counselling and child-friendly spaces were among the services children and young people said were most urgent; children did not consider legal services such as family reunification a priority for the services they need.
- Child rights laws, policies and programmes have long been inadequate in Afghanistan, and long-standing humanitarian crises further exacerbate the challenges. Despite efforts, these challenges are made worse by policies and migration regulations that are not child sensitive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Adopt a socioecological approach to programmes that support migrant and displaced children and young people.

- Focus programmes on whole families to best support, protect and care for children and young people.
- Analyse risk and resilience factors at child, family, community, local and country levels, allowing for a full understanding of barriers for children, young people and families.
- Replicate successful socioecological approaches to create caring and protective environments in fragile contexts of mixed migration and forced displacement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

2. Establish interventions to support migrant and displaced populations based on location-specific contextual analysis of situations and programmes.

- Steer clear of blanket 'return and reintegration' approaches because they are not always safe, appropriate, sustainable or in the best interests of the child.
- Ensure that locations where children are (re)settled are conducive to their well-being, development, protection and care.
- Use location-specific contextual analysis to develop programmes for returnees, recognizing that children and young people experience different levels of harm based on where they are living.

3. Design and implement multisectoral child protection services built on cooperative efforts among sectors and service providers.

- Involve peace actors in dialogue about sustainable access to services and encourage joint participation in the design and implementation of services for children and young people in contexts of migration, displacement and return.

4. Provide more accessible services to children and young people regardless of migration status, including:

- Education
- Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)
- Safe spaces for children, young people and entire families that provide an opportunity for play and socializing, but that can also serve as a venue for children and young people to be heard and supported.

5. Pay particular attention to the needs of girls who have returned from migration or who are internally displaced.

- Provide access to community spaces so girls can play, participate and socialize.
- Make sure WASH services and feminine hygiene products are safe and accessible for girls.

6. Adopt a phased approach to addressing children and young people's situations and experiences, tackling immediate needs and acknowledging drivers of unsafe movement.

- Address short-term needs of housing, education, protection, WASH, cash transfer and social work for children and young people who are migrants, internally displaced or returned to Afghanistan.
- Seek solutions for long-term needs of children and families stemming from poverty, violence, lack of services and gender barriers, among others.
- Embrace programmes that are based on multisectoral, integrated strategies that bridge humanitarian, development and peacebuilding considerations (a 'triple nexus' approach).

7. Consider safe migration programmes.

- Recognize that movement from home is a reality among children within and outside Afghanistan.
- Adopt safe migration programmes to help provide children with a range of services and assistance that can accompany them through their migration journeys whether within Afghanistan or across borders.

8. Embrace a regional approach.

- Analyse and assess situations with neighbouring countries, especially in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, to develop a regional approach and region-wide interventions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure that the regional approach is based on child rights and provides access to services as children move across borders or await return.
 - Hold regional workshops to help countries collaborate on a child protection plan and a joint policy and programmatic framework for addressing the needs of children in the context of migration.
 - Establish mechanisms for information-sharing, capacity-building and monitoring systems that measure progress against a set of specific milestones and outcomes.
- 9. In consultation with children, young people and families, strengthen systems to better provide child-specific and family-centred support for children and young people.**
- Identify the legal, policy and practice barriers that exclude children and young people from child protection and other protection systems.
 - Develop and regularly update contextual local, national and interagency strategies to protect and address the needs of children and young people.
 - Recognizing that a ‘blanket approach’ will not work everywhere; consult displaced and migrant children, young people and families to develop systems and interventions tailored to the specific needs of families, children and young people.
 - Use a ‘child lens’ to build capacity and raise awareness of existing laws, policies, procedures and mechanisms that protect children and young people who experience migration and displacement.
- 10. Advocate for governments and public authorities to address the needs of migrant and displaced families regardless of their legal status.**
- Work with host governments and public authorities to address the needs of migrant and displaced families from Afghanistan.
 - Ensure that host governments and public authorities recognize the need to respect child rights and uphold dignity and standards of care throughout children’s experience of movement, regardless of their migration status.
 - Help local and international actors coalesce around a road map for promoting safety, well-being, care and protection of children.
 - Call for a collectively designed and agreed child protection monitoring mechanism that measures progress towards key indicators.
 - Engage donors in rethinking and advocating for durable solutions for child returnees and internally displaced persons – solutions that are linked to the broader framework of durable solutions for Afghan populations in general.
 - While recognizing the framework for durable solutions for Afghanistan in general, advocate against forced returns and promote safe routes for children moving within and outside the country.

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CHAPTER 1

Research objectives and methodology

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Since August 2021, the United Nations has revised its strategy in Afghanistan as agencies face an unprecedented humanitarian crisis and the real risk of a systemic collapse and human catastrophe. Set within this context, the overall aim of this study is to consolidate and generate evidence to better understand the experiences and perceptions of Afghan children around reintegration following their return to Afghanistan, in the context of a wider understanding of the impact of migration.

This evidence contributes directly to UNICEF's work on strengthening child protection and social welfare systems in Afghanistan, by framing reintegration as per geographical and operational contexts within the country as well as within the region.

The study focuses on two key areas of enquiry:

- Policies, institutions, systems and services in place to address return and reintegration, from immediate to long-term solutions
- Children's, families' and communities' perspectives and experiences of migration, including those regarding the return and reintegration process, considering the policies, institutions, systems and services in place.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a mixed-methods approach to data collection, combining quantitative research (a survey) with qualitative research (semi-structured, in-depth interviews), together with extensive desk research and literature review to inform the research design and context.

The tools for this research (questionnaires and topic guides) were designed by UNICEF Innocenti in close collaboration with the UNICEF Afghanistan Country Office and the national research partner, Samuel Hall. The tools were translated into appropriate languages and piloted as part of the fieldwork training and inception. All enumerators were specifically trained to undertake this study.

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH AND SAMPLE PROFILE

The quantitative element of the study was a survey with a sample of children and parents impacted by migration. It assessed their reasons for, and experiences of, migration and return; their current access to services and support; and their future intentions.

For the purposes of this study, 'impacted by migration' was defined as children or young people, between the ages of 7 and 19, who are not living in their usual home area because they are either internally displaced persons (IDPs) or because they are returnees to Afghanistan. The respondents were away from their home area for at least 3 months or, for returnees, had returned to Afghanistan between 3 and 24 months ago.

Those children and young people aged 14–19 years were interviewed directly by an enumerator and for children aged 7–13 years a parent was interviewed on their behalf.

In total, 1,529 respondents were interviewed as part of the quantitative research. Quotas were set to ensure a broad spread of locations and types of respondents, including by:

- Age group
- Migration type: returnees and IDPs
- Location: five provinces in Afghanistan
- Location type: in rural, urban and IDP camp settings.



A higher proportion of the survey respondents were classified as returnees rather than internally displaced persons.

The profile of the achieved study sample is shown in Table 1.

Reflecting the purposive sampling design, there is a good spread of boys and girls represented in the data set, as well as three broad age ranges. Those interviewed are highly likely to be living with a parent or relative – in fact, only 2 per cent of children under 18 years told us they are not with a responsible adult.

Almost 3 in 10 (29 per cent) respondents were aged 7–13 years – responses were from the parent interviewed on the children’s behalf. The remaining respondents, who were interviewed themselves, were roughly equally split between the ages of 14–16 years (37 per cent) and 17–19 years (34 per cent).

The research was designed to interview approximately the same number of respondents across five provinces in Afghanistan identified in coordination with UNICEF Afghanistan Country Office – Ghor, Herat, Kabul, Nangahar and Nimroz. This was broadly achieved, albeit slightly more interviews were conducted in Ghor to make up for minor undersampling in three of the other provinces. Nevertheless, the total number of respondents per province is sufficient to allow for robust disaggregation of the data by province.

Reflecting the design of the sampling approach, a higher proportion of the survey respondents were classified as returnees rather than IDPs. Returnees are those who say they have returned to Afghanistan after having lived in another country, while IDPs are those who say they have moved from another part of Afghanistan. Therefore, all respondents are impacted by migration in some way.

Nine in 10 respondents were single, with 1 in 10 either married or engaged.

Most respondents (86 per cent) had some form of identification, although 14 per cent said they had none of the nine types of identification asked about in the survey. Three in four (76 per cent) had an Afghan identity card or Afghan Tazkira, which is by far the most common form of documentation. The next most common is a vaccination card (36 per cent), followed by birth certificate (15 per cent) and refugee card (12 per cent).

Interestingly, only 1 in 50 (2 per cent) said they had an Afghan passport; even among those who are returnees (and have therefore crossed an international border), only 3 per cent claim to have an Afghan passport.

A minority of respondents (16 per cent) said they had a disability, which is defined as having a challenge in speaking, hearing, seeing, walking or any other physical difficulty.

Table 1. Profile of survey respondents

SEX		MARITAL STATUS ³	
46%	Female	89%	Single
54%	Male	7%	Engaged / promised to marry
AGE		3%	Married
29%	7–13 years	*%	Widowed / separated
37%	14–16 years	DOCUMENTATION	
34%	17–19 years	15%	Birth certificate
WITH RESPONSIBLE ADULT? ⁴		36%	Vaccination card
98%	Yes	2%	Afghan passport
CURRENT LOCATION		76%	Afghan identity card or Afghan Tazkira
24%	Ghor	3%	Education certificate / transcript
18%	Herat	3%	MoRR registration card
19%	Kabul	5%	IOM beneficiary card
20%	Nangahar	12%	Refugee card
19%	Nimroz	6%	Student card
MIGRATION TYPE		*%	Other
63%	Returnee	14%	None of these
37%	IDP	HAVE A DISABILITY?	
LOCATION TYPE		16%	Yes
59%	Urban	84%	No
16%	Rural		
25%	Peri-urban ⁵		

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

* a value higher than 0% but less than 0.5%.

Note:

IOM, International Organization for Migration; MoRR, Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations.

Qualitative research

The qualitative research element of this study was designed to provide important context and texture for the quantitative data and to allow for a deep dive on specific issues identified during the literature review. Interviews took place with children and young people who had been impacted by migration, members of communities in which migrant and displaced children are situated and with workers from non-governmental organizations (NGO), governments and the United Nations who interact with or have an understanding of the situation facing migrant and displaced populations. The qualitative research also covered some more sensitive areas that were not appropriate to be covered by the quantitative tool.

A total of 70 qualitative interviews took place, including 15 with child returnees aged 10–18, of which 7 were with girls; 9 with parents of returnees or IDPs; 13 with community members and leaders; 8 with government officials; and 25 with representatives of national and international civil society organizations working in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The interviews were spread across six locations – Kabul, Nangahar, Ghor, Nimroz, Herat and Kandahar – with a relatively even spread of interviewees (children, parents and community leaders) between them.

The interviews were based around three topic guides (designed for children, community leaders/parents, and international non-governmental organization (INGO) workers/officials), which were piloted and translated into relevant local languages. The majority of participants were interviewed face-to-face, with the only exception being some of the interviews with INGO workers. Detailed notes were taken of each interview, which were then translated and typed up into transcripts in English. To maintain the anonymity of the interviewee, no information that might identify the respondent was recorded, except in the case of interviews with officials and INGO workers who said that they did not mind being identified.

Ethics

The research adhered to the requirements set out in the UNICEF Procedure for Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis.⁶ The development of the tools, training of enumerators and fieldwork sought to ensure that (a) the best interests of the child were at the heart of the research; (b) informed consent/assent was gained, and done in a way that was entirely voluntary; (c) no harm would occur as a result of taking part (or refusing to take part) in the research; (d) respondents were protected in terms of the confidentiality of the information they provided and all information collected is held securely and properly; and (e) no payments were made to respondents to induce them to take part in the research.

Given the timings and location of the research, enumerators were briefed about COVID-19 safety measures, security protocols, child protection code of conduct, safeguarding procedures and referral pathways for sensitive disclosures and children of particular vulnerability. Specific sampling points were elected to ensure the safety of the enumerators and respondents.

Research permission was granted by the Afghan Ministry of Health.

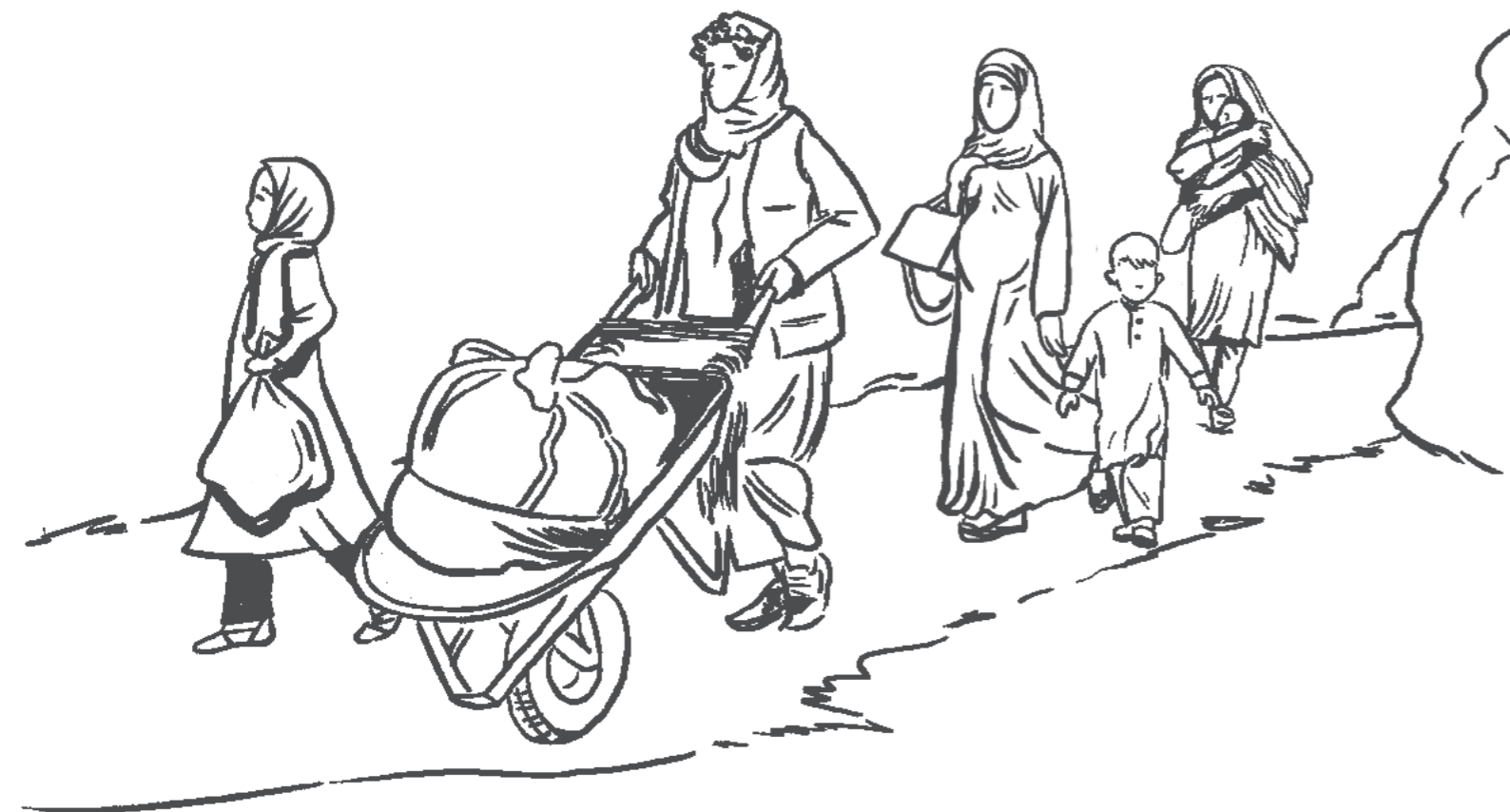
One province in Afghanistan, Kandahar, was initially selected as a research location, but it was not possible to conduct any surveys in this region because the provincial authority's requirements to be involved in the fieldwork would have undermined the safety, anonymity and confidentiality guarantees of ethical research. (A small number of supplemental qualitative interviews were carried out in Kandahar in strict adherence with ethical protocols and featured no involvement from the provincial authority.)

Limitations

The research is not designed to provide an exhaustive analysis of all aspects of child migration within, into and out of Afghanistan. Rather, it is structured to assess key challenges and experiences across different locations, using a robust methodology that acknowledges relevant limitations. These limitations include that sample locations were necessarily clustered across five provinces, and it was not possible to conduct a purely random sample approach. The choice of communities for interviews was informed by local knowledge of the presence of children and families impacted by migration and displacement. This type of research is based on people's perceptions of their experiences, and it is not designed to challenge or externally validate respondents' views.



A total of 70 qualitative interviews took place across six locations – Kabul, Nangahar, Ghor, Nimroz, Herat and Kandahar.



CHAPTER 2

Afghanistan and regional migration context

INTRODUCTION

The August 2021 change in power in Afghanistan was rapid and created an acute humanitarian crisis. A sharp decrease in international aid has left the De Facto Authority (DFA) struggling to deliver basic services,⁷ jeopardizing many of the economic and political gains of the last 20 years. The situation is only getting worse: an estimated 28.3 million people will need humanitarian and protection assistance in 2023, up from 24.4 million in 2022 and 18.4 million in 2021,⁸ driven by extremely high levels of food insecurity,⁹ climate-change induced crises,¹⁰ the bankruptcy of both formal and informal economies and the sudden drop in direct international development assistance.¹¹

Within this context, the displacement picture is mixed. Since the DFA took control of the country, the security situation has generally stabilized across the country. This has led to a decrease in conflict and violence-induced displacement, with over 1.2 million internally displaced persons returning to their places of origin between 2021 and 2022. Furthermore,

an anticipated mass movement of refugees out of Afghanistan and into neighbouring countries through officially regulated borders did not take place in 2021 and 2022.

However, the number of families being forced to move due to natural disasters or lack of employment and basic needs is increasing,¹² and outward movement across unregulated borders, alongside some returns to Afghanistan,¹³ has remained fluid. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), between January and December 2022, 64,245 Afghan refugees returned to Afghanistan (94 per cent from Pakistan – over five times more than the overall number of returns in 2021), mainly due to the high living costs and lack of employment opportunities in host countries.¹⁴ In addition, hundreds of thousands of individuals have been deported back to Afghanistan from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan.¹⁵

The situation these families return to in Afghanistan is one defined by a severely limited capacity to receive them – in the midst of a humanitarian and post-conflict crisis, Afghans, regardless of their migration status, are in urgent need of basic goods and services, including health care, food, water and shelter.¹⁶ Return to Afghanistan, therefore, exposes children and their families to a range of physical, psychological and emotional risks stemming from the wider context of fragility facing the entire country.¹⁷

The deepening of poverty has also reduced the capability of many families to provide for their children's education, health care, adequate nutrition and protection. Loss of household income has left many struggling to survive and has increased the adoption of harmful coping mechanisms.¹⁸ Families have pushed their children to leave school to work, with an estimated 1 million children now engaged in child labour.¹⁹ The severe socioeconomic situation has resulted in many children becoming the primary breadwinner in their household.

Despite an overall decrease in conflict, violence continues to play a fundamental role in children's lives. For instance, a number of schools were violently attacked in April 2022;²⁰ and boys remain highly vulnerable to recruitment from armed groups for different purposes including active combat, suicide attacks, spying and preparation and movement of improvised explosive devices (IEDs).²¹

At the same time, girls face a number of specific challenges, including exposure to harmful practices such as child marriage, forced marriage and exchange marriage. While violence against women and girls was pervasive in Afghanistan prior to August 2021, threats to their safety have been dramatically compounded by DFA policies that restrict women's and girls' freedom of movement and education,²² forcing them into isolation and leaving them at risk of experiencing further violence.²³

REGIONAL CONTEXT

At the time of this study, most of those who were interviewed had returned from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan. Many Afghans continue seeking protection and access to livelihoods across the region, according to official figures.^{24,25} However, unofficial figures are likely to be significantly higher.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, sanctions continue to have a negative impact on the economic context, and natural disasters continue to pose a significant threat to Afghan refugees and nationals alike. The borders with the Islamic Republic of Iran remain officially closed for those trying to seek asylum and are only open for those with valid passports or visas. Despite these restrictions, Afghans continue to cross into the Islamic Republic of Iran through unofficial border crossings,²⁶ often with the assistance of smugglers – which increases their risk of falling into the hands of traffickers. At the same time, and despite the non-return advisory issued by UNHCR, Iranian authorities continue to forcibly return Afghans who are apprehended while trying to enter the Islamic Republic of Iran or detected on Iranian territory.²⁷ Deportees are generally held in detention centres before being transferred by Iranian security forces to both official and irregular border crossings back into Afghanistan.²⁸

International Organization for Migration (IOM) returns data suggest there are a number of ‘voluntary’ movements back to Afghanistan,²⁹ although decision-making is likely to have been impacted by push factors such as fear of deportation in the Islamic Republic of Iran. As of June 2022, UNHCR identified an increasing trend of Persons of Concern (PoCs)³⁰ arriving from the Islamic Republic of Iran who had experienced violence and persecution.³¹ UNHCR reported in August 2022 that many Afghan children in the Islamic Republic of Iran were engaged in child labour,³² which is understood to have increased due to the deteriorating economic situation of Afghan families in the Islamic Republic of Iran.³³ Many Afghan boys who cross the border into the Islamic Republic of Iran do so through unofficial routes facilitated and operated by smugglers.³⁴ They face multiple dangers and challenging living conditions, including a lack of food and potable water, poor accommodation, dangerous transportation and lack of access to health care.³⁵

Neighbouring Pakistan hosts over 1.4 million Afghan refugees.³⁶ However, its long-generous hosting of refugees has put significant strain on available resources, a pressure that has increased as a result of recurrent natural disasters including the devastating recent floods in 2022. Despite a reported high degree of acceptance of Afghan refugees in Pakistan,³⁷ Afghan refugees and Afghans of other status have multiple protection needs in Pakistan, including the need for access to registration and documentation to enjoy basic rights and access to services, and the risk of arrest and detention. Violence against children and gender-based violence are largely under-reported, and access to justice for refugee girls and women is often impeded by a lack of family/community support.³⁸ Intimate partner violence, child, early and forced marriage and denial of resources, services and opportunities are prevalent issues among refugee communities in Pakistan.³⁹

Children without documentation, including those whose births have not been registered, are also particularly vulnerable to trafficking and being detained and prosecuted as adults. Child marriage and child labour are prevalent, and access to education remains one of the most critical issues disproportionately affecting girls.

Children with specific needs have limited access to schooling, mental health and psychosocial support.



Many Afghans continue seeking protection and access to livelihoods across the region, according to official figures; however, unofficial figures are likely to be significantly higher.

AFGHANISTAN MIGRATION

The character of migration in Afghanistan is complex and multifaceted. Some migrant and displaced populations are moving to neighbouring countries in the hope of finding work to support their families; some are fleeing persecution; some are displaced within Afghanistan; while others are returning to Afghanistan – either voluntarily or by force.

Migration has long been a cyclical life-coping strategy, and any response to migration in Afghanistan needs to take into account the impact of the recent disruption and have a longitudinal perspective that recognizes and addresses continuities in the challenges faced by Afghan migrant and displaced populations. The August 2021 transition, however, has acted as an accelerant and intensifier of pre-existing migration drivers. Afghanistan’s collapsing economy following the transition increased the salience of economic-driven migration for populations across the country. The crippling financial crisis, coupled with the fear of having to live under the DFA rules and restrictions, has significantly intensified migration flows of Afghans, including children. A number of studies⁴⁰ based on consultations with children have highlighted how a quarter (25 per cent) of children reported they had moved or been displaced since August 2021 – with safety and security (88 per cent), damage to their home (27 per cent) or economic factors (19 per cent) as the main drivers. In particular, both boys and girls described how, mostly, boys under 18 – sometimes as young as 13 – had left the country for employment in Türkiye, the Islamic Republic of Iran or Pakistan due to the economic situation.

While security has generally improved in terms of humanitarian access for aid agencies, levels of fragility remain high. As a result, the calculus driving migration reflects a context that has shifted away from a development trajectory to one of complex socioeconomic fragility. This means that while some migrant and displaced persons might cite economic or security concerns as the primary reason for movement, the systemic drivers that lie behind this are likely to relate to concerns about both dimensions. In the first quarter of 2022, agencies reported that almost 20 per cent of Afghan families were forced to send their children out to work, with an estimated 1 million children in February 2022 engaged in child labour⁴¹ and how many of these children were working under threat of physical violence from their families, with boys sent to work in neighbouring the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁴²

Furthermore, in January 2022, the United Nations Human Rights Council found that the deterioration of the economic situation after August 2021 was also a contributing factor to the increase of illegal trafficking and the sale of children. The All-Survivors research project, in particular, denounced the numbers of boys being smuggled across the Iranian and Pakistani borders (where employment and security were considered better than in Afghanistan), and incidents of sexual violence against them committed by paid ‘guides’.⁴³ Unaccompanied boys who are moving across borders in search of work have been found to be ‘particularly vulnerable to human trafficking’, including for agricultural and construction work often to pay off their families’ debts.

Combined, these studies emphasize the importance of recognizing the complexity of migration drivers, including negative coping strategies, not least as they have an impact on return and reintegration where drivers have not been addressed.

While many move across borders in search of safety and livelihoods, many Afghans remain displaced within Afghanistan. It is estimated that there are more than 1 million children living in internal displacement in Afghanistan.⁴⁴ All across the country, people are moving as a result of growing vulnerabilities aggravated by the conflict, drought and economic shocks and years of lack of recovery.⁴⁵ However, there is a lack of evidence in understanding whether returnee children who then become internally displaced face the same risks and challenges as other internally displaced children, and how programmes and policies are taking these into account when securing solutions to their displacement, and the multiple impacts and hidden costs, both direct and indirect, on social development that displacement of children and young people can cause.

Programmatic responses to migration

Since August 2021, there has been a shift from a development to emergency operational context (for more information on the policy structure, see Annex 1). The scale of the challenges in Afghanistan, alongside fundamental disruptions to established relationships between government authorities and international/civil society, have created a difficult operating environment for responding to the needs of those impacted by migration. Established government functions related to migration and child protection have been fundamentally weakened across the country as a result of multiple factors, including lack of clarity about the role of different ministries/officials, lack of continuity in memorandums of understanding (MoUs) and standard operating procedures (SOPs) established prior to the transition, limited government resources and capacity, a high level of 'brain drain', and ensuing gaps in technical capacity among migration-relevant ministries and civil society. In addition, INGOs and NGOs are facing curtailment of their migration protection/support activities. While challenges of government capacity and lack of funding have long been endemic to all those working in Afghanistan, the level of complexity around migration, including challenges around categorizing different groups of migrants and displaced populations, is amplifying an already challenging operating environment. Significant reductions in international assistance have further compounded the situation.

These dynamics – lack of government capacity, lack of clarity among INGOs and NGOs about the parameters of their previously established actions with migrant and displaced populations and a lower level of funding-to-demand ratio – are combining to create huge and, for the near future, apparently enduring gaps in protective services for children on the move. And the complexity of these intersecting factors suggests that is unlikely this situation will change any time soon.



It is estimated that there are more than 1 million children living in internal displacement in Afghanistan. However, there is a lack of evidence in understanding whether returnee children who then become internally displaced face the same risks and challenges as other internally displaced children, and how programmes and policies are taking these into account.

Return and reintegration of Afghan children and young people

Against the context described above, return to Afghanistan – whether voluntary or forced – continues to take place. Previous studies on return to Afghanistan, the majority conducted prior to the transition, highlight some of the broad challenges children face on their return in country, including lack of access to services such as education, risk of recruitment into armed groups and discrimination as a result of being 'returnees'.⁴⁶ Existing analysis also points to a persistent lack of assistance for longer-term reintegration of those who have returned,⁴⁷ including inadequate focus on the psychological and social dimensions that constitute sustainable reintegration.⁴⁸

Child protection actors in Afghanistan work with other programme sectors to support an integrated case-based approach in programme delivery. As of November 2022, 1,795 'children on the move' (of which 519 were girls) had received protective services during their return particularly following deportation, transport and return to their communities, including family reunification, follow-up and reintegration support. However, huge challenges remain to ensure that multisector interventions are met in all geographical areas where children are returned to – not least as a result of the significant humanitarian crisis in the country as a whole.

As a result, many areas of return lack services, and the complex process of converging non-governmental and governmental services delivery in a coordinated fashion and approach is still ongoing. Further to this, the fragility of the Afghan context makes it difficult to follow the Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARR) approach⁴⁹ to child protection interventions, which aims to strengthen essential area-based services and facilities by supporting durable solutions and a conducive environment for sustainable reintegration of returnees through a community-based protection support.

Children's perspectives on migration

Children's perceptions and opinions are often disregarded in decision-making around migration. Yet, as UNICEF Innocenti's previous study of child migration in the Horn of Africa demonstrated,⁵⁰ children and young people believe that they have choices and are able to express them in describing their migration journeys. For instance, children felt they had a choice in moving initially, they had a clear understanding of those who they felt could help them or harm them, and they expressed a strong degree of control over their next steps. However, this agency is too often ignored by policymakers and those designing programmes.

In Afghanistan, only a few studies have been carried out in recent years that focus on the knowledge, attitudes, practices and engagement of children in migration.⁵¹ Children and youth are rarely included in institutional discourse and are often seen as disempowered objects of policies and programmes. As a result, the support system can all too easily fall short of meeting their aspirations, capacities and needs.



CHAPTER 3

Analysis of the migration journey

INTRODUCTION: A SPIRAL OF HARM AND NEGLECT

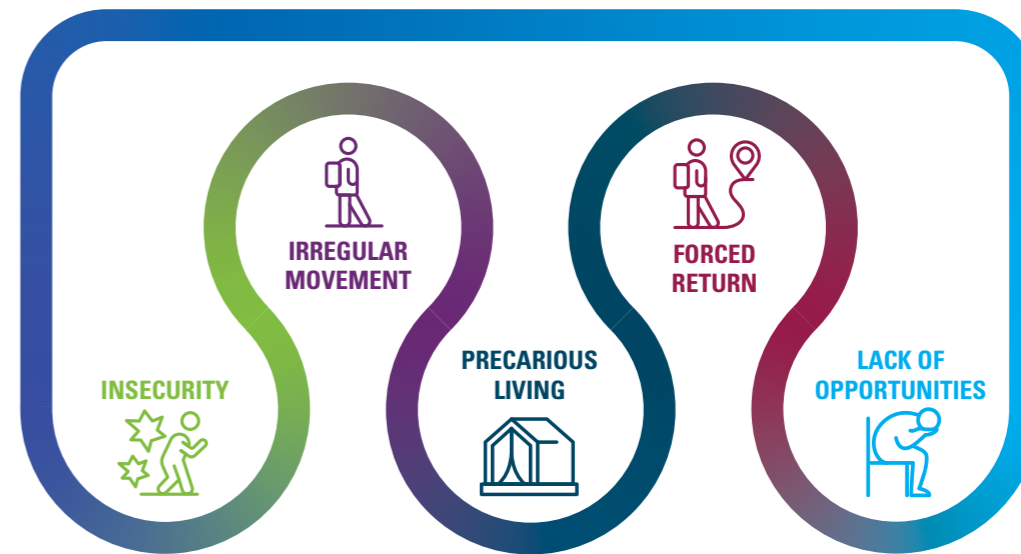
The experience of children and young people who have endured migration journeys – especially those who have been forced to return to Afghanistan – can be conceptualized as a spiral of harm and neglect. The drivers of movement and the experiences in transit are heavily negative, exposing children to multiple vulnerabilities.



Given that the research took place in Afghanistan, there is an inevitable bias towards those who have been returned – and, therefore, towards a particular story of migration.

Figure 1 attempts to summarize the typical experience of those who move and return to Afghanistan. Of course, not all children and young people who move would follow this path exactly. Furthermore, given that the research took place in Afghanistan (as opposed to countries of destination or transit for Afghan migrants and refugees/asylum seekers), there is an inevitable bias towards those who have been returned – and, therefore, towards a particular story of migration. However, the evidence generated in this research suggests that for many, while movement is a key coping mechanism, it carries significant risk. It can also lead to an accumulation of harm and neglect for many, which then shapes their current lives and future potential. To a large extent, the issues faced by returnees are also shared by those who are internally displaced, and therefore this concept can be helpful to understanding the migration journeys of many different types of children and young people impacted by migration who are currently living in Afghanistan.

Figure 1. The spiral of harm and neglect.



Movement from their home area is driven primarily by economic precarity, but often interlinked with fragility and harm associated with war, violence and political uncertainty. The process of movement out of Afghanistan typically involves crossing borders in irregular ways. These journeys often require the assistance of smugglers, which then raises the risk of harm and incurs debts that have to be repaid later. While some children and young people take the decision to move of their own accord, the findings point to an overwhelming picture of parents encouraging and facilitating their children to move abroad to support their family via remittances, despite many knowing the risks involved. Migration, therefore, is seen as a coping strategy by families who see few viable alternatives.

Finding work in a foreign country – in this study, primarily the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan – is often the pull of movement abroad, yet the achievement of this goal can increase vulnerabilities Afghan children and their families face while abroad. Given that most move irregularly, the work they are able to obtain generally offers little, if any, social protection or basic employment rights, and they are at greater risk of exploitation and abuse by their employer. If they are discovered by the host country’s authorities they are treated as criminals rather than victims, treated harshly and potentially abused before being forcibly deported back to Afghanistan, often without any money they had managed to earn.

Returning to Afghanistan often results in returnees being in a worse position than when they first left. The locations in which they return to live, whether voluntarily or through forcible return, are often facing many of the same stresses and deprivations that caused those same individuals to move initially, and conditions have often worsened since the transition. Migrant and displaced children themselves may have missed months, if not years, of education. If they have not been able to make sufficient money to pay off the cost of their journey but also to send money back to their families, they have failed their primary objective for moving and many may have incurred additional debts on the way. The result is a process of return that incurs not just physical hardship, but psychological distress – the opportunities they perceived movement could bring give way to pessimism and despair about the reality of their lives and a bleak sense of the future.



Returning to Afghanistan often results in returnees being in a worse position than when they first left. Migrant and displaced children themselves may have missed months, if not years, of education.

The story of one 13-year-old girl, who is a recent returnee from the Islamic Republic of Iran and is now living as an IDP, sums up many of these dynamics.

“Our living condition, like all the people around us, is difficult. My mother suffers from rheumatism, and I have a calcium deficiency disease. I feel pain in my bones, and my teeth fall out bit by bit. My brother suffers from acute abdominal pain. We are a seven-member family, and all of us are unemployed. Because of my father’s debts and unemployment in Afghanistan, we emigrated to Iran so that at least one of our family members could find a job, and we would pay our debts. But then we were deported, and we have nothing. Before [when they lived in their home in Daikundi] we had land and food. But we did not feel safe, so we left. Now we just have nothing.”

She later added,

“Many people do not care about what we are doing here. All the people of the community have the same condition here because we are all internally displaced people or deported from other countries. However, when we leave home for outdoor activities or go to the store for shopping, some girls who are the same age as me say: ‘You are poor. You are an immigrant. Get out of our area’. Likewise, when some girls whose families are in good financial condition bring money to school to spend, they flaunt their possessions and humiliate us. ‘You are poor and have nothing’, they say. Luckily, our neighbours do not misbehave with us.”

...

“I suffer a lot because we don’t have a house and move from one house to another. Also, I can’t help my mother with her tailoring tasks. I wish I were a boy because there are so many restrictions for girls, especially immigrant girls. For example, girls cannot do whatever they want whenever they want. However, if I were a son, I could provide financial support for my family. In our region, unlike boys, there is much discrimination against girls. For example, boys have access to many things that girls do not. Girls in our area often cannot go out of the house because people consider it a fault.”⁵²

The remainder of this section provides empirical evidence collected from returnees to Afghanistan, as well as those internally displaced, that demonstrates how the lived experience of many migrant and displaced populations can be seen as a spiral of harm and neglect.

DRIVERS OF MOVEMENT

While different drivers of movement are rarely mutually exclusive, the quantitative research demonstrates that those interviewed identified the main driver for leaving Afghanistan as economic hardship (see Table 2). Nearly all respondents (93 per cent) offered ‘economic hardship/lack of jobs/poverty’ as one of the reasons they left. It is by far the dominant driver. The next two most significant drivers are ‘security/war/violence’ (47 per cent) and ‘natural disaster’ (23 per cent). No other reason is a driver for more than 10 per cent of respondents.

Table 2. Reasons for leaving Afghanistan from returnee parents and children (n = 930)

Q: WHAT WERE THE REASONS THAT YOU LEFT AFGHANISTAN?	%
Better education/school opportunities	5
Economic hardship/lack of jobs/poverty	93
Domestic violence	3
Other family problems or concerns (not violence related)	6
Harmful practices	2
Lack of basic services	6
Natural disaster, e.g., drought, famine, earthquake	23
Personal freedom	3
Religious persecution	1
Security/war/violence	47
Threat of forced or early marriage	1
To join family elsewhere	2
To join friends elsewhere/encouraged by peers	2
Family decision	10
Other	5
Don't know/can't remember	*

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

* a value higher than 0% but less than 0.5%.

Gender analysis of the drivers of movement showed similar patterns of reasons for moving among boys and girls. Economics and security/war/violence are the top two drivers for both boys and girls, although more girls than boys cite security/war/violence (62 vs. 36 per cent). In this study, more girls also considered natural disaster as a driver (31 vs. 16 per cent), and twice as many girls as boys say one of the main reasons was a family decision (14 vs. 7 per cent).

The drivers of movement for IDPs are very similar, with economic concerns as predominant, followed by security and natural disasters (see Table 3).

Table 3. Reasons for moving within Afghanistan from internally displaced persons (parents and children who have moved within Afghanistan) (n = 571)

Q: WHAT WERE THE REASONS THAT YOU MOVED?	%
Better education/school opportunities	15
Economic hardship/lack of jobs/poverty	88
Domestic violence	4
Other family problems or concerns (not violence related)	4
Harmful practices	7
Lack of basic services	11
Natural disaster, e.g., drought, famine, earthquake	35
Personal freedom	4
Religious persecution	1
Security/war/violence	63
Threat of forced or early marriage	4
To join family elsewhere	2
To join friends elsewhere/encouraged by peers	*
Family decision	n/a
Other	6
Don't know/can't remember	0

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

* a value higher than 0% but less than 0.5%.



Economics and security/war/violence are the top two drivers of movement for both boys and girls.

The economic drivers of movement – and the importance of the family supporting this movement – also come out clearly in the qualitative interviews: preparations for moving can take months or years (for example, to save enough), involve the use of smugglers or other irregular means to cross borders and raise expectations that life is better in other countries. Based on suffering and desperation at home, movement is seen to provide more opportunities – for both the individual child or young person and, perhaps more importantly, to support the family who do not or cannot move.

“Many families pay for their children to go to Iran and Pakistan through smuggling, and a lot of money is needed. But it’s not worth it. They borrow money and collect it in every possible way in the hope of a better future, and their children, who have arrived there, must work for a long time and cover their expenses and debts. This process takes years. Maybe they will be able to send money to their parents in Afghanistan after a few years, and they will have to return to their country or be deported and emigrate again.”⁵³

“My father is unemployed and at home. I was forced to leave the school about three years ago after 10th class due to unemployment, poverty, lack of living and daily household expenses, and inability to pay for the education of my little sister. I went with my friends and our neighbour’s son in search of a job opportunity to Iran.” [He then became disabled when in Iran after being electrocuted at work.] “At that time I had not any other option except emigration to save the life of my little sister. I chose emigration between the options and as a result, I lost my hands.”⁵⁴

“When there is nothing to eat at home and you are neither employed nor you go to school, then it is better to migrate to another country and find work there and earn some money to support your family.”⁵⁵

The transition to the new DFA government has exacerbated some of the drivers of movement. On the one hand, the end of the war has brought some peace. On the other hand, those who worked for the previous government (particularly in the security field) are fearful of reprisal and everyone is affected by the worsening economic context.

“In the area where we live, the majority of the residents are displaced people, and almost a year ago, after the Taliban took over, several of our neighbours who were employees of the previous government took refuge in Iran, one of them was our family.”⁵⁶

“We cannot go to our place of origin because everyone knows us there and we fear that they will inform the Taliban that we have returned from Pakistan and then they will arrest/kill my father and brothers because the security situation is not good in the country and my father was a cook for the military in the previous government.”⁵⁷

“After the Taliban took over, I, who was 17 years old and a 10th grader, left school, took some money from my father and went to Iran to get a job, because after the political changes, our economic situation was getting worse day by day because people borrowed all the items of my father’s shop, and his shop went bankrupt.”⁵⁸

“Because our community was insecure and the Taliban had taken over the community, we had to leave our home town. Taliban made us miserable and destroyed our houses. They oppressed us. For example, they used violence against us and told us to leave our community because the place we lived belonged to the government. My father was a soldier in the former government. Recently, we were also suffering from drought in our region.”⁵⁹



Children and young people moved outside Afghanistan partly because they felt compelled to do so, but also because they hoped for a better life, especially to get income to support themselves and their families.

Forced or chose to leave Afghanistan?⁶⁰

Returnees were asked if it was their choice to leave Afghanistan. Older children (14–19 years) are equally split, with 51 per cent saying it was their choice and 48 per cent saying it was not. In contrast, parents of younger children are twice as likely to say they felt forced to leave than chose to do so (66 vs. 34 per cent). It is likely that many of those saying it was their choice to leave answered this from the perspective of being involved in the decision as to how to leave and by what means, but the drivers of movement – economic insecurity and war/violence – were outside their control.

LIFE OUTSIDE AFGHANISTAN

Children and young people moved outside Afghanistan partly because they felt compelled to do so, but also because they hoped for a better life, especially to get income to support themselves and their families.

In this research sample, which reflects the locations in which research took place rather than the overall balance of return from different countries, three in four returnees returned to Afghanistan from the Islamic Republic of Iran (74 per cent) and one in five came from Pakistan (20 per cent). A small proportion travelled from Türkiye (6 per cent).

Before they moved to another country, 44 per cent of returnees say they felt safe living in their home area in Afghanistan and 39 per cent say they felt unsafe. When they left Afghanistan to live in another country, their perceptions of their safety outside Afghanistan did not change much from how safe they felt before they moved in Afghanistan – overall 43 per cent felt safe outside their home country, which is the same as the 44 per cent who felt safe before they moved. However, feelings of safety varied considerably between those who were in the Islamic Republic of Iran (40 per cent felt safe) and Pakistan (58 per cent felt safe). Furthermore, the reasons for feeling unsafe were somewhat different before they left and as they experienced life in another country.

Older children (i.e., 14–19-year-olds) were asked why they felt unsafe in the country outside Afghanistan. Many reasons were given related to the environment in which the respondents were living outside their home/family life (see Table 4).

Table 4. Reasons for feeling unsafe outside Afghanistan given by 14–19-year-old children (n = 200)

Q: WHY DID YOU FEEL UNSAFE?	%
Lack of appropriate shelter	57
Lack of money/resources	47
The general situation in the country	22
Violence/threats outside the home	52
Violence/threats inside the home	7
Lack of male relative	9
Other	48

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

In addition to the options outlined in Table 4, around half gave a different reason for being unsafe. Many of these responses related to fear of being arrested by the police or other authorities of their host country or treatment from local people, as illustrated by the comments below.

“Because I was working under a cruel employer, and I was afraid of the police.”⁶¹

“I was not safe because of not having documents.”⁶²

“Pakistani people considered us as their enemy. They treated us badly and always beat my father.”⁶³

“Whenever I was leaving job, I was scared of being deported.”⁶⁴

“Because of government officers.”⁶⁵

Older children (i.e., 14–19-year-olds) were also asked how they felt about their overall life satisfaction while they were outside Afghanistan. Overall, two in five (41 per cent) said they were satisfied – that is, they rated their overall life satisfaction as a 5, 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale. However, there are significant differences by location, as many more of those who were living in the Islamic Republic of Iran than Pakistan were satisfied with their lives (43 vs. 28 per cent, respectively). Given that incidence of harm in the Islamic Republic of Iran came through strongly in the research, this finding raises questions on how ‘satisfaction’ is quantified by those who move.

The difference in life satisfaction cannot be explained by perceptions of safety (as explained above) or by differences in number of friends – in both countries around 7 in 10 respondents say they had a lot or a few friends, and 3 in 10 said they had none.

Satisfaction also cannot be explained by family connections. More than 9 in 10 (92 per cent) of those in Pakistan were living with at least one parent, but only half (49 per cent) of those in the Islamic Republic of Iran were in this situation. It suggests that factors such as opportunities to work and to make money may be seen to take precedence over, for instance, personal safety, when people evaluate their life satisfaction. More specific research on these concepts and their impact on children would be worthwhile.

REASONS FOR RETURNING (RETURNEES)

The main reason for most returnees being back in Afghanistan is that they were unable to stay in their host country, usually because they were detained by police and forced to return. Some also left because conditions were too harsh in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan or Türkiye, but the overall picture is of a group of children and young people who were compelled to return to Afghanistan (see Table 5).

Table 5. Reasons for return given by returnee parents and children (n = 958)

Q: WHAT WERE THE MAIN REASONS THAT YOU RETURNED TO AFGHANISTAN?	%
Education	8
Economic	26
Family	18
Security	14
Unable to stay in another country, including forced to return	76
Other	3

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

The main difference between those returning from Pakistan and from the Islamic Republic of Iran is that economic drivers were much more salient among the former – 57 per cent of children and young people who came from Pakistan gave economics as one of the reasons for moving, compared with 19 per cent from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Even so, being unable to stay (69 per cent in Pakistan) was still the most significant reason.

There were multiple stories of children, or family members, being arrested by police in their host country and treated badly. Some also talked about having to pay bribes to police or other authorities so as not to be deported.

“As they got know that my husband is Afghan they deported us.”⁶⁶

“At first my husband and then I along with my kids went to Iran, but after 3 months my husband was deported and I was left alone, so I don’t have any place for living and have no choice but to return back to Afghanistan.”⁶⁷

“My father was arrested by Iran’s patrol, so we all were deported with him.”⁶⁸

“Türkiyish police arrested us and deported us because we didn’t have documents.”⁶⁹

“I didn’t had documents, so police caught me and deported me.”⁷⁰

“They arrested me, imprisoned me, beat me and deported me.”⁷¹

The above findings also correlate with other survey data which detail that three quarters of returnees say they were forced to return and, of these, almost 9 in 10 were forced to do so by their host country (see Table 6).

Table 6. Who forced parents and children to return? (n = 721)

Q: WHO MADE YOU RETURN?	%
Family	23
Friends	1
Government in host country	86
International organization	1
Other	3

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

There are many examples and stories from the qualitative discussions about the poor treatment Afghani children and young people faced, especially in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Those who were forcibly returned to Afghanistan (which are most of those in this research sample) would likely have been arrested by Iranian police and there is sufficient testimony within these data that highlights poor treatment and violations of basic human rights.

“When I arrived in Iran, one of our relatives helped me find work. I worked there for more than 4 months. One day, some police came and arrested us and took us with them. They kept us for 3 weeks and beat us a lot and tortured us in different ways such as they hanged us and started beating us and they were asking us why we had illegally entered their country. Another time, they put us in stinky bathrooms and toilets and didn’t provide us with food and water. Then after all those tortures, they deported us to Nimroz. I didn’t have a penny in my pocket as I was arrested in the workplace where I left everything.”⁷²

This exposure to harm and violence carried out by state authorities often compounded neglect and poor treatment by others in the Islamic Republic of Iran, including communities and employers.

“My father spoke with a smuggler to take us to Iran. We were 20 children between 15 and 17 years old who left their home town. My father came with us. When we were there, my father worked in a stone-cutting factory, and I worked in a shampoo-manufacturing factory. After 4 months, the owner of the stone-cutting factory



The main reason for most returnees being back in Afghanistan is that they were unable to stay in their host country, usually because they were detained by police and forced to return.

informed me that my father was working on a stone-cutting machine to shape and cut stones when a large rock fell on my father’s leg and broke his leg. He came back to Afghanistan because the doctors said he could no longer work in the factory. I stayed behind and paid for my father’s hospital bills. But then the Iranian police came and arrested us while we were working and brought us to the camp where we stayed for 10 days. The police there were very rude. They were yelling and humiliating us saying, ‘You Afghan bastards’. They would beat us if we resisted them. Then they deported us and our lives have deteriorated. ... We are too much in debt now.”⁷³

Yet many did not want to return to Afghanistan – despite the horrendous conditions in their host country. This may be because of fear of reprisals back in their home area, as discussed above, or the need to make money to support their family and/or pay back debtors (typically smugglers or others who helped them move irregularly). The end result is a vicious cycle of poor treatment, dangerous work and neglect or return to Afghanistan with huge debt and a sense of failure and desperation.

CASE STUDY

A 17-year-old boy, Kandahar

“The main reason behind my migration was unemployment. In the previous government, I was working in a factory but when the government fell to the Taliban, I became unemployed. One day, one of my friends who was from Kabul told me to migrate to Iran with him. I borrowed some money from our relatives and told them that I would send their money when I got work in Iran. When we crossed the border, the smuggler separated me from my friend. He told me that I don’t have enough money to continue my journey with them and they would take me to Zahedan. I had borrowed PKR 80,000 so I knew I could not return [to Afghanistan] without achieving my goal which was working in Iran and earning money.”

Eventually the 17-year-old boy found work in a factory, and his employer was keeping his pay for him. But he was arrested and held in detention by the authorities and beaten before being deported without any of his money.⁷⁴ He is now back with his mother, but because he was unable to pay off his debt from his work in the Islamic Republic of Iran, he has to use the money he earns for that. He later said:

“I regret having migrated because I experienced a lot of difficulties on the way, and I’m in debt because I couldn’t stay in Iran to work and earn money. If I knew that I would get indebted and would return empty handed to the country, I would have never migrated abroad. No one told me that the routes are so dangerous. Everyone I asked about the migration to Iran, they all told me that migrating to Iran is an easy thing and there are no problems – until I tried and then I realized that I had made a big mistake. If I had known, I would have invested my migration money here in the country. Also due to my migration, my mother’s sickness got worse. And I was humiliated and ridiculed in Iran. When I was in Iran, my employer didn’t provide good food for me. Mostly, I was eating biscuits, which caused me stomach problems. No, I don’t want to migrate abroad again.”⁷⁵

The 17-year-old boy later admitted that he had also got addicted to drugs while he was in the Islamic Republic of Iran. As he concluded:

“Moving abroad illegally is playing with death and no one should move abroad through illegal means because you will get humiliated and dishonoured in the host country by its people and government and secondly you will spend a lot of money, but you won’t be able to earn even your migration money in the host country.”⁷⁶

Despite it all, the 17-year-old said he is glad to be back with his family.

INTERNATIONAL HELP TO RETURN (RETURNEES)

Just 3 in 10 (30 per cent) returnees report receiving any support from an international agency after crossing over the border into Afghanistan. Among those who received some support, the provision of money (69 per cent) is the most frequent type of support, followed by clothing, food or shelter (56 per cent) and payment for travel (26 per cent) (see Table 7).

Table 7. Type of support received among parents and children who received support from international agencies (n = 287)

Q: WHAT SUPPORT DID THIS AGENCY* PROVIDE YOU WITH, IF ANY?	%
Help to plan the journey back	11
Paid for travel/plane ticket	26
Money	69
Clothing, food or shelter	56
Family reunification	14
Mental health support	2
Case management	2
Other	10

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

*‘This agency’ refers to the international agency that supported the respondent.

The survey results show that those who do get help mostly receive financial and other basic support. This type of support correlates with findings that that financial and basic support is of most immediate need to children and young people as they return to Afghanistan. At the same time, the qualitative data generated from this study also clearly illustrate the trauma many suffer across the migration cycle. Being forced to move initially because of poverty or hunger, building up debts to pay for smugglers and lack of social and security protection in a foreign country, compounded by work that carries abuse by the employer, all create a situation of increasing precarity for many who move. If the authorities in the host government find these children and young people, it can lead to further misery – arrest, humiliation and even torture – before they are forcibly returned to Afghanistan. The psychological and emotional impact on these young people – in addition to the physical pain – is immense.

“If I talk from the perspective of a newly returned child to the country, I can describe their state of feeling as heartbroken, these children are like disabled people, they need someone on their side to take care of them and show them the best track to a better life in the new environment. These children start a new life in the country from zero, with no motivation or hope for the future. There is a need for guide men to go to these children, guide them in starting a new life, ask them about their interests and help them by providing the facilities to achieve their goals and ambitions.”⁷⁷

“When a migrant returns, he has already lost everything. He has lost his spirit. Therefore, immigrants should also receive psychological support, but again, if a job is created and they are busy with work, they will not have time to be anxious and worried. Consequently, their mental condition shall improve.”⁷⁸



“To me, coming back to Afghanistan means struggling with life and living a poor life because there are no employment opportunities and a proper governance system to support you.”⁷⁹

The negative impact of moving is also seen in access to school. Even before they moved, many of these children and young people did not go to school and access to education is lower now that they have returned.

“Moving abroad and coming back to Afghanistan helped me to realize that our culture is the best in the world, it also showed me that you are honoured when you live in your own country but if you migrate to another country, you get ridiculed and humiliated by others. ... Yet coming back to Afghanistan means sadness for me because I couldn’t achieve my goals there. Now I face poverty and unemployment again, which makes me sad.”⁸⁰

The negative impact of moving is also seen in access to school. Even before they moved, many of these children and young people did not go to school – 57 per cent of IDPs said they were in school before they moved and so did 54 per cent of returnees. However, access to education is lower now that they have returned: 42 per cent of IDPs are in school (down 15 points since they first moved) and just 36 per cent of returnees are in school (down 18 points).

Their situation is then compounded by lack of access to assistance for many – as indicated by some of the low levels of support, as explored further in the next section. As one young man, who is now disabled after an accident at work when he was abroad, said:

“Last night, our gas cylinder ran out and we are waiting for someone to help us to buy a kilo of gas, we don’t have bread and water, and we only have a few kilos of flour to make bread, so far no one has helped us and we are asking charity organizations to help the poor people like us, they help thousands of people, they help the rich and those who have a job, but they don’t help us. I have been behind the gates of charity organizations several times, but they did not help me. I saw gunmen and armed people who have power, and the aid is distributed to this kind of people, but they don’t help us. Now is the time of intercession and nepotism. No one helps the poor.”⁸¹

FUTURE MIGRATORY INTENTIONS

Four in five (82 per cent) children plan to stay in their current location in the next 6 months and just 11 per cent plan to move somewhere else. The remainder (7 per cent) are unsure what they will do.

Table 8 shows the demographic breakdown of those who plan to move elsewhere. Across all of those interviewed, 11 per cent of respondents say they plan to move. However, a higher percentage of boys than girls (6 per cent) aim to move on; and older children (20 per cent) are much more likely than others to say they aim to move on.

Table 8. Demographic analysis of those who intend to move in the next 6 months

RESPONDENTS	%
Total	11
Boys	16
Girls	6
Age – years	
7–13	4
14–16	9
17–19	20
Province	
Ghor	8
Herat	12
Kabul	16
Nangahar	17
Nimroz	4
Migration status	
Returnees	15
Internally displaced persons	6
Area	
Urban	9
Rural	13
Peri-urban	15

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.



The fact that so many plan to remain in their current location in the near term means that there are opportunities for service providers to help support these children and young people (and their families).

The Islamic Republic of Iran (38 per cent) is most likely to be mentioned by those who plan to go somewhere else, which probably reflects the high proportion of respondents in the sample who had previously been in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Just under a quarter (23 per cent) of those who plan to move say they plan to go somewhere else in Afghanistan, but as many (22 per cent) plan to travel to Europe.

Among those who plan to stay, 68 per cent feel it will be their choice to stay and 32 per cent feel they will be forced to stay. The fact that so many plan to remain in their current location in the near term means that there are opportunities for service providers to help support these children and young people (and their families), which is explored further in Chapter 4. It may also be the case that if support and services are enhanced in these locations then more will stay given that among those who plan to move somewhere else, only 45 per cent feel it is their choice to move and more than half (55 per cent) say they will be forced to move.

As detailed in Table 9, economic factors are the primary driver of further movement and would be a factor in nearly all cases of respondents planning to move from the area in which they currently live. The prominence of economics as a factor in movement is a very striking finding of this research study.

Table 9. Reasons for planning to move somewhere else from parents and children who plan to move in the next 6 months (n = 173)

Q: WHY DO YOU PLAN TO MOVE AWAY FROM HERE?	%
Education	18
Economic	92
Family	12
Security	24
Natural disaster	3
Unable to stay, including forced move	27
Other	3

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

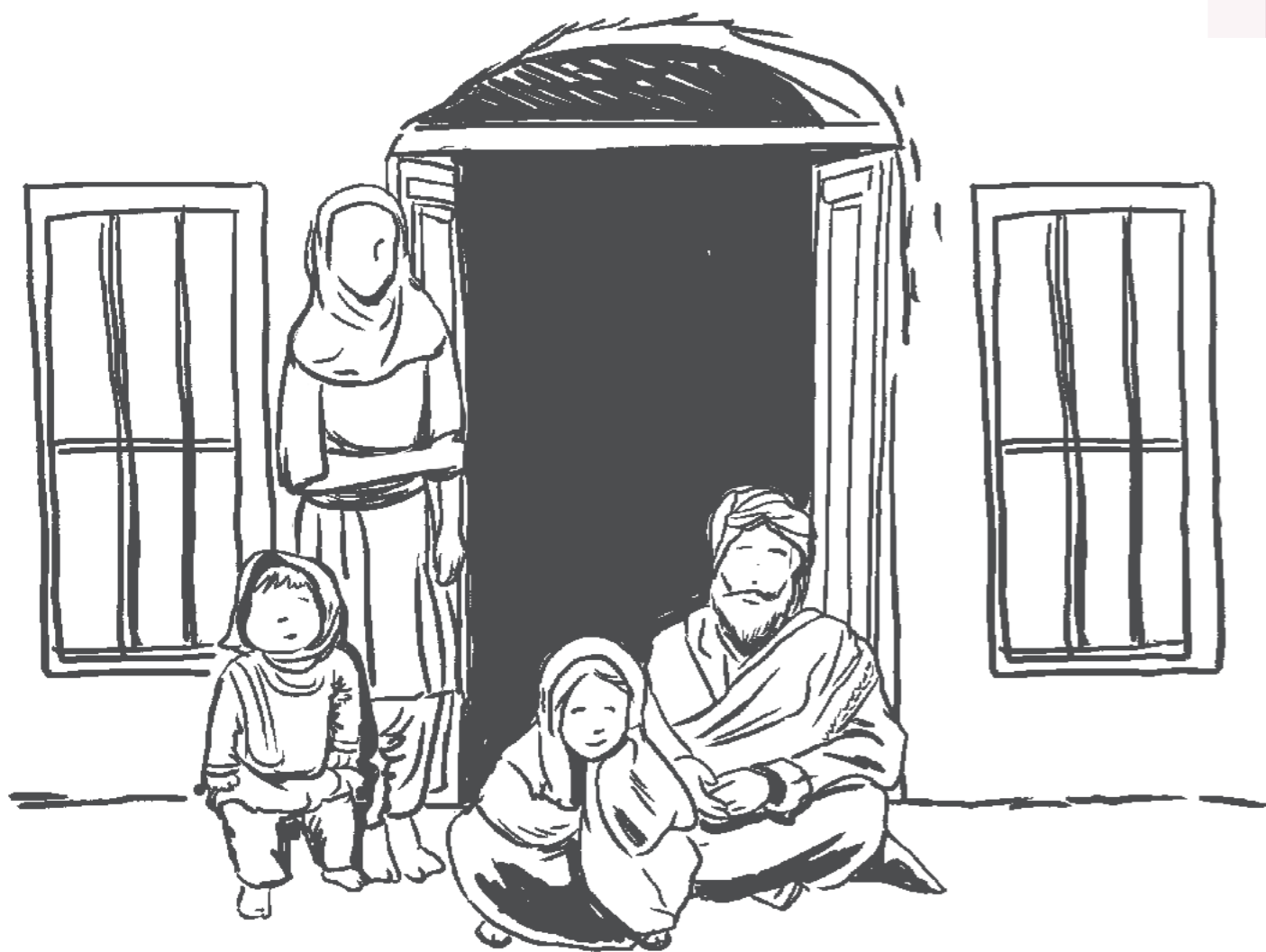
While there is a dominant driver that pushes children and young people to move on, there is no single dominant reason that encourages them to stay in their current location (see Table 10). Personal safety and security (45 per cent), staying with family (40 per cent) and economic considerations (40 per cent) are the most significant factors. Hardly anyone (1 per cent) cites special support services for returnees and IDPs as a reason to stay, but a third (33 per cent) point to not having money to travel as a reason, which suggests a significant desire to move but not the means. This correlates closely with the proportion of these respondents who feel forced to stay in their current location (32 per cent).

Table 10. Reasons for planning to stay in their current location from parents and children who plan to stay in that location for the next 6 months (n = 1,250)

Q: WHY DO YOU PLAN TO STAY HERE?	%
Employment opportunities/jobs/financial security	40
Education opportunities/schools	28
Safety and security	45
My personal freedom	18
Basic services, such as health and water, are good	9
To stay with family	40
To stay with friends	13
Feel part of the local community	10
There are special support services for returnees/internally displaced persons	1
Do not have money to travel	33
Other	6

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

The reasons for people to stay, and barriers to onward movement, are clearly interlinked. For example, many plan to stay in a location because of a lack of options to move elsewhere, for example because their home areas are not safe or it is unaffordable to live elsewhere. Many of the 'other' reasons given by respondents illustrate the perspectives that respondents feel they have nowhere else they can go or they do not want to leave this area/Afghanistan to attempt migration again.



CHAPTER 4

Analysis of migrant and displaced populations' current situation

Chapter 4 offers insights into how Afghan child and youth migrant and displaced populations and their families currently perceive their lives in their new host communities. These include both returned migrants and displaced and those who are still displaced within the country as IDPs. Respondents were questioned about their perceived quality of life, feelings of safety and protection and experiences in accessing services and engaging in collective life. The responses suggest that conditions following return to Afghanistan often further contribute to the downward spiral of harm and neglect introduced in Chapter 3, compounding the negative experiences many encountered during transit and exposing children and youth to further vulnerabilities.

QUALITY OF LIFE

The older children (those aged 14–19 years) were asked about their life satisfaction using a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates a response of feeling 'terrible' and 7 a feeling of being 'delighted'.⁸² The survey asked about respondent's satisfaction with their overall life and across five specific dimensions:

- Family life
- Friendships
- School experience
- Work
- Accommodation.

For this analysis, we have taken those who respond with a 5, 6 or 7 as providing a positive response and categorized them as being 'satisfied' (see Table 11).

Table 11. Life satisfaction of 14–19-year-olds (n = 1,084), October 2022

SATISFACTION WITH...	%*
My overall life	33
My family life	42
My friendships	59
My school experience	33
My work	13
My accommodation	39

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

*% indicating 5, 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates you feel 'terrible' and 7 indicates you feel 'delighted'.

Only one in three are satisfied with their life overall at present and the level of satisfaction varies quite considerably across the range of dimensions. A majority – three in five (59 per cent) – are satisfied with their friendships, but only two in five say the same about family life (42 per cent) or accommodation (39 per cent). The two lowest dimensions are school experience and work. However, these results are based on responses from all 14–19-year-olds irrespective of whether they are currently in school or work. Further analysis shows that of those who are currently in school, 67 per cent are satisfied with their school experience; and of those who are currently working, 28 per cent are satisfied with their work – much more positive ratings for being in school than working.

Table 12 shows the demographic breakdown of the overall life satisfaction indicator. There is no difference in terms of age or migration status, but fewer girls than boys are satisfied (28 per cent and 37 per cent, respectively) and there are considerable differences by province. Children living in Nangahar (12 per cent) and Kabul (26 per cent) are least likely to feel positive about their lives.

Table 12. Demographic analysis of those satisfied with their life overall (n = 1,084)

RESPONDENTS	%*
Total	33
Boys	37
Girls	28
Age – years	
7–13	n/a
14–16	33
17–19	33
Province	
Ghor	42
Herat	48
Kabul	26
Nangahar	12
Nimroz	35
Migration status	
Returnees	33
Internally displaced persons	32
Region	
Urban	33
Rural	27
Peri-urban	35

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

*% of respondents who say they would describe their overall life satisfaction as 5, 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale.



Only one in three are satisfied with their life overall at present and the level of satisfaction varies quite considerably across the range of dimensions.

Respondents gave their reason for rating their life satisfaction as they did. Frequently, economic considerations are given for those who rate low on this score, as illustrated by the following comments.

“It’s been a year that the security situation is improved, but everything is expensive now.”⁸³

“Our economic situation is very bad, and I don’t have time for school now because I have to work and earn money for family.”⁸⁴

“Our economy is low and we are poor. My father is sick, and don’t have a job. We don’t have our own house, and no money to attend school.”⁸⁵

“Since there is no school, we remain uneducated; also there is no work, and we are poor and homeless.”⁸⁶

These perspectives are corroborated by feedback from discussions with key informants who consistently pointed to the dire situation facing many migrant and displaced children and families, illustrating the lack of the most basic services and support mechanisms.

“Currently, the children of returnees and displaced people are living in a piteous state, poverty or lack of financial sources are their main challenges. Since there are several drought years, parents of these children have lost their jobs and their children are collecting fuel from the dustbins for the coming of the new season (winter) and this become a common job for these children. ... Our message to you is to tell the offices you are in contact with that bread is necessary for the hungry and water for the thirsty. Our people are thirsty for water and education and hungry for bread, and the Taliban’s oppression and cruelty are so much and unbearable that cannot be described.”⁸⁷

In contrast, those who are most positive about their life tend to mention their family, being able to go to school and feeling safe.

“Because I have a good family, that doesn’t interfere in my life a lot, and I can freely get education.”⁸⁸

“My parents are alive and I am happy in my home. My friends are good, and no one forces me to work.”⁸⁹

“Because I am with my parents, and they provide all my needs.”⁹⁰

SAFETY AND PROTECTION

Most children⁹¹ (71 per cent) say they have not experienced any of the 10 types of harm or violence covered in the survey while living in their current area (see Table 13). The most likely harm for them to have experienced is having felt scared of other people (14 per cent). Similar proportions have been physically hurt by someone they know (5 per cent) or by someone they did not know (8 per cent). Overall, 12 per cent of children have been physically hurt by someone.



Most children say they have not experienced any of the 10 types of harm or violence covered in the survey while living in their current area.

Table 13. Experience of harm in current location as reported by 14–19-year-olds (n = 1,084), October 2022

Q: HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED ANY OF THESE AT ANY TIME SINCE YOU HAVE BEEN LIVING IN THIS AREA?	%
Been physically hurt by someone you know	5
Been physically hurt by someone you did not know	8
Been forced to do work without being paid	5
Been forced to do work with pay	5
Been forced to join the military or another armed group	*
Carried a weapon to protect yourself	*
Felt scared of other people	14
Seen or had to run away from unexploded devices/bombs	6
Held against your will by government authorities, including the army or police	1
Held against your will by someone else	*
Other forms of harassment or violence	2
No/none of these	71
Don't know/can't remember	8
Refused	*

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

*a value higher than 0% but less than 0.5%.

Girls are less likely than boys to have experienced one or more of these harms, and exposure to these harms seems to increase with age. Returnees are more exposed to these harms than IDPs. However, the key difference is by province – only 44 per cent of those in Kabul have not experienced any of these harms (Table 14).

Table 14. Demographic analysis of those who say they have not experienced any harm/violence (n = 1,084)

RESPONDENTS	%
Total	71
Boys	65
Girls	78
Age – years	
7–13	n/a
14–16	74
17–19	68
Province	
Ghor	78
Herat	76
Kabul	44
Nangahar	69
Nimroz	87
Migration status	
Returnees	68
Internally displaced persons	77
Region	
Urban	72
Rural	72
Peri-urban	69

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

Analysis of experience of harms and abuse among those living in Kabul shows that these respondents are somewhat more likely to have been physically hurt by someone (17 per cent), been forced to work (24 per cent), felt scared of other people (24 per cent) and seen or had to run away from unexploded devices/bombs (22 per cent).

Issues around family violence were not covered in the quantitative research (due to its sensitivity and ethical considerations).



Overall, children are more likely to feel safe than unsafe living in their current area; however, as many as 3 in 10 children feel unsafe at least sometimes.

Insights from the qualitative interviews demonstrate there can be additional vulnerabilities facing returnees if they have moved and perceived to have 'failed'. The interviews suggest that some families accept their children back, while others do not.

“When a child returns empty handed to the household, family members such as parents use abusive words for these children that why they couldn’t make it to reach to their destination, who will pay the loans and how, as well as beat them that you are a useless boy, you spent our money and returned empty handed to the country. That’s why the children cannot reintegrate in the household and get isolated. But in some other families, this is not the case. They don’t use abusive words when they return back home, rather they show sympathy with their child and support them in all aspects so that they don’t get upset or develop health problems. That’s why they are integrated easily in the family.”⁹²

“Returnee and IDP children cannot go to school now. Returnees and IDPs have a fragile economy and cannot support their family’s living expenses. Thus, their children under the age of 18 have no option but to work. Most of the children of returnees and IDPs work in the industrial township with meagre salaries or as apprentices in shops.”⁹³

FEELINGS OF SAFETY

Overall, across all ages covered in the survey, children are more likely to feel safe (73 per cent) than unsafe (12 per cent) living in their current area. Although this is a positive finding, it does mean that as many as 3 in 10 children feel unsafe at least sometimes (12 per cent feel 'unsafe' and 15 per cent feel 'sometimes safe/sometimes unsafe').

Table 15 shows the demographic breakdown of those who feel unsafe in their current location. More girls than boys feel unsafe and there are some differences by age, with fewer 7–13-year-olds reporting feeling unsafe. There is no difference by migration type, but there are significant differences by province with those currently living in Kabul and Nangahar considerably more likely to feel unsafe.

Table 15. Demographic analysis of those who report feeling 'unsafe' (n = 1,529)

RESPONDENTS	%
Total	12
Boys	10
Girls	15
Age – years	
7–13	7
14–16	14
17–19	14
Province	
Ghor	2
Herat	11
Kabul	20
Nangahar	20
Nimroz	11
Migration status	
Returnees	13
Internally displaced persons	12
Region	
Urban	10
Rural	15
Peri-urban	16

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

Older children (i.e., those aged 14–19 years) were also asked if they feel safe or not in different locations – in their home, outside during the daytime, outside at night or at school.

Very few felt unsafe either at their school (5 per cent)⁹⁴ or in their home (7 per cent), and only a small proportion felt unsafe outside during the daytime (15 per cent). However, a majority felt unsafe outside at night (55 per cent). This finding is consistent with research in most countries where people tend to feel less safe at night than during the day.

As explored in the previous section, children’s perceptions of their level of safety have significantly improved compared with how they recall feeling before they moved. When asked how safe or unsafe they felt in their home area before they moved, just 38 per cent claim to have felt safe and more, 43 per cent, felt unsafe. The proportion of children who therefore felt unsafe at least sometimes fell from 3 in 5 (58 per cent) before they moved to 3 in 10 (28 per cent) after.

The perceptions of safety in one’s home area varied considerably by type of respondent. More than half of IDPs felt unsafe in their home area (53 per cent) and only 32 per cent felt safe. In contrast, those who moved to leave Afghanistan were relatively more likely to feel safe in their home area: 42 per cent felt safe vs. 38 per cent unsafe.

Those respondents who said they feel unsafe (or parents who felt the area was unsafe for their child) were asked why they felt this way. The two key reasons were lack of money/resources (63 per cent) and lack of appropriate shelter (60 per cent) (Table 16).

Table 16. Respondents’ reasons for feeling unsafe (n = 189), October 2022

Q: WHY DO YOU FEEL THIS LOCATION IS UNSAFE (FOR YOUR CHILD)?	%
Lack of appropriate shelter	60
Lack of money/resources	63
The general situation in the country	46
Violence/threats outside the home	47
Violence/threats inside the home	4
Lack of male relative	6
Other	7
Don’t know	0
Refused	0

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

These data also illustrate how perceptions of safety should not just be linked to the experience (or threat) of actual violence. Instead, safety is part of a multidimensional assessment of one’s quality of life and where people feel unsafe it is typically linked to other negative life experiences – particularly around economics. Their household situation, family well-being, children’s familiarity and relationship with those living in proximity to them and multiple other factors are all likely to have an impact on notions of safety. The qualitative research illustrates this well.



Perceptions of safety should not just be linked to the experience (or threat) of actual violence. Safety is part of a multidimensional assessment of one’s quality of life and where people feel unsafe it is typically linked to other negative life experiences – particularly around economics.

“Our children do not see their current situation and future well because there are no jobs, the economic situation is not good, forced marriages are taking place, there is a lot of family violence, there is no way or opportunity provided for them to study. ... We live in a country where nothing is good. There is no security.”⁹⁵

“We have recently returned from Pakistan after the collapse of the previous government, and we are a poor family. And you know that people do not get along with poor people and everyone sees them as not valuable and doesn’t respect them.”⁹⁶

“The biggest challenge is poverty and lack of employment. The fathers of these children do not have job security, and this is the reason why children become vulnerable.”⁹⁷

Lack of security can also be exacerbated for migrant and displaced populations because of a lack of community and other support that they might expect to have if living in their home area:

“It’s hard to be a migrant here. No one from our village lives here and we feel alone and strange here. When we need help or support, there is no one to support or help us. So, being a migrant is very difficult for me. Finding work is hard in a place where you don’t know anyone and paying the rent of the house is another burden on your shoulders. Besides, you feel scared of the community and other people because you don’t know whether they are good or bad.”⁹⁸

“Around here, sometimes locals opposed the returnees and displaced members concerning the food assistance distributed through philanthropic organizations. According to them, the assistance should not be distributed to the displaced people in this community because the local people say that these assistances are for the local people and are given as a quota for them, not displaced people and tenants. They think returnees and displaced people are here temporarily and do nothing to build the community. Thus, the indigenous people of the community have a negative perspective toward the returnees and the displaced people. Also, in decision-making matters, the local people do not give any rights to the displaced people.”⁹⁹

To some extent the problems faced by these children and young people are because they are migrants/displaced, but such problems also reflect the harsh and difficult conditions faced by many host communities – so even if host communities want to help, they often do not have the means to do so.

“Actually, the people of Ghor province cannot cooperate in any way. Every individual is concerned with providing food for their own household. There is no privileged individual to assist others. Honestly, everyone tries to save their own children from death and hunger. They cannot assist others.”¹⁰⁰



Even where children and young people struggle with security and access to services where they currently are in Afghanistan, it is often thought to be better than experiences abroad.

“There are bunches of challenges in people’s daily life, they are struggling with poor livelihood, and they cannot provide something to eat three times a day. For those families who are living in abject poverty, the local people provide assistance and foodstuffs based on their financial ability.”¹⁰¹

However, the picture is not one of total isolation or exclusion. Qualitative interviews point to examples of migrant and displaced children being supported in their host communities.

“The community people sit with child returnees and guide them to the straight path and show sympathy with them. They tell them that they are there for their support and invite them to different ceremonies in the community so that they don’t feel isolated. They also tell other children and people in the community not to harass the child returnees by using abusive words for them so that they could easily reintegrate within the community and build good relations as they had before their migration abroad.”¹⁰²

“Whenever new immigrants come here, we assign a group of the area’s elders to collect foodstuffs and other equipment for them from the houses. We also emphasize to them if they need bread or other things just send their sons to their neighbours and they will provide them with the goods they need. If you stay a while here in our house, you will see children who are knocking on the door of our house and asking for food and used clothes. The people of the area only help them in this manner and with these goods like bread, flour, cooking oil and soup. We are not heartless and can feel what situation they are going through.”¹⁰³

Furthermore, and reflecting the statistical analysis above, even where children and young people struggle with security and access to services where they currently are in Afghanistan, it is often thought to be better than experiences abroad, such as in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

“It is hard to live both here and in Iran; however, I prefer my country to Iran because I have an Afghan identity here and I am not persecuted and harassed. At the moment, we are not afraid of anyone here, but in Iran, the security situation was not very good for us, and I did not think that I was safe. In the place where we were, every day there was a conflict between the people of the area, and this made fear and apprehension prevail in me ... here at least we have no fear of the police’s interference or detention, and we consider ourselves safe.”¹⁰⁴

“Generally, Afghans are insulted and humiliated in public in Iran, hear taunts, and are called ‘Afghani’ in a humiliating manner. They enjoy returning to their country and can sleep peacefully at night in their country even if they are hungry. When the returnees return to their country, their love for their land increases; we have seen people who, after returning, were interested in their work and had a sense of peace.”¹⁰⁵

SERVICE ACCESS

Table 17 shows the services or support children say they have received while staying in their current location (A). Two thirds have used a health centre or hospital (67 per cent) and half have been to school (51 per cent). Relatively few children have accessed any of the other services or support covered in the survey.

The lack of use of a service does not necessarily mean lack of service availability, as some children may not feel they have needed that service. As illustrated in Table 17, to understand where there are service gaps, those respondents who have not used each service were also asked if they had not needed to use the service (B) or had needed the service but had been unable to use it (C).

There is considerable unmet demand for these services: 85 per cent of the children need cash support and 69 per cent a safe place to play but are unable to access these. More than half are also unable to get help to find work (63 per cent) or social worker/counselling support (55 per cent).

Non-use of family tracing/reunification help is mostly explained by children not needing these services; and many non-users of legal support do not need this help rather than being unable to access it (43 per cent each).

Table 17. Access to services and support for 7–19-year-olds ($n = 1,529$), October 2022¹⁰⁶

I am going to read out some services and support that you may or may not have used. For each one, since you have been staying here, tell me if you have used it/received it or not?

	(A) USED/ RECEIVED, %	(B) NOT NEEDED, %	(C) NEEDED, UNABLE TO, %	(D) REFUSED/NOT KNOWN/ NOT ANSWERED, %
A health centre or hospital	67	5	25	3
Social worker/counselling support	14	27	55	4
A school/education	51	4	36	9
Family tracing/reunification help*	10	59	22	9
Cash support	9	5	85	1
Help finding work*	15	18	63	4
Legal support	9	43	43	4
A safe place to play	20	7	69	4

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

* Asked of 14–19-year-olds only ($n = 1,084$).

Findings for this question are notable for the majority of children indicating that family tracing and reunification was ‘not needed’ – reflecting the fact that 98 per cent of the profile indicated they were already accompanied by a responsible adult.

Table 18 shows the proportion of different types of respondents who have been unable to access three of the services: social worker, cash support and a safe place to play. These data illustrate several important differences, as well as consistencies, in the lack of service provision.

There is no difference by sex or migrant status in terms of lack of access to social workers. Slightly more younger children have unmet needs. However, the differences by province are more significant, with the highest levels of unmet demand in Ghor and Herat, being twice the proportion of those in Nangahar or Nimroz,

In contrast, unmet demand for cash support is reasonably consistent between different provinces and also by age of the child. The main difference for this item is higher unmet demand among girls and somewhat more among IDPs.

Table 18. Demographic analysis of those who have needed but been unable to access selected service (n = 1,529)

RESPONDENTS	SOCIAL WORKER, %	CASH SUPPORT, %	SAFE PLAY SPACE, %
Total	55	85	69
Boys	55	79	60
Girls	55	92	81
Age – years			
7–13	60	85	69
14–16	52	88	75
17–19	54	82	62
Province			
Ghor	71	86	58
Herat	67	89	86
Kabul	60	87	71
Nangahar	45	83	56
Nimroz	30	81	79
Migration status			
Returnees	55	83	69
Internally displaced persons	55	88	69
Area			
Urban	57	85	65
Rural	52	87	75
Peri-urban	53	84	75

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

Many more girls than boys do not have a safe place to play, particularly in Herat and Nimroz. The lack of play opportunities is seen as symbolic of other deprivations children face, including lack of education, hygiene and health.

“Educational opportunities for children in our country are minimal, and no recreational places exist. It used to be a playground for children, but powerful men usurped it. Currently, children do not have a place to play. In addition, no sports centres can improve their health, and no one has assisted in this field.”¹⁰⁷

“Because people have low incomes, children do not have enough food and clothes. There are no playgrounds and entertainment places for children, which causes depression in children.”¹⁰⁸

The lack of sufficient cash – and the inability to earn money to generate cash – is both an immediate problem for children and young people, and a longer-term concern for many given the high levels of indebtedness they incur. Movement costs money so the search for more security or better livelihoods has costs associated with it, as explained by the following community leader.

“Before we had security issues but right now the issues of security are solved but the issues of unemployment and drought still exist. In terms of unemployment, most migrants don’t have education, skill and money. Each mentioned factors that increased the chance of unemployment among them. The drought also impacts negatively in the area. Most internally displaced persons run away from drought in their area. Even in our society, some local families left here because of water shortage and lost their agricultural lands and livestock. The drought issues covered both the local community and migrants. They are losing their deposits and are under debit.”¹⁰⁹

The following case study illustrates the painful trauma associated with moving, especially where smugglers are involved and how the whole family unit is impacted.

CASE STUDY

18-year-old woman, Kabul

An 18-year-old woman living in Kabul described how she and the rest of her family (parents and nine siblings) had paid a smuggler to take them to the Islamic Republic of Iran. They sold everything they owned to pay the fee. The journey took more than 8 days, and they were given very little food and had to walk long distances. When they arrived in the Islamic Republic of Iran, they stayed with relatives but had to remain hidden so they would not be arrested. Her father finally found some work as a labourer, but 5 months later was arrested and the family, except for one of her brothers who managed to hide, was deported. They are now back in Kabul living in one room with no kitchen or bathroom. She said,

“When we arrived in Kabul, we even did not have the basic necessities like something to eat. Our neighbours and kin assisted us with food, cash and household utensils. Now, my father is jobless and ill. In addition, after four months, my brother was also arrested and deported back to Afghanistan. It made us anxious since he was our family’s only source of income. My father is a drug addict, and his health is dire now. He coughs too much, and his liver has a problem. Also, he feels pain in his feet. My brother works as a car cleaner, earning 150 AFN a day. My two younger sisters are begging on the street since we are in dire situations. ... We are angry and sad because we lost everything and spent all of our savings.”¹¹⁰

Consultations with child protection actors¹¹¹ further underscored the continuing challenges of guaranteeing availability, accessibility and quality of services consistently throughout the country. Following August 2021, the country witnessed a systemic collapse with severe reduction of the social workforce, institutional and line ministries as well as university and think tank personnel dedicated to fostering service delivery, capacity and coordination mechanisms. As a result, services are provided in the immediate aftermath of children’s return during the reception stage, but when moving to other areas of return and reintegration, multisector interventions might not be available in all locations where children have settled. This, coupled with a decrease in capacity of case workers and increase of child returnee case load, leaves a high percentage of children with unmet needs in the long run.

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Children (and parents of younger children) were asked why they were (their child is) not at school. IDPs and refugees can face additional barriers to receiving education because they have moved. This may be because of lack of an identity card or due to them having stopped schooling after they moved and not reconnecting with the education system thereafter. Frequent movement from one place to another also makes accessing education more difficult, as illustrated by the following explanations given by children themselves.

“We are always moving, so I didn’t get the chance to go to school.”¹¹²

“A lack of Tazkira.”¹¹³

“When I went to abroad, I was dropped out of school. I am not allowed to start it again.”¹¹⁴

“When I was not a refugee, I was in school, but when I became a refugee, the school stopped. The money I had was all spent on travel. I sold the land for the trip, and I got rid of it, and the money, too. So I have to get a job now, but there are no jobs. I sometimes get it once a week. Therefore, I cannot attend school.”¹¹⁵

Nevertheless, specific factors related to being a migrant or displaced as barriers for not being in school are given fairly infrequently. They are not typically a major or the main reason for being excluded. Other factors, such as quality of teaching, preference for religious education or family pressure not to attend are also given as reasons – and each of these could apply as much to those who have not moved as to those who have. Yet, analysis of feedback of the responses clearly demonstrates that economic factors are the key barrier to school participation. This could be because of the cost of schooling (e.g., fees, exam costs or equipment) or, more likely, that children have to work – or seek work – to help support their families, as suggested by the following quotes.

“I have to work to cover life expenses, support my family.”¹¹⁶

“Our economy is poor, so I am looking for job. Therefore, I stop school.”¹¹⁷

“Every day I go to Chawk to get a job. Sometimes, there’s work, sometimes there’s not. How can I go to school?”¹¹⁸

“I was alone because my father left us. I had to work to find food, and no one helped me to study.”¹¹⁹

In addition, the following are examples of parents explaining why their child (aged between 7 and 13 years) does not attend school given the economic context.

“Due to financial problems, we are not able to provide uniform and stationery to send out kids to the school.”¹²⁰

“As I am old so I cannot work, and my kid works for food.”¹²¹

“Due to problems and lack of money they are not able to buy the school tools.”¹²²

Even so, several key informants explained how returnee children suffer more – they have little or no access to education now that they have returned, which compounds months or potentially years of lack of education when they were outside Afghanistan. More often than not, lack of education is linked with other issues facing families, such as economic difficulties, poor health and lack of work.



Girls are particularly impacted and are more likely to be prevented from going to schools.

“The single biggest problems facing children who have returned are education and malnutrition. Unfortunately, no one has done anything special to solve the child returnees’ problem. Most of the returnees’ children have less or are uneducated. We don’t have enough resources here. The children don’t have good health. They don’t have access to nutritious food. Most of the immigrants’ children between 10 to 12 years old seem to be 6 to 7 years old. They are thin and sick. This is a serious problem among the immigrants’ children here. We haven’t seen any NGO help for them.”¹²³

Girls are particularly impacted and are more likely to be prevented from going to schools – either because they are not allowed to due to government restrictions/school closures or because their families do not want them to go. These are far more salient reasons for girls not being at school than the girls choosing not to attend themselves.

“With Taliban take over, our future is not clear.”¹²⁴

“Because girls are not allowed to study after 6th grade.”¹²⁵

“The government has closed the school though I like it very much. There are many problems for girls.”¹²⁶

“After Islamic Emirate take over, secondary school was closed.”¹²⁷

“Because my father and big brother says that I am grown up now, and that it’s my marriage time. They say, it is bad if an adult girl go to school.”¹²⁸

The qualitative data pointed to some of the frustrations that girls feel at their lack of ability to go to school or have opportunities that boys in similar socioeconomic situations have. As a 13-year-old girl said,

“I suffer a lot because we don’t have a house and move from one house to another. Also, I can’t help my mother with her tailoring tasks. I wish I were a boy because there are so many restrictions for girls, especially immigrant girls. For example, girls cannot do whatever they want whenever they want. However, if I were a son, I could provide financial support for my family. In our region, unlike boys, there is much discrimination against girls. For example, boys have access to many things that girls do not. Girls in our area often cannot go out of the house because people consider it a fault.”¹²⁹

Likewise, a 15-year-old girl, who was internally displaced having recently returned with her family from the Islamic Republic of Iran, linked her current lack of opportunities with their ‘failed’ migration – a ‘failure’ that was seen to have had a particularly negative impact on her as a girl.

“Migration is a horrible phenomenon because a person lives in his own community for many years, grows up there, goes to school, gets used to people, and progresses little by little. Conversely, the situation becomes very hopeless when a person often migrates from one place to another. I think migration is much more difficult for girls because boys can travel far away, study and work anyway. When there is no school in a community, girls cannot go to a school far away from their community or stay away from home because different ethnic groups live in this community. Since we don’t have any acquaintances in this area, we can’t leave the house.”¹³⁰

ACCESS TO ESSENTIALS

Children aged 14–19 years were also asked if they had access to six other types of products or services. These range from essentials, such as clean drinking water and enough food to eat, to other commodities, such as a mobile phone.

Although a majority of children have access to clean drinking water (68 per cent) and washing facilities (65 per cent), it is striking that a significant proportion – around one in three – do not (*see Table 19*). It is also noteworthy that these children are as likely to have a mobile phone as enough food to eat; and, reflecting findings reported above, fewer than 3 in 10 feel they have money for day-to-day living (28 per cent). A similarly small proportion of girls have access to feminine hygiene products.

Table 19. Access to essentials for 14–19-year-olds (n = 1,084), October 2022

DO YOU HAVE ACCESS TO ... ?	% YES
Clean drinking water	68
Washing facilities	65
Enough food to eat	50
Mobile phone	47
Feminine hygiene products ¹³¹	29
Money for day-to-day living	28

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

Table 20 shows the demographic breakdown of those who say they have access to clean drinking water, enough food to eat and money for day-to-day living. It shows some large differences, such as fewer girls having access to both clean water and enough food to eat, and access somewhat lower to both among those aged 14–16 than the older age group. Generally, more returnees have access than IDPs, although the differences are not huge. However, the biggest difference is by province, with those living in Kabul particularly likely not to have access.

Table 20. Demographic analysis of percentage of respondents who have access to essentials (n = 1,084)

	CLEAN DRINKING WATER, %	ENOUGH FOOD, %	MONEY, %
Total	68	50	28
Boys	80	57	35
Girls	54	40	20
Age – years			
7–13	n/a	n/a	n/a
14–16	64	42	23
17–19	73	58	33
Province			
Ghor	68	75	25
Herat	88	71	64
Kabul	54	25	17
Nangahar	67	42	13
Nimroz	67	33	26
Migration status			
Returnees	72	54	33
Internally displaced persons	62	43	21
Region			
Urban	63	47	23
Rural	79	51	33
Peri-urban	74	55	38

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

The qualitative research was designed to try to collect examples of how services have been designed specifically to support those children who have been impacted by migration, either as returnees or IDPs. The overriding feedback from the research, however, is the lack of support, which corroborates the data as presented in Tables 19 and 20.

It is difficult for either the government or NGOs to meet the huge demand for support. There is an appreciation that international support is being provided; however, there is criticism that this is not reaching the intended recipients.



The main problems are poverty, lack of employment opportunities and lack of educational opportunities. No one has helped us yet. ... We suggest that NGOs should provide job opportunities.

“The NGOs should provide foodstuff and clothes and cash to the children and the government should provide employment opportunities for these groups. The reason behind why this support is not being provided is that it’s embezzled. We hear on the radio and watch it on the television that a lot of assistance has been provided for the Afghan children by the international community but these supports are not reaching the needy ones – it is embezzled by the government of NGOs or the international community announces false news about these supports.”¹³²

“The main problems are poverty, lack of employment opportunities and lack of educational opportunities. No one has helped us yet. Today, my friends said that those who returned from Iran are being registered, so I reached out to you to be registered and provided with employment opportunities. We suggest that NGOs should provide job opportunities.”¹³³

“The Taliban interfere in the distribution of aid and the selection of aid beneficiaries and do not pay attention to the displaced people inside the cities.”¹³⁴

“When aids come to the community, first of all the Taliban takes it and then, they distribute it among those who have worked with them previously. Sometimes, they were distributing some aids to the families, there was a woman who was a widow and she wanted to get benefited from the aids as well but the Taliban members beat her and told her why she has come out of her house and asking for aids and told her to leave the area and go to her home, otherwise they will beat her more. But when their own people were coming, they allowed them to enter the distribution place and take the aids.”¹³⁵

The following case study highlights the difficulties faced by some in receiving the support to which they are entitled, and the additional problems caused if they raise a concern or complaint.

CASE STUDY

17-year-old boy, Kandahar

“I would say that we feel both supported and unsupported here. First, I would like to tell you why we feel supported: as I mentioned above, we have a water problem in our house, but it’s solved by our neighbours because they provide us water from their well and on the other hand, ... when we face any problem, our neighbours are there to support us. Second, why we don’t feel supported is that when assistance comes from the NGOs, it doesn’t reach us. Most of the time when we go to the community leader or any other person in charge, they don’t take our names on the list of beneficiaries and don’t provide any support.”¹³⁶

The 17-year-old later said, “When assistance comes to the community, if we go to the community leader or Mulla Imam of the mosque to add our name on the list, either they don’t take our name or they tell us to share the assistance with them 50/50. A while ago, I filed a complaint against them in the governor’s office that the community leader or Mulla Imam of the mosque doesn’t provide assistance for us because I didn’t know that they were also Taliban. After my complaint, they came to my house and asked me why I had filed a complaint against them. They threatened me that if I repeated it once again, they would take my house and create more problems for me.”¹³⁷

COLLECTIVE LIFE AND INFORMAL SERVICES

Regarding treatment from the host communities, 93 per cent of children said they were treated in a ‘good’ way – just 6 per cent were treated in a ‘bad’ way. The low number of respondents who felt they were treated badly (n = 62) means that any analysis of why these children felt badly treated requires interpretation with some caution. The data suggest that migration status plays a role. For example, 18 of these 62 respondents (29 per cent) believed they were treated poorly by local people because “I am not living in my home area/am displaced”, but 26 out of 62 (42 per cent) believed it was because of their economic status. Of course, these issues will be inter-related but these limited survey data corroborate evidence from the qualitative interviews – sometimes local communities are ‘hostile’ to migrant/displaced children. However, such hostility can stem from underlying lack of provision, security and economic stability in the lives of the local people rather than a principled opposition to the inclusion of migrants and displaced populations per se. It should also be noted that there are many cases captured in the qualitative studies which indicated local communities helping and being supportive where possible, despite significant resource constraints.

The qualitative data pointed to a nuanced picture, in which some children and young people feel discriminated against – because they are not known in the area and/or because of negative associations with their migration. While the data point to communities willing to help in many situations, as outlined above, these also highlight the limitations on communities that are, themselves, struggling to survive. In addition, a minority spoke of bad treatment by those around them. As a 17-year-old girl interviewed in Nangahar said:

“No one cares about us – neither they invite us to their weddings or other functions nor they help us to get rid of this bad situation. People of this community treat us differently because we are migrants and we don’t know anyone here. We wish we could have moved anywhere else where we could receive help and assistance, as well as sympathy and good treatment from the community people, at least. Where my father could find a job or work so that we could have access to enough food.”¹³⁸

The economic insecurity faced by these children and the high levels of unmet demand for many core services are compounded by the relatively low level of participation in more informal groups and associations, which could potentially provide protective support. As detailed in Table 21, two thirds of children are not a member of any of the six groups asked about in the survey. The highest levels of participation are in religious and sports groups, but even with these only one in five children say they are members.

Table 21. Membership of organizations or groups for 14–19-year-olds (n = 1,084), October 2022

Q: ARE YOU A MEMBER OF ANY OF THE FOLLOWING TYPES OF ORGANIZATIONS OR GROUPS?	%
Religious (e.g., mosque)	19
Sports groups	19
Community groups	4
Volunteer/NGO groups	1
Youth groups	8
Mother and child groups	1
Other	*
None	65
Don't know	*

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

*a value higher than 0% but less than 0.5%.

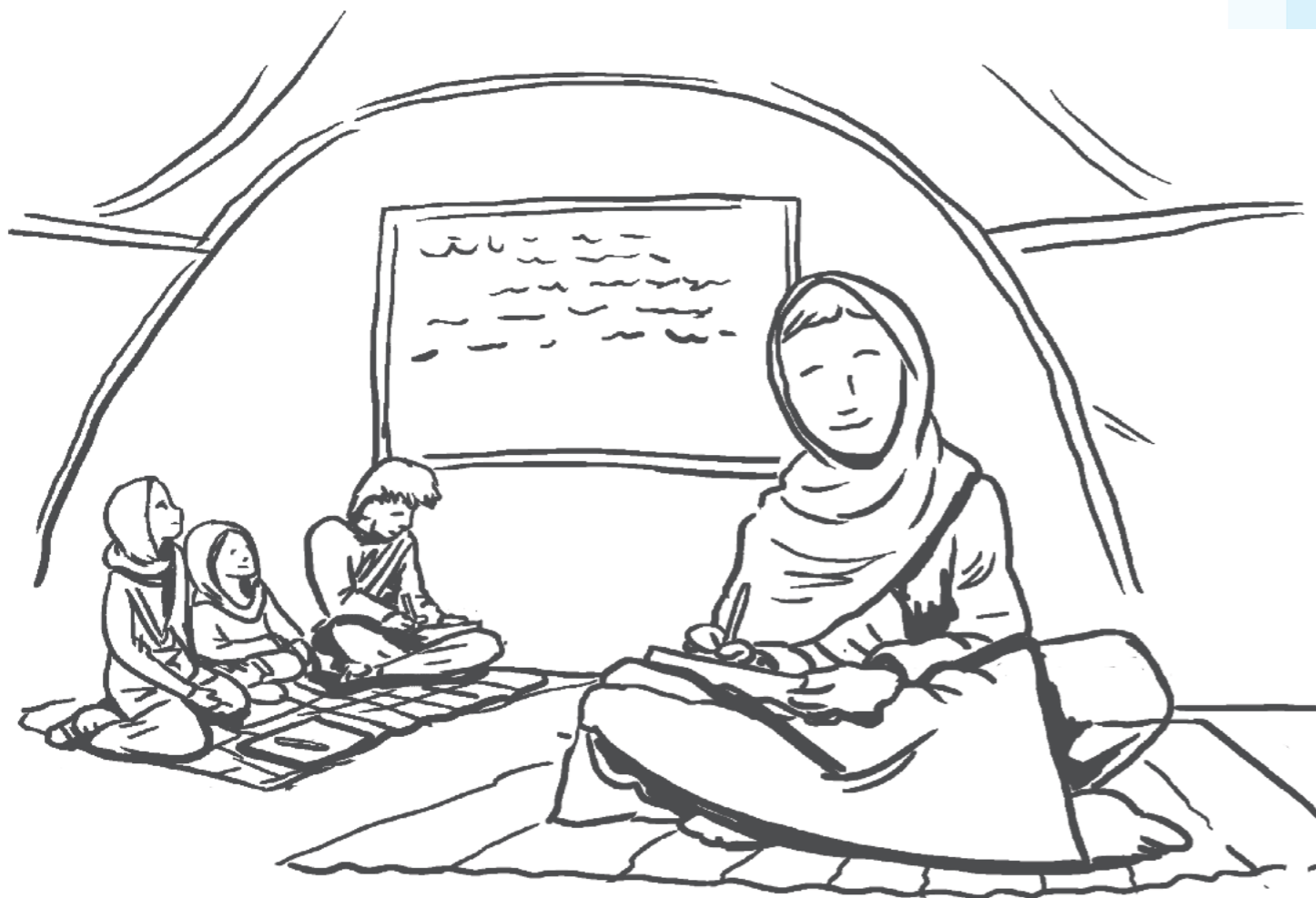
There is little difference in participation level based on the child's migration status; instead, age (younger children are less likely to participate) and location (those living in Kabul are particularly less likely to) explain much more. However, the biggest variation is by sex, with more than twice as many girls than boys not participating in any of these groups, and close to all girls (91 per cent) being excluded from all groups (see Table 22).

Table 22. Demographic analysis of respondents who are not members of any organization (n = 1,084)

RESPONDENTS	%
Total	65
Boys	43
Girls	91
Age – years	
7–13	n/a
14–16	71
17–19	58
Province	
Ghor	43
Herat	73
Kabul	80
Nangahar	60
Nimroz	72
Migration status	
Returnees	63
Internally displaced persons	68
Region	
Urban	61
Rural	69
Peri-urban	71

Source: UNICEF Innocenti research and analysis.

This stark gender divide is also clear when we consider the two most popular groups – religious and sports. Just over a third of boys are members of a religious group (31 per cent) or sports group (34 per cent), but hardly any girls are (4 per cent and 2 per cent, respectively).



CHAPTER 5

Summary key findings and recommendations

KEY FINDINGS

How Afghan returnee or internally displaced children, youth and families describe their journeys prior to arrival in their current location

- **The experience of children and young people who have endured migration journeys – especially those who have been forced to return to Afghanistan – can be conceptualized as a spiral of harm and neglect.** The drivers of movement and the experiences in transit are heavily negative, exposing children and families to multiple vulnerabilities and distress.
- **Nearly all respondents cited poverty, lack of income and economic hardship as a key reason for their initial migration.** Children and adults hope to find a better life and opportunities in neighbouring countries and provide financial support to families back home. **At the same time, drivers of movement are highly complex and inter-related** – respondents also cited additional factors beyond economic hardship, including insecurity linked to conflict, violence and natural disasters as compounding drivers.

- **The journey out of Afghanistan carries significant risk for children.** Although migration can represent a key coping mechanism for households in times of conflict and insecurity, the process also exposes children to risk of abuse and harm as it typically means crossing borders in irregular ways, and it often involves the assistance of smugglers, which increases the risk of harm and leads to debt that must be repaid.

- **Despite knowing the risks involved, many parents encourage their children to move abroad to support their families.** Forty-eight per cent of older children felt the decision to leave Afghanistan was forced on them by parents or other family members. However, a roughly equal number (51 per cent) described their involvement and engagement as active participants in household decisions about migration. These data indicate that, in many cases, the initial decision to move is the result of a complex and negotiated process within households, in which children regularly express their own agency.

- **There is a high risk of exploitation, and no protection is available when working abroad, often illegally.** Children who have moved to neighbouring countries live in precarious conditions with no proper housing or safe income, constantly fearing insecurity and violence. They risk being detained and deported by law enforcement or exploited by traffickers. They often pursue income-generating activities that place them at great risk of exploitation and abuse by their employers.

- **Children are forced to move back to Afghanistan.** The clear majority of respondents were deported, forced to return to Afghanistan.¹³⁹ They did not choose to return because conditions within Afghanistan had improved, or because they had achieved their goals abroad. Instead, respondents cited two primary reasons for returning to Afghanistan: overt or implicit pressure by state authorities, often leading to deportation; and living conditions that were not conducive to earning money or well-being. The qualitative data demonstrates, indeed, that many of the respondents were subject to overt abuses, including being detained and mistreated by law enforcement agents.

When a host country's authorities discover children working illegally, the children are treated as criminals rather than victims and risk being abused before being deported back to Afghanistan, often without any of the money they managed to earn.

- **The conditions children experience on immediate return and challenges reintegrating can be devastating.** The majority of children and parents who return to Afghanistan do not plan to move again soon. If compelled to move, they said they would do so for economic reasons, regardless of the safety and protection risks they would be likely to encounter. Many children and families said they felt worse off on return than before they moved, citing physical hardship and psychological distress. The services provided by the international community, they said, were insufficient to dissuade them from future migration attempts.

How Afghan returnee or internally displaced children, youth and families perceive their current life in the host community

■ **Children and young people reported poor satisfaction with their current life.** Only one in three children and young people said they were satisfied with their life after returning to Afghanistan. In addition to dealing with the distress that migration brought into their lives, children and young people struggled with school and work – experiences they reported in the lowest categories of satisfaction. In contrast, family and friends provided support and were ranked higher for levels of satisfaction. Girls seem to be less satisfied than boys; and children living in Nangahar and Kabul seem to be less satisfied than children who returned to other parts of the country.

■ **Children and young people reported feeling economically unsafe.** Perceptions of safety were not only linked to violence and threat; children, especially the older ones, reported feeling unsafe when referring to negative life experiences – particularly around personal and household finances, regardless of gender and migration status.

■ **Access to protection services.** Many children and young people say they are unable to access a wide range of basic services and support. This includes support from social workers and school, but also economic support from working or receiving cash support. Strikingly, respondents reported two areas where they lacked services: having a safe place to stay and access to clean drinking water. The absence of formal support services is often compounded by exclusion from membership in more informal, community-based groups that can play a significant role in providing individual and collective support and foster resilience. For instance, only 1 in 25 older children said they were members of a community group and 4 in 5 were not members of a sports group. Exclusion was especially high for girls.

■ **There is a critical need for cash support and counselling/social support.** Most of the children have access to health care and education, services that are widely available, and that most children can access. However, the majority of children indicated a need for and an inability to access cash support, social workers and child-friendly spaces. Legal services such as family reunification were not considered by children as services of priority need.

■ **Children, especially girls, lack safe spaces to play and opportunities to participate in collective life.** Many more girls than boys do not have a safe place to play, particularly in Herat and Nimroz. A very small proportion of male children are part of collective groups and those who are mainly sign up for religious or sports groups. More than twice as many girls as boys do not participate in any of these groups, and almost all girls are being excluded from collective life. This impedes their ability to raise concerns or be heard.

■ **Children feel they have little or no access to education on return.** Economic factors are the key barrier to school participation as well as a lack of many years of

schooling while children were outside Afghanistan. Girls were particularly impacted and were more likely to be prevented from going to schools – either because they were not allowed by government restrictions/school closures or because their families did not want them to attend.

■ **Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) are still largely needed, especially for girls.** One child out of three does not have access to drinking water and washing facilities. Girls have lower access than boys, and only a small proportion are able to access feminine hygiene products.

■ **Variability of experience is often linked to location, not just migration status.** Analysis of experience of harm and abuse among those living in Kabul shows that these respondents are somewhat more likely to have been: physically hurt by someone (17 per cent); forced to work (24 per cent); scared of other people (24 per cent); and exposed to – seen or had to run away from – unexploded devices/ bombs (22 per cent). A number of factors may account for the differences between Kabul and other locations, including the rapid deterioration of overall living conditions including access to drinking water, basic services and food supply following Afghan's transition to the new government, and a potential increase in violence linked to high levels of poverty and insecurity. Similar differences were also reported between perceptions of feelings of safety by province, with respondents living in Kabul and Nangahar considerably more likely to report feeling unsafe. The scope of this study does not allow for a definitive explanation of the variance between these and other locations, raising the need for further analysis.

■ **Systems and policies pertinent to child rights are child-blind and their real impact on Afghan children has not been fully studied.** Laws, policies, strategies and programmes were not adequately implemented prior to the August 2021 political transition to a new government, and their impact on children has not been studied because of weak government structures at the local level, budget constraints, insecurity and a lack of political will. Challenges are even greater in the long-standing humanitarian crisis impacting the country, worsened by policies regulating migration processes that, despite efforts, still regularly lack a child-sensitive lens and specific references to children returnees or internally displaced persons.

RECOMMENDATIONS

■ **Programmatic interventions to support migrant and displaced populations in Afghanistan should adopt a socioecological approach.** The study recognizes the interconnectedness of the vulnerabilities and strengths of children, families and communities. It understands that activities should be grounded within a socioecological approach including interventions aimed at child, family and community levels. Support should not focus solely on the children. Rather, it should take into account Afghan families as a whole as a way to support, protect and care for children. Therefore, it is recommended that child protection risks and resilience factors at the different levels be analysed, facilitating an understanding of the barriers to services. Children, families and communities should be consulted regularly



Children and young people reported poor satisfaction with their current life and feeling economically unsafe.



Programmatic interventions to support migrant and displaced populations in Afghanistan should adopt a socioecological approach and be informed by location-specific, contextual programmatic analysis.

when adopting prevention and response measures. Given the complexity and the multidimensional protection issues relevant to Afghan migrants and displaced families and children, it is useful to learn from other fragile contexts of mixed migration and forced displacement and examine how socioecological approaches have been adopted to enhance a caring and protective environment at large.

- **Programmatic interventions to support migrant and displaced populations in Afghanistan should be informed by location-specific, contextual programmatic analysis.** Child protection actors, along with others, should avoid considering the ‘return and reintegration’ of children and families into their ‘home areas’ as part of a blanket approach because not all solutions are safe, appropriate or sustainable and necessarily in the best interests of the child. The locations where children are (re)settled need to be conducive to their well-being, development, protection and care. Since respondents, regardless of their migration status, reported different experiences of harm based on where they lived – with greater risk reported in Kabul and Nangahar – it is essential that programmes are informed by location-specific contextual analysis.
- Child protection services should not be provided as stand-alone interventions. Rather, child protection services should be designed and implemented from the start with a multisectoral approach, built on a joint effort from different sectors and service providers. The focus should be alleviating poverty and providing access to basic needs. Relevant dialogue regarding sustainable access to services should be open to development and peace actors, who should be encouraged to jointly participate in the design and implementation of services for children and youth in contexts of migration, displacement and return.
- Access to basic services for returnee and internally displaced girls, especially, remains a great challenge that urgently needs to be addressed. Service priorities indicated by respondents include education, access to WASH services and opportunities for safe spaces where children can play, participate and socialize. It is important that spaces are provided where boys and girls can both be supported and listened to, which can serve as a venue to explore and address the experience and needs of children and work with families.
- Reintegration programming should consider children’s personal experience, migration journey and family situation, regardless of their status as a returnee or internally displaced persons. This implies adopting a phased approach, tackling basic needs in the immediate term, and acknowledging and addressing drivers that compel unsafe movement at the family and child levels in the medium and long term – needs stemming from poverty, violence, service barriers and gender considerations, among others. The programmes should include the recommendations based on multisectoral, integrated strategies that bridge humanitarian, development and peacebuilding considerations (a ‘triple nexus’ approach).

- **Safe migration programmes should be considered.** Movement is already acknowledged as a reality among children within and outside Afghanistan. Adopting safe migration programmes would help provide children with a range of services and assistance that can accompany them through their migration journeys across different national and cross-border sites.
- **There is a need for a regional approach.** Further analysis and assessment is needed in collaboration with neighbouring countries, especially in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, to develop a more focused regional approach and interventions that address the migration experience and the return of children to Afghanistan. This approach needs to recognize the importance of fulfilling basic child rights and providing access to services as children wait to return or move across borders. Regional workshops can help countries collaborate on a child protection plan of action, including the adoption of joint policy and programmatic frameworks such as road maps, information-sharing, capacity-building and monitoring systems that measures progress against a set of specific milestones and outcomes.
- **Systems-strengthening.** It is important to identify existing legal, policy and practice barriers that exclude specific groups from child protection and broader protection systems, understanding legislative and policy gaps in relation to child protection in humanitarian crises. Child protection actors should develop, regularly update and contextualize local, national and inter-agency strategies for preventing and addressing needs and protection concerns among Afghan boys and girls. It is also relevant to consult with displaced and migrant children, families and communities to develop a ‘child lens’ and tailor systems to children’s and families’ needs and concerns rather than adopting a blanket approach. Ultimately, a child lens and tailored approach builds capacity and raises awareness of existing laws, policies, procedures and mechanisms, and helps prevent and address child protection issues.
- **Advocacy implications.** Child protection actors have an important role in advocating for – and working with – nearby host governments and public authorities to address the needs of Afghan migrant and displaced families while also respecting and upholding the dignity, basic rights and standards of care throughout children’s experience of movement, irrespective of their legal migration status. This effort could be enhanced with the establishment of a road map promoting safety, well-being, care and protection of children. It would also benefit from a child protection monitoring mechanism that examines the road map’s progress in reaching parameters and indicators collectively designed and agreed by all sectors. This effort should also include donor engagement in advocating and rethinking durable solutions for child returnees and internally displaced persons. These solutions need to be placed within the broader framework for durable solutions for Afghan populations in general, while also advocating against forced returns and for safe routes for children moving within and outside Afghanistan, fleeing the dire situation in their country.

Glossary

Asylum seeker: A person seeking to be admitted into a country as a refugee and awaiting decision on their application for refugee status under relevant international and national instruments. In the case of a negative decision, they must leave the country and may be expelled, as may any alien in an irregular situation, unless permission to stay is provided on humanitarian or other related grounds.

Child: A person aged under 18 years. For the purposes of this research, children were aged 10–17.

De Facto Authority (DFA): The current government of Afghanistan since 15 August 2021.

Forced displacement/forcibly displaced: Refers to refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons. Forced displacement occurs when individuals and communities have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence as a result of, or in order to avoid, the effects of events or situations such as armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights abuses, natural or human-made disasters and/or development projects. It both includes situations where people have fled as well as situations where people have been forcibly removed from their homes, evicted or relocated to another place not of their choosing, whether by state or non-state actors. The defining factor is the absence of will or consent.

Forced return: Refers to individuals being forced against their will or compelled by different factors to return in country of origin, including through instances of deportation, expulsion or removal order by which a state physically removes a non-national from its territory.

Host community: The community in which a migrant permanently or temporarily resides after initial movement from their community of origin.

Impacted by migration: Those who have returned, or been forced to return, to Afghanistan from other countries; and those who are internally displaced.

Internally displaced person (IDP): A person (or group of people) 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 generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who has not crossed an internationally recognized state border.

Irregular migration: Movement that takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit and receiving countries. There is no clear or universally accepted definition of irregular migration.

Migrant: An umbrella term for a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. This term considers both those who migrate through regular legal channels, as well as those who migrate through undocumented irregular channels.

Refugee: A person who “owing to well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinions, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country”.¹⁴⁰

Returnee: For the purposes of this study, ‘returnee’ refers to any migrant of Afghan nationality who has returned to Afghanistan following elective migration or forced displacement, as well as IDPs who have returned to their community of origin within the country following initial displacement.

Separated children: Children separated from both parents or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members.

Socioecological approach: A child protection approach that involves designing integrated approaches in partnership with children, families, communities and societies.¹⁴¹

Smuggling: The procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a state party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident.¹⁴² Smuggling, contrary to trafficking, does not require an element of exploitation, coercion or violation of human rights.

Trafficking of persons: The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving or payments of benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.

Unaccompanied children: Persons under the age of majority who are not accompanied by a parent, guardian or other adult who by law or custom is responsible for them.

Young person: For the purposes of this research, a person aged 18–24 years.

Annex

FRAMEWORKS PROTECTING AND PROMOTING RIGHTS OF THE CHILD RETURNEES DURING THEIR RETURN AND REINTEGRATION

Since August 2021, there has been a shift from a development to emergency operational context, and serious challenges have emerged in working with an unstructured governance. The supportive and protective roles of the former government have been weakened, through brain drain, lack of clarity around the roles of ministries/officials; inexperience of new leadership; and with memorandums of understanding (MoUs) as well as policies either no longer being valid or with uncertainty about their validity.

The international and national legal framework pertinent to children's rights in Afghanistan along migration policies, frameworks and strategies regulating migration and the support of return and reintegration at the international, regional and domestic level not only lacks a child focus perspective, but also there is no clarity on whether this legislative framework, including the Constitution itself, is considered to be in force by the De Facto Authority (DFA).

Synthesis of the International Framework

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is the most ratified convention in legal history. The General Comment No. 6 of the CRC speaks to the principle of 'non-refoulement' by indicating that: "in fulfilling obligations under the CRC, States shall not return a child to a country where there are substantial grounds for believing that there is a real risk of irreparable harm to the child".

Most importantly, the CRC sets the 'best interests of the child' (Art.3) principle, the horizontal foundation that should serve as a yardstick throughout all return-related actions and decisions. The 'best interests' is also a central element of the rights of the child protected by the Charter and the Treaty on European Union (TEU, Article 3 (3)) and is mirrored in secondary European Union (EU) legislation on return such as the Return Directive, which specifies how throughout implementation, member states' authorities must take due account of the best interests of the child, and that this must be a primary consideration in their actions.

Other key articles of the CRC pursuant to child return include those that recognize the rights of the child to be safe and protected from abuses, exploitation, trafficking, torture and other forms of violence; to be granted the right of access to health care and education; to be free from poverty; to be legally recognized; not to suffer from discrimination; and to have their views respected.

In addition to a child rights framework, the right to return is enshrined in other binding international human rights instruments such as the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).¹⁴³ Similarly, the Guiding Principles

on Internal Displacement,¹⁴⁴ specifically Principle 28, note that "Competent authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to establish conditions, as well as provide the means, which allow (internally) displaced persons to return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity, to their homes or places of habitual residence."

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Handbook and Guidelines on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status,¹⁴⁵ international protection ceases when national protection is resumed or assumed. According to the same document, a durable solution, including return, is found "when protection needs cease."

Afghan National Framework Pertaining to Child Rights and Migration

In Afghanistan there have been many improvements to legislation and policy frameworks pertaining to child rights,¹⁴⁶ including the adoption of the 2019 Law on Protection of Child Rights,¹⁴⁷ and the 2020 Childhood Protection Policy, as well as other relevant policies focusing on (i) security and violence, (ii) economic and social protection and (iii) solutions to displacement. However, according to the 2018 Child Rights Situation Analysis (CRSA) in Afghanistan, most of these laws, policies, strategies and programmes were not adequately implemented prior to August 2021, neither has there been detailed insight into their real impact on children, due to weak government structures at the local level, budget constraints, insecurity and a low level of political will. Challenges in the implementation of laws and policies specifically related to children are even greater with the current authorities.

Also, policies in Afghanistan regulating migration processes lack a child-sensitive lens and specific references to children returnees or IDPs, therefore the following should only serve as reference for understanding how migration policies indirectly impact child return and reintegration in Afghanistan.

The 2013 National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons¹⁴⁸ aims to set out principles and framework around issues affecting IDPs by providing guidance for addressing current and future situations of internal displacement in Afghanistan, through:

- Prevention and containment of new internal displacement, including the adoption of contingency planning and early warning for disaster risk reduction (DRR)
- Addressing the emergency needs and concerns of both the IDPs and displacement-affected communities including those which host IDPs;
- Ensuring that the search for durable solutions, as provided by the Constitution of Afghanistan, is relevant to international human rights and humanitarian law treaties as well as to the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

The 2017 Policy Framework for Returnees and IDP of Afghanistan pays attention to the social and economic dimension of reintegration of returnees, by emphasizing the need:

- To assist returnees and IDPs to find productive employment as rapidly as possible, ensuring their rights to public services, legal protection or participation in Afghanistan's political and electoral institutions is guaranteed
- To improve the documentation and registration system
- To ensure that the impacts of returnees and IDPs on host communities are considered, especially when considering interventions to strengthen basic service provisions for returnees and IDPs.¹⁴⁹

The 2015 Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations (MoRR) comprehensive voluntary repatriation and reintegration policy is another document that underlines the former government commitment to:

- Address the unique vulnerabilities of returnees in a coordinated and comprehensive manner
- Foresee a special status of returnees for a period of two years, during which they will receive preferential access to social services and priority inclusion in individual and community-based development initiatives
- Extend programme interventions and social services to meet concerns of returnees allowing for different approaches and prioritization of activities in rural or urban environments
- Avoid the possibility of secondary displacement, by carefully considering overall numbers and patterns of return and absorption capacity of return areas.

As mentioned, the above policies are not child-focused, and only a few articles or provisions refer to children, specifically child returnees or IDPs. Other than unaccompanied minors, no other groups of children are quoted as vulnerable and therefore in need of attention when providing services. The policies also do not have any reference to specific vulnerability criteria when referring to the prioritization of vulnerable households of returnees. The main services mentioned as being of priority for children returning to Afghanistan are education, health and having access to documentation. These policies lack a more comprehensive protective and well-being perspective, and do not frame solutions addressing the unique challenges and vulnerabilities of girls, and children with disabilities following return and during displacement.

Regional and International Migration Framework

Afghanistan is also party to bilateral and multilateral agreements with international and regional actors and countries. These agreements set conditions of mutual cooperation in

controlling migration flows, in assisting return and in ensuring a sustainable reintegration once return is made to Afghanistan.¹⁵⁰ However, not all countries have implemented a homogeneous approach or common policy or actions when responding to the ongoing and deteriorating social, economic, political and security situation in Afghanistan. Whereas some countries have offered resettlement to Afghans, others have made their borders increasingly secure.

Changes to EU Migration Regulatory Framework in recent years

Prior to the Taliban takeover, the EU had provided billions in development aid to Afghanistan since 2002, making Afghanistan one of the EU's top recipients of global aid. Migration has always been a key topic at the centre of frameworks between the country and the EU. For example, next to other areas of cooperation, migration is one of the areas included in the EU–Afghanistan Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development (CAPD), which was signed in 2017. This was followed by the EU Strategy on Afghanistan, adopted in the same year, which emphasizes the “return, readmission and reintegration of irregular migrants” from the EU member states to Afghanistan.

Prior to this, however, readmission was facilitated through the Joint Way Forward (JWF)¹⁵¹ signed during the Brussels donor conference, in which the EU and its member states committed to pledge 5 billion euros collectively and 1.2 billion euros from the EU budget in development aid between 2016 and 2020 to Afghanistan, while also outlining actions to reduce irregular migration and to improve readmission and return. Specifically, the JWF outlined how the EU intended “building on its existing support for programmes linked to the forced displacement of Afghans in Afghanistan and in neighbouring countries (particularly Iran and Pakistan), by working closely with the countries in the region and transit countries hosting large numbers of migrants and refugees, to reinforce their capacities to provide protection, dignified and safe reception conditions, and sustainable livelihoods.” However, the EU's JWF agreement did not acknowledge the increase and impact of internal conflict in Afghanistan, and the unequal burden the country's neighbours have shouldered for years. In April 2021, the agreement was extended through the Joint Declaration on Migration Cooperation between Afghanistan and the EU (JDMC) 2021.¹⁵²

The JDMC does not establish legal rights or obligations under international or domestic law, yet sets strict conditions and a structured process for returning Afghans to their home country (i.e., the organization of flights, proof of nationality and flight costs). Unlike its predecessor, the JDMC provides a framework for cooperation for an indefinite period, with the option for each party to suspend this only after prior consultation on an annual basis. Most importantly, it reduces further protection safeguards for individuals, particularly vulnerable groups, and introduces a set of measures that make it easier for member states to deport Afghan nationals at a time of increasing instability and a deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan.

Another agreement which relates to the JDMC and sets return as a top priority to be addressed by the government and the international community is the Afghanistan

Partnership Framework 2020, which states how the government of Afghanistan, with international support, should ensure a safe return of the Afghan population along an “orderly, regular and responsible migration and mobility”, and prioritize reintegration of returnees by expanding community service delivery and improving economic conditions and employability.

The above agreements, in the wake of the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan, and the rapid deterioration in the security and human rights situation in large parts of the country in August 2021, have been temporarily and officially suspended. Suspensions of the agreements were supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs appeal¹⁵³ and UNHCR’s non-return advisory for Afghanistan (2021)¹⁵⁴ and Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum Seekers from Afghanistan (2022).¹⁵⁵

The appeal and guidance call on all countries to allow civilians fleeing Afghanistan access to their territories, to guarantee the right to seek asylum, suspend deportations (including of Afghans whose asylum claims have been rejected) and to ensure respect for the principle of non-refoulement at all times. They call on states to register all arrivals who seek international protection and to issue documentary proof of registration to all individuals concerned, as well as to facilitate and expedite family reunification procedures for Afghans whose families are left behind in Afghanistan or who have been displaced across the region.

Last but not least, the September 2021 EU Draft Action Plan responding to the events in Afghanistan¹⁵⁶ clearly suspends the JDMC.

Regional Migration Regulatory Framework: A snapshot

Complementing the agreements mentioned in the earlier section, which sees Afghanistan’s cooperation mainly with EU actors, there are also regional agreements and strategies in place regulating migration, return and reintegration. It should be noted that some of these initiatives, for example the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees, existed prior to the 2021 government transition and are now platforms for further investment from the EU.

In fact, the EU, through its Action Plan, strongly emphasizes support, collaboration and investment in regional mechanisms such as (a) supporting programmes linked to the forced displacement of Afghans in Afghanistan and in neighbouring countries (particularly the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan), which reinforce and provide protection, dignified and safe reception conditions, and sustainable livelihoods; (b) increasing regional cooperation to prevent irregular migration, by reinforcing border management and preventing smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings; and (c) reinforcing activities in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan to support both long-term refugees and potential newly displaced persons, by taking into account the needs of their host communities.

The Solutions Strategy, Support Platform and Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration: A regional response

The Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) is the result of a quadripartite consultative process among Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan and UNHCR. Since its launch in 2012, the SSAR has served to jointly identify and implement approaches towards lasting solutions for Afghan refugees in the region. Building on a convergence of interests and reconciling the priorities of the country of origin and the principal host countries, the SSAR has provided a comprehensive strategic vision and operational framework for three overarching objectives: facilitating voluntary repatriation; enabling sustainable reintegration; and assisting the host countries and communities.¹⁵⁷

To enhance at best the solution strategy, a new Support Platform¹⁵⁸ for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees was created in 2019 with the intention to help Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan by (a) coordinating their efforts on promoting solutions for Afghan refugees; (b) implementing the Solutions Strategy adopted by the three countries; (c) drawing on stronger international political and financial commitments within the region; and (d) achieving solutions for Afghan refugees, in line with the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR).¹⁵⁹

In 2020, the Platform was further strengthened by the formal establishment of a Core Group for the Support Platform, comprising states and institutions¹⁶⁰ that are committed to demonstrating their solidarity with the Afghan refugee situation and intend to make concrete commitments to the initiative and its aims.

In host countries such as in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, the Platform seeks to increase:

- Support for national public services to aid efforts to include refugees in community-level systems
- Support for refugees in building their human capital
- Self-reliance to improve their lives in the countries where they currently reside
- Support for host countries in building a protective environment for refugees, to alleviate pressure on local systems, while strengthening refugees’ eventual prospects for return and reintegration at home.

With Afghans and host communities in neighbouring countries facing increased challenges in the current deterioration of the humanitarian crisis, the Solutions Strategy attempts to address the compelling need for greater burden- and responsibility-sharing from the international community. This said, the interventions lack a child focus as well as an investment in the area of child protection.¹⁶¹

Within the SSAR, the Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARR) is a key component of UNHCR’s work to support the Government of Afghanistan in strengthening essential facilities and services in communities to which Afghan refugees are returning. The Government of Afghanistan’s Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) and UNHCR have identified 80 Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARRs) where returnees are living side by side with displaced people and local communities. In these areas, multiple multisectoral, stakeholders come together and, through a humanitarian–development–peace approach, implement a range of projects (for returnees, IDPs and host communities), such as cash assistance and in-kind support to vulnerable families, access to adequate shelter, education and skills training, provision of entrepreneurial support, implementation of quick impact livelihoods projects and public infrastructure development. The PARRs approach also promotes durable solutions (*see Table A1*) for returnees and internally displaced persons through efforts to expand access to land, documentation, social services, self-reliance and inclusion in decision-making structures.¹⁶²

Regional Response Plan 2022 and projected situation in 2023

The Regional Response Plan (RRP)¹⁶³ 2022 focused on responding to existing populations in the neighbouring countries of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, including registered Afghan refugees and asylum seekers, Afghans of various statuses including undocumented persons, host communities and potential new arrivals. The 2022 RRP promoted an area- and needs-based approach. Area-based investments focus on health, education, clean and renewable energy, vocational skills development and social protection to mitigate the impact on national systems and support the inclusive policies of the host governments, benefiting both host communities and refugees.

A steady flow of new arrivals from Afghanistan in neighbouring countries is expected in 2023, including via unofficial border crossings. Combined with arrivals since 2021 and large in situ populations, this will continue to place a significant burden on host countries. Therefore, investment will continue into building community resilience, and supporting host governments to ensure access to territory, asylum and protection in accordance with international standards, including respect for the principle of non-refoulement, admission, reception, registration and documentation.

Immediate and longer-term needs must also be addressed through nexus programming by reinforcing the local and national systems of host countries, with particular attention to the needs of children, women and vulnerable populations.¹⁶⁴

Table A1. International and National Child Rights Framework for Durable Solutions

	DURABLE SOLUTIONS PRINCIPLES	CHILD RIGHTS AND PROTECTION STANDARDS
International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNHCR 1951 Refugee Convention UNHCR Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities IASC Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for Refugees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> OHCHR CRC UNHCR’s Framework for Protection of Children Global Protection Cluster’s Minimum Standards for Child Protection UNICEF’s Children Rights in Return Policy and Practices in EU UNICEF’s Child Notice The UNICEF six-point Agenda of Action is also important and relevant: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure address of the root causes of movement No detention Non-discrimination Provision of services and continuum of care Protection of children from violence Non-separation (families should stay together)
National	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Signatory to 1951 Convention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> UN CRC and two optional protocols on involvement of children in armed conflict and sale of children, child prostitution, child pornography¹⁶⁵ (ratified) National Child Protection Policy (2020) Policy on Safeguarding Rights and Protection of Children for Children in Contact with the Law (2020) Policy of Protection of Children within the Defence and Security Sector in Afghanistan for children affected by armed conflict (2020) Childhood Protection Policy (2020) 2019 Afghanistan Child Act (Law on Protection of Child Rights) General child-specific laws and policies, i.e.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National Plan of Action against Trafficking and Kidnapping of Children (2004) The Juvenile Code (2004) National Strategy for Children with Disabilities (2008) Action Plan for the Prevention of Underage Recruitment into the Afghan National Security Forces (2011) National Strategy for Street Working Children (2011–2014)
KEY MULTI-STAKEHOLDER AGREEMENTS AND POLICIES RELATED TO MIGRATION IN AFGHANISTAN		
Policies		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2013 National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons 2015 Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations (MoRR) Comprehensive Voluntary Repatriation and Reintegration Policy 2017 Policy Framework for Returnees and IDP of Afghanistan
Agreements		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2012 Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) SSAR the Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARR) 2021 Joint Declaration on Migration Cooperation between Afghanistan and the EU (JDMC) 2021 (currently suspended) EU Action Plan (2021)

Endnotes

- 1 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Global Trends Report', UNHCR, 2023, <www.unhcr.org/global-trends>. This report refers throughout collectively to 'migrant and displaced' populations. In the Afghan context, this terminology considers children, young people and their families who have moved outside the country to be 'migrants'. The term 'displacement' encompasses all those whose movement was compelled by force outside Afghanistan as refugees and asylum seekers, and within the country as IDPs. Lastly, the term 'returnee' is used to refer to individuals and populations who have returned to Afghanistan from migration outside the country (whether this return was forced or elective), as well as IDPs who have returned to their communities of origin within the country following their internal displacement. See [Glossary](#) for further details.
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- 3 This question was only asked of children aged 14–19 years; those respondents aged 7–13 years are assumed to be single.
- 4 Asked of those aged 7–17 years.
- 5 Informal IDP camps would fall within this definition.
- 6 United Nations Children's Fund, 'UNICEF Procedure on Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis', <www.unicef.org/evaluation/documents/unicef-procedure-ethical-standards-research-evaluation-data-collection-and-analysis>.
- 7 United States Institute of Peace, 'Winter is coming in Afghanistan. Are the Taliban ready?', 11 November 2021, <www.usip.org/publications/2021/11/winter-coming-afghanistan-are-taliban-ready>.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 20 million people are facing acute hunger, including 6 million people at emergency levels (IPC4).
- 10 30 out of 34 provinces are experiencing extremely low quality of water and six times more households are experiencing drought in 2022 than in 2020.
- 11 ReliefWeb, 'Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Planned Response 2023', <<https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-and-planned-response-2023-endarips#:~:text=A%20massive%20two%2Dthirds%20of,decades%20of%20conflict%20and%20recurrent>>.
- 12 The number of conflict displacements continued to decline in 2022 to around 7,400 as of 30 June, the lowest mid-year estimate we have ever recorded for the country (723,000 between January and December 2021; 7,400 between January and June 2022). Flooding, drought and earthquakes triggered 124,000 displacements between January and June 2022, five times the figure for the whole of 2021 (Internal Displacement and Monitoring Centre, 'One year on: the Taliban takeover and Afghanistan's changing displacement crisis', 2022, <www.internal-displacement.org/expert-opinion/one-year-on-the-taliban-takeover-and-afghanistans-changing-displacement-crisis>).
- 13 ReliefWeb, 'Afghanistan Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan 2022 Mid-year Report', January–June 2022, <<https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-situation-regional-refugee-response-plan-rrp-2022-mid-year-report>>.
- 14 In October 2022, the average number of daily returns stood at 52 individuals – the highest monthly figure (1,612) since 2018, UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and Pacific (RBAP) External Update: Afghanistan Situation #21, As of November 2022
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Mixed Migration Center, 'Understanding the Impact of COVID-19 on Afghan Returnees', 2020, <<https://mixedmigration.org/resource/4mi-snapshot-understanding-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-afghan-returnees/>>.
- 17 Save the Children International Afghanistan Country Programme, 2018, 'Child Rights Situation Analysis', October 2018, <<https://old-afghanistan.savethechildren.net/sites/afghanistan.savethechildren.net/files/library/CRSA%20Report%20-%20Final%20version.pdf>> and UNICEF Afghanistan, 'Situation Analysis of Children and Women in Afghanistan', August 2021, <www.unicef.org/afghanistan/media/6301/file/Summary-Situation%20Analysis.pdf>.
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- 19 Save the Children, 'Afghanistan: A fifth of starving families sending children to work as incomes plummet in past six months', 14 February 2022, <www.savethechildren.net/news/afghanistan-fifth-starving-families-sending-children-work-incomes-plummet-past-six-months>.
- 20 'Even During Conflict, Schools and Hospitals Must Remain Safe Havens – Statement by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict', May 2022, <<https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/2022/05/even-during-conflict-schools-and-hospitals-must-remain-safe-havens-statement-by-the-special-representative-of-the-secretary-general-for-children-and-armed-conflict/>>.
- 21 European Union Agency for Asylum, *Key Socio-economic Indicators in Afghanistan and in Kabul City*, August 2022, <https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2022-09/2022_08_COI_Afghanistan_Key%20socio-economic_indicatorsAfghanistan_and_Kabul_city_EN.pdf>.
- 22 Since March 2022, the DFA has closed the vast majority of girls' secondary schools depriving girls of the right to education.
- 23 Although the De Facto Authorities have expressed a commitment to protecting women and girls, the strict rules on their movement and dress continue to be tightened and enforcement measures have increased in severity. For example, some women found outside without male accompaniment (Mahram) have been subjected to public lashings – UN Women, 'Gender Alert, Women's Rights in Afghanistan: Where are we now?', December 2021, <www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/Gender-alert-Womens-rights-in-Afghanistan-en.pdf>.
- 24 Figures available from UNHCR population portal, at 'Situation Afghanistan situation', <<https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan>>.
- 25 UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and Pacific, External Update: Afghanistan Situation #20, as of September 2022.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Afghanistan Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan, January – December 2022', <<https://reporting.unhcr.org/afghanistan-situation-regional-refugee-response-plan-1292>>.
- 28 ReliefWeb, UNHCR Bureau for Asia and Pacific, External Update: Afghanistan Situation #17, as of 1 June 2022, <<https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/unhcr-regional-bureau-asia-and-pacific-rbap-flash-external-update-afghanistan-situation-17-01-june-2022-two-week-coverage-period>>.
- 29 In addition, according to Amnesty International, Afghan deportees after being held in a detention centre, are transferred by Iranian security forces to both official and irregular border crossings. European Union Agency for Asylum, 'Iran – Situation Situation of Afghan Refugees', December 2022, <https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2023-01/2023_01_COI_Report_Iran_Afghans_Refugees_EN.pdf>; Amnesty International, 'Afghanistan: "They don't treat us like humans": Unlawful returns of Afghans from Turkey and Iran', 31 August 2022, <www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa11/5897/2022/en/>.
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- 35 Ibid.
- 36 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Afghanistan Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan, January – December 2022', <<https://reporting.unhcr.org/afghanistan-situation-regional-refugee-response-plan-1292>>.
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- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Save the Children, 'Breaking Point: Children's lives one year under Taliban rule', 2022, <<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/breaking-point-childrens-lives-one-year-under-taliban-rule/>>.
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- 43 European Union Agency for Asylum, *Key Socio-economic Indicators in Afghanistan and in Kabul City*, August 2022, p. 63.
- 44 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 'Twice Invisible, Accounting for Internally Displaced Children', 2019, <www.internal-displacement.org/publications/twice-invisible-accounting-for-internally-displaced-children/>, p. 5.
- 45 ReliefWeb, 'Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023', January 2023, <<https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-overview-2023-january-2023>>.
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- 52 13-year-old girl, Herat.
- 53 Community leader, Jadayee Dowoom Mukhabirat, Herat, October 2022.
- 54 19-year-old man, Ghor, October 2022.
- 55 16-year-old boy, Kandahar, October 2022.
- 56 Young returnee woman (from Islamic Republic of Iran), Nimrod.
- 57 17-year-old girl, returnee (from Pakistan), Nangahar.
- 58 19-year-old man, returnee, Nimroz.
- 59 16-year-old boy, Herat.
- 60 This question was not asked of IDPs.
- 61 18-year-old man, returnee, Herat.
- 62 16-year-old girl, returnee, Nimroz.
- 63 18-year-old woman, returnee, Kabul.
- 64 18-year-old man, returnee, Kabul.
- 65 15-year-old boy, returnee, Ghor.
- 66 Parent of 10-year-old girl, returnee, Nangahar.
- 67 Parent of seven-year-old boy, returnee, Kabul.
- 68 18-year-old woman, returnee, Kabul.
- 69 18-year-old man, returnee, Nangahar.
- 70 19-year-old man, returnee, Nangahar.
- 71 18-year-old man, returnee, Nangahar.
- 72 17-year-old boy, Kandahar.
- 73 16-year-old boy, Herat.
- 74 17-year-old boy, Kandahar.
- 75 17-year-old boy, Kandahar.
- 76 17-year-old boy, Kandahar.
- 77 Skills Development Officer, Directorate of Labour and Social Affairs, Herat.
- 78 Community leader, Herat.
- 79 17-year-old boy, Kandahar.
- 80 16-year-old boy, Kandahar.
- 81 19-year-old man, Dara, Ghor.
- 82 Adapted from Heubner's Brief Multidimensional Life Satisfaction 8 Scale (BMSLSS).
- 83 19-year-old man, returnee, Herat.
- 84 17-year-old boy, returnee, Nangahar.
- 85 15-year-old girl, returnee, Kabul.
- 86 15-year-old girl, returnee, Herat.
- 87 Community leader, Ghor.
- 88 19-year-old, internally displaced woman, Kabul.
- 89 17-year-old boy, returnee, Nangahar.
- 90 14-year-old girl, returnee, Nimroz.
- 91 This question was asked of 14–19-year-olds only.
- 92 Internally displaced man, Kandahar.
- 93 Community leader, Herat.
- 94 This was based on those 14–19-year-olds who said they were currently attending school ($n = 307$).
- 95 18-year-old woman, District 17, Kabul.
- 96 17-year-old girl, returnee (from Pakistan), Nangahar.
- 97 INGO worker, Herat.
- 98 16-year-old boy, Kandahar.

- 99 Community leader, Herat.
- 100 Parents of migrant child, Ghor.
- 101 Community leader, Ghor.
- 102 Internally displaced man, Kandahar.
- 103 Community leader, Ghor.
- 104 14-year-old girl, returnee, Nimroz.
- 105 Community leader, Herat.
- 106 Those respondents who said they have accessed a service (% shown in A) were not included in the calculations for the percentages in B, C and D.
- 107 Community member (male), Kabul.
- 108 Internally displaced man, Nimroz.
- 109 Community leader, Nimroz.
- 110 18-year-old woman, Kabul.
- 111 Consultation with CP Area of Responsibility (AoR) and ACO representatives.
- 112 18-year-old, internally displaced woman, Herat.
- 113 18-year-old woman, returnee, Herat.
- 114 18-year-old man, returnee, Nangahar.
- 115 18-year-old man, returnee, Nangahar.
- 116 18-year-old man, returnee, Nangahar.
- 117 18-year-old man, returnee, Nangahar.
- 118 14-year-old, internally displaced boy, Ghor.
- 119 17-year-old boy, returnee, Ghor.
- 120 Mother of eight-year-old girl, returnee, Kabul.
- 121 Father of 12-year-old boy, returnee, Ghor.
- 122 Mother of 13-year-old girl, returnee, Nangahar.
- 123 Community leader (Council member), Nimroz.
- 124 16-year-old girl, returnee, Nimroz.
- 125 16-year-old, internally displaced girl, Nimroz.
- 126 17-year-old, internally displaced girl, Nangahar.
- 127 15-year-old girl, returnee, Kabul.
- 128 16-year-old, internally displaced girl, Nimroz.
- 129 13-year-old girl, Herat.
- 130 15-year-old internally displaced and returnee girl, Herat.
- 131 Asked of girls only.
- 132 Internally displaced man, Kandahar.
- 133 16-year-old boy, Herat.
- 134 Community leader, Ghor.
- 135 17-year-old girl, returnee (from Pakistan), Nangarhar.
- 136 17-year-old boy, Kandahar.
- 137 17-year-old boy, Kandahar.
- 138 17-year-old girl, returnee (from Pakistan), Nangarhar.
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- 140 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951.
- 141 Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 'Standard 14' in 'Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (CPMS)', <https://handbook.spherestandards.org/en/cpms/#ch002_001_002>.
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- 144 Inter Agency Standing Committee, 'IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons', Brookings Institution Project on Internal Displacement, The Brookings Institution, University of Berlin, April 2010, <www.unhcr.org/50f94cd49.pdf>.
- 145 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Handbook and Guidelines on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees', HCR/1P/4/ENG/REV. 3, December 2011, <www.refworld.org/docid/4f33c8d92.html>.
- 146 For further reference, see United Nations Human Rights Treaty Bodies, 'Ratification Status of Afghanistan', <https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=1&Lang=EN>.
- 147 The 2019 Law on the Protection of Child Rights, provides the rights of children for citizenship, identity, registration and birth. It prohibits the recruitment of children as soldiers (Articles 12(27) and 75), ensuring that a child who has violated the law shall be kept separate from adults during custody, detention and incarceration (Article 12(29)). Further to this, the law offers legislative protection for child survivors of gender-based violence calling relevant government ministries and organizations to assist in the rehabilitation of survivors. Chapter 15 of the law in particular has provisions against sexual abuse of children and includes prohibition of illegal acts against children (Article 94); prevention of sexual misuse of children (Article 96); and prohibition of Bacha Bazi (Article 99). Other important articles are those promoting the right of access to services, and the right to education and those condemning illegal transfer of the child abroad. <www.unicef.org/afghanistan/media/3936/file/Law%20on%20Protection%20of%20Child%20Rights.pdf>.

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- 149 Save the Children International Afghanistan Country Programme, 'Child Rights Situation Analysis', 2018, p. 77.
- 150 According to UNHCR, in 2020 Pakistan was the country hosting the largest number of Afghan Refugees (1,438,000), followed by Islamic Republic of Iran (780,000) and Germany (148,000). Austria, France and Sweden hosted each an average of 30,000, while the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and United States of America, respectively, hosted 9,000 and 2,000 refugees.
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- 153 Ministry of Refugees, 'Declaration of MoRR Related to Stop of Forced Return from Europe Temporarily', <<https://morr.gov.af/en/node/3938>>, drafted in consultation with the Office of the National Security Council the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations in July 2021.
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- 157 The SSAR builds on three pillars: (a) creating conditions conducive to voluntary repatriation through community-based investments in areas of high return; (b) building Afghan refugee capital based on livelihood opportunities in Afghanistan to facilitate sustainable return and reintegration; and (c) enhanced support for refugee hosting communities; preserving protection space in host countries and resettlement in third countries. See SSAR, 'A Partnership for Solidarity and Resilience', p. 6.
- 158 As a framework for engagement by the international community, the Global Compact on Refugees makes it possible for host countries and countries of origin to activate a 'support platform' mechanism to help them galvanize action around large-scale and protracted refugee situations. This approach ensures a broadened base of support that includes not just states, but other actors who are critical to a comprehensive response such as development partners, civil society, academia and the private sector, among others. See also SSAR Support Platform, 'Core Group', <<https://ssar-platform.org/core-group>>.
- 159 A Support Platform is a mechanism envisioned by the Global Compact on Refugees, which was affirmed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2018. This landmark Global Compact is itself a framework for building global solidarity on refugee solutions and promoting equitable responsibility-sharing for refugees globally. See UNHCR, 'Global Compact on Refugees', <www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-are/global-compact-refugees>.
- 160 The SSAR Core Group was established to channel political, financial and technical support towards supporting solutions for the protracted Afghan refugee situation. Membership includes the European Union (as Chair), Asian Development Bank, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, Qatar, Republic of Korea, Switzerland, Türkiye, the United Kingdom, United Nations Development Programme, the United States and the World Bank. UNHCR provides secretariat support for both the [Support Platform and the Core Group](#).
- 161 The SSAR Support Platform document outlines the initiative within each country in the region; however, child protection/protection still needs major focus compared with other sector interventions
- 162 UNHCR, 'Afghanistan: 15 Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARRs)', <<https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/71048>>.
- 163 ReliefWeb, 'The Afghanistan Situation Regional Response Plan (RRP) January- December 2022', <<https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/afghanistan-situation-regional-response-plan-rrp-january-december-2022>> is in line with the GCR, the SSAR, the SSAR Support Platform launched at the Global Refugee Forum in 2019 and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. The 2022 RRP will support host governments in their efforts to promote resilience.
- 164 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 'Afghanistan Regional Response Plan 2023', November 2022, <<https://humanitarianaction.info/article/afghanistan-rrp>>.
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for every child, answers

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