

## RESILIENCE OF AFGHAN RETURNEES HOW THE RESILIENCE OF AFGHAN RETURNEES ARE STRENGTHENED THROUGH INTERVENTIONS?

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Figure 1 Afghan Refugees arrive at a U.N. Repatriation Center in Torkham, Afghanistan (Photo Source: Foreign Policy News)

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<p><b>Received:</b> August 11<sup>th</sup>2021  <b>Accepted:</b> September 10<sup>th</sup> 2021  <b>Published:</b> October 26<sup>th</sup> 2021</p>	<p>Voluntarily returned Afghans mainly from Iran and Pakistan over the last decade, the two neighboring host countries with majority of refugees are vulnerable. This paper discusses on resilience of returnees in terms of unsustainable livelihood opportunities, access to land, portable water, sanitation, and poor government infrastructure. By using Save the Children International intervention the paper explores on theories of resilience, refugee, livelihood, and community lead total sanitation as a successful case study in three provinces of Afghanistan (Nangarhar, Balkh and Jowzjan). As well as the essay will reflect on the role of NGOs and humanitarian aid organizations as implementing partner to help Afghan government provide service in most deprived post conflict areas. Throughout various integrated interventions the desktop research argues on approaches to engage returnee families in income generation activities, capacity building programs and provision of sacrificing costs for the breadwinners. The essay will discuss on results of these interventions aiming to strengthen returnee’s resilience helping them in having access to safe water for drinking and engaging the vulnerable groups in livelihood activities. Their skills are improved, awareness on hygiene and sanitation practices are in better condition and their income increased leading to improved livelihood opportunities, which enable them to support their families in their areas of settlement. The topic of the essay will conclude on elaborating the importance of aforementioned interventions and reflect on the question: How the Resilience of Afghan Returnees are Strengthened Through these Mediations?</p>

**Keywords:** Sulfur, sulfite anhydride, sulfite acid, sulfites, bisulfites, sulfitation

1 INTRODUCTION

Categorized as 172 out of 187 on the Human Development Index, Afghanistan is considered to have low human development with some of the world’s poorest global humanitarian indicators (UNDP, 2011, P144). Afghanistan has now entered its fourth decade of conflict, and continuing insecurity and recurrent natural disasters have left the population vulnerable, with many people’s coping mechanisms exhausted leaving them unable to escape a cycle of chronic poverty. Approximately 34% of the population is food insecure and one third of the population lives below the poverty line (CHAP, 2013, P19). Internal displacement due to conflict and insecurity is increasing: the 2008 CAP refers to some 232,000 IDPs, a number that remained roughly the same in 2009. However, IDP numbers had grown to 435,436 in 2011, and further, to 445,856 at the end of September 2012; according to UNHCR figures cited in UNAMA’s 2012 Mid-Year Review, “conflict induced displacement in 2012 is 14% higher than in the same period last year.” (AHUT<sup>1</sup>, 2012, P15). Afghanistan also has the largest refugee returnee population in the world – 5.7 million Afghan refugees have voluntarily returned to Afghanistan, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), with at least 2.7 million still remaining in Pakistan and Iran. Conflict is projected to escalate during 2013 and beyond, exacerbating already existing vulnerabilities at the community level through loss of livelihoods, growing rates of communicable diseases, increased displacement, and heightened protection concerns (ReliefWeb OCHA, 2012).

For those who have returned over the last decade, return is often unsustainable with returnees struggling to access land, sustainable livelihood opportunities, housing, security and basic services. Many returnees, having become accustomed to more urban conditions with improved access to basic services such as education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, return to Afghanistan, often to rural areas of origin, and are faced with weak government structures, poor infrastructure, inadequate service provision, and limited access to livelihood or employment opportunities, reducing the likelihood that their return, and settlement, will be sustainable or long-lasting. Without access to basic services, particularly shelter and land, healthcare, water and sanitation and employment opportunities, returnee families will remain an extremely vulnerable section of Afghan society. Despite the majority of Afghanistan’s population remaining in rural areas, the number of people living in urban areas has vastly increased in the last decade. Informal settlements have grown surrounding the country’s major cities, such as Kabul, Jalalabad, Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat. People living in these areas suffer from a combination of acute vulnerability, limited shelter options and limited access to basic services as well as a lack of income opportunities (CHAP, 2013, P17-21).

Save the Children International has implemented various integrated interventions to strengthen the resilience of returnees that have resettled after quite long time and them witnessing many shortcomings in the community. In this paper, the case of returnees’ resilience and the role of humanitarian aid organizations will be elaborated.

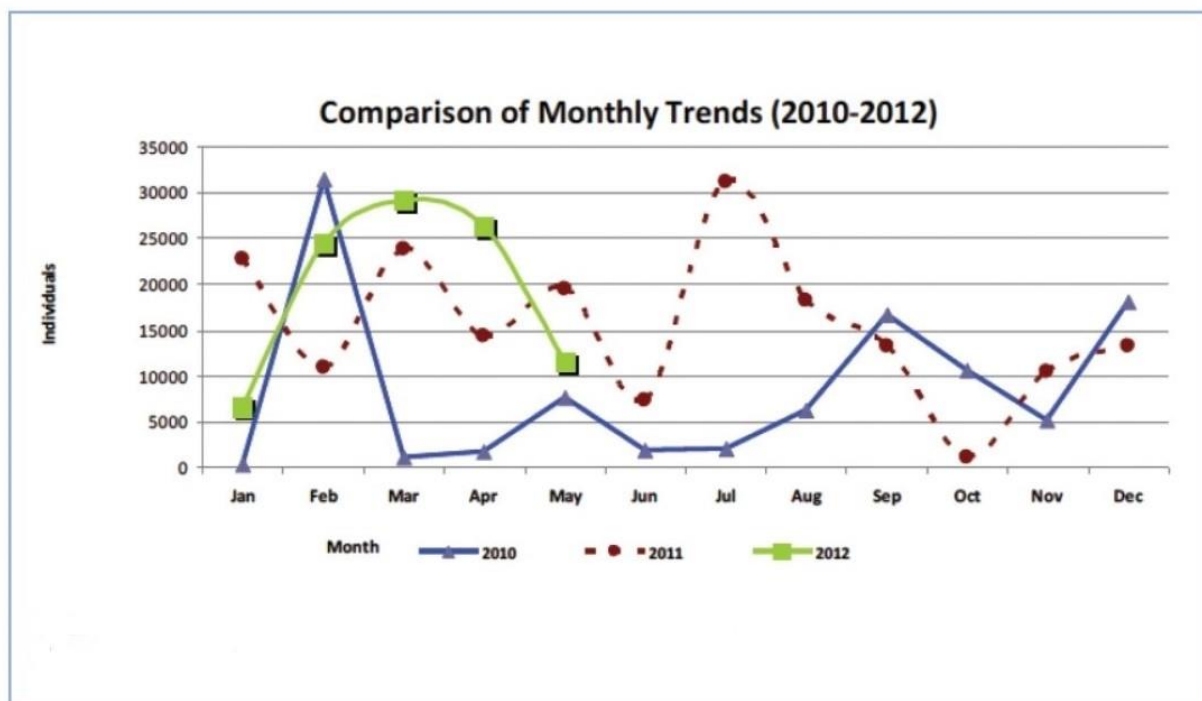


Figure 2 New Conflict-induced Displacement (Source: UNHCR, July 2012) (Retrieved, 06:04:2021)

<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan: Humanitarianism in Uncertain Times

### 2 THEORIES

#### 2.1 Resilience

Resilience, from the Latin *resilire* (to recoil or leap back), is a general concept related to positive adaptation in the context of challenge. In the physical sciences and engineering, resilience typically refers to the capacity to withstand stress or strain without breaking, or to recover original form, like a spring or rubber band. In the science of human development, resilience has broad and diverse meanings, including recovery from traumatic experiences, overcoming disadvantage to succeed in life, and withstanding stress to function well in the tasks of life. Essentially, resilience refers to patterns of positive adaptation or development manifested in the context of adverse experiences.

Resilience refers to positive patterns of functioning or development during or following exposure to adversity, or, more simply, to good adaptation in a context of risk. In behavioral studies, resilience is inferred from two judgements about how well an individual is doing: one concerns the quality of adaptive functioning or development, and the other concerns the exposure to some kind of threat to functioning or development. Very generally speaking, resilience is an inference about how well a system has responded to challenge. This concept can be applied to any living system or to a human organization, such as a family or school. If there has been no challenge, a person or a family or some other kind of system might be described as competent or successful but not (at least not yet) resilient.

The criteria for defining or operationalizing resilience for research have varied and there have been controversies about these criteria. Some definitions of resilience focus additionally on how a person is feeling, in terms of psychological well-being or happiness. It is also reasonable to include additional domains of physical or mental health in the definitions of what it means to be "doing okay" in life. Therefore, it is important when judgements about resilience are made (in research, practice, or policy) that the criteria for judging positive outcomes be clearly indicated (Ann S. Masten, 2006, *p1,3-5*).

To narrow down and in light a reflection based on this piece of information, resilience in the local context of the country is that in Afghanistan we have experience the issue in various levels. This means both, political and military conflicts have led to massive disruptions of livelihoods, education, and networks of social support. Afghan families endure pervasive poverty, economic instability, and persistent violence. Since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, and in the context of an ongoing war, large-scale reconstruction programs have raised expectations for socio-economic advancement, accentuated inequalities, and led to widespread frustrations with persistent social injustice (Eggerman and Panter-Brick, 2010, *p72*).

#### 2.2 The role of NGOs and humanitarian aid organizations

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are playing an increasingly important role throughout the Third World in assisting war-related refugees. NGOs of various sizes, backgrounds and expertise have been giving both solicited and unsolicited help in regional 'hot spots' to alleviate the pain that accompanies war and displacement. As local conflicts of high or low intensity continue around the globe, host governments, the UN, and the ever-present superpowers are likely to look to NGOs for help. The consequences and future implications of NGO humanitarian work in Third World conflicts can already be seen in Afghanistan, where a proxy war has created the largest single refugee population in the world. The combined efforts of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the governments of Pakistan and the USA could not alone take care of the 3.5 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan (1.5 million sought refuge in Iran). NGOs stepped in to help provide the necessary humanitarian support. In fact, over 200 NGOs from all over the world have played significant and various roles in the continuing Afghan civil war: many have provided relief to refugees in Pakistan, some have secretly crossed into Afghanistan to assist in war zones, while others have lobbied governments and the public to support the 'Afghan cause'. However, as in other war environments, the 'humanitarian' work performed by these NGOs became, in many cases and to varying degrees, politicized. What follows is a broad examination of these non-governmental organizations the nature of their work, their motivations, and their effectiveness in the context of the competing interests of the different parties in the Afghan conflict (Helga Baitenmann, 2007, *p62*).

Previously mentioned that in the essay Save the Children interventions to strengthening the resilience of returnees will be used to exemplify a successful case study and therefore a brief intro about the organization is worth to be stated. As one of the leading organizations (SC) have been working in Afghanistan since 1976 to deliver lasting change to the lives of children across the country. They have work closely with children, parents, teachers, village councils, religious leaders, government ministries, non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders. Their programs focus on education, health and nutrition, child protection, food security and livelihood, and humanitarian response.

### 3 CASES

The case study elaborates on the role of humanitarian aid organization and how the resilience and the unsustainable returnees' life is maintained with the facilitation of the integrate initiatives to address these gaps. The case study involved many aid organizations and actors (DoRR<sup>2</sup>, DRRD<sup>3</sup>, UNHCR, NRC<sup>4</sup>, IRC<sup>5</sup>, IMC<sup>6</sup>, DDA<sup>7</sup>, CDCs<sup>8</sup>) to consult the planning and strengthening the resilience of returnee families. Save the Children (SC<sup>9</sup>) conducted a rapid assessment in high return areas of Nangarhar, Jawzjan and Balkh provinces to determine the priority needs of returnee communities (SC Project Docs, 2013).

These consultations and assessments confirmed gaps in the provision and assistance provided to communities with high numbers of registered returnees. The most critical needs included:

- Poor access to safe drinking water among communities – particularly on government land allocation sites and returnee settlement areas
- Poor access to sanitation facilities – particularly the common practice of open defecation and little or no access to sanitary latrines
- Limited employment opportunities and a high reliance on irregular casual labor
- Protection concerns– particularly for women and children including child labor and low school attendance, psychosocial problems due to displacement and a general lack of awareness of the rights of women and children

An estimated 68% of the population in Afghanistan has no access to safe water and sanitation facilities, while access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) is particularly critical for special groups such as women, children, IDPs, returnees and the *kuchis*<sup>10</sup>(UNICEF, 2012). There is a general lack of public awareness on safe drinking water practices, as well as hygiene and sanitation among many returnee communities (WASH Cluster, 2012)<sup>11</sup>. An unhealthy household environment, lack of access to safe water, and inadequate health and hygiene services all contribute to insufficient livelihood assets and poor livelihood strategies, in turn threatening nutrition, health and general well-being of children (Sphere Handbook, 2011, p146) The CHAP for 2013, ranks Nangarhar as 4 'High' in relation to WASH, and 5 'Very High (Worst)' in relation to Conflict Displacement, and Protection as a whole. Jawzjan is ranked as 5 'Very High (Worst)' and Balkh as 4 'High' in relation to WASH.

Seasonal variation in food access and availability, unsustainable livelihood activities – through a large reliance on irregular casual labor for income – rising food prices regionally and globally and reduced economic opportunities at home and abroad are all serving to exacerbate the vulnerability of returnee families in Afghanistan. The economic situation in neighboring Iran, and reduced opportunities in many Afghan cities such as Mazar and Kabul (linked to a general slow-down in many sectors due to 2014 transition fears), is limiting remittances for many households. Returnee households are particularly vulnerable given the high reliance on casual labor for income following return to their areas of origin or new areas of settlement. Most returnee households have only partial access to any employment opportunities in a highly seasonal and variable labor market and are unlikely to have other sources of income to rely on given that they are having to re-establish livelihood activities after being absent for a number of years. In addition, reliance on labor migration is problematic for child-wellbeing, leading to prolonged periods of separation. In Afghanistan, when households are faced with unreliable income sources, and increasing food insecurity, negative coping strategies are often utilized, which can mean increasing reliance on child labor, selling productive assets, increasing debt levels, reducing food intake, and in some cases migration. Shocks such as natural disasters, and insecurity, can force already vulnerable families further into poverty.

### 4 DISCUSSIONS

As the case explores, in contemporary Afghanistan, material poverty lies at the root of social suffering, and drives a multi-faceted discourse around it. The "broken economy" [iqtisad kharab] is the root of all miseries, a struggle that goes well beyond the lack of food, clothing, and adequate shelter. Economic insecurity produces complex tensions within families: it is a central driver of psychological distress, physical pain, domestic violence, and community conflicts. It is also a key impediment to the achievement of social and cultural ambitions. Afghans articulate mental and physical ill-health as both a cause and a result of material poverty, as poverty morphs into multiple experiences of suffering, both individual and collective (Eggerman and Panter-Brick, 2010, p80)

<sup>2</sup> Department of Refugees and Repatriation

<sup>3</sup> Department of Rural Rehabilitation and Development

<sup>4</sup> Norwegian Refugee Council

<sup>5</sup> International Rescue Committee

<sup>6</sup> International Medical Corps

<sup>7</sup> District Development Assemblies

<sup>8</sup> Community Development Councils

<sup>9</sup> Save the Children

<sup>10</sup> *Kuchis* are a nomadic population in Afghanistan

<sup>11</sup> The WASH cluster study, 'Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Vulnerability in Afghanistan' from Sept 2012, found that a major challenge for WASH reported by district officials was the lack of awareness about WASH among the public, and a lack of capacity to spread this awareness, e.g., importance of drinking save water, why open defecation is a problem and hand washing at critical times.

Through these interventions humanitarian aid organization seeks to reduce the vulnerability of returnee, IDP and other vulnerable groups with provision of improved WASH facilities, access to economic opportunities, and increased knowledge and capacity to prevent violence against women and children in Afghanistan.

The integrated approach by the humanitarian aid organization is mainly designed to improve the quality of services in communities, in particular seeks to reduce the vulnerability of returnee, IDP and other vulnerable groups with provision of safe water and the improvement of school WASH facilities and increase the knowledge and motivation of communities to use these facilities appropriately and improve the sanitation situation in the community more generally by themselves. By providing livelihood support to vulnerable households in conjunction with awareness raising on coping strategies that negatively impact the well-being of children, SC's experience shows that households will have less recourse to engage children in labor, and other forms of violence, in order to deal with economic hardship and instead have the means to support their children's development (for example through better childcare practices, and improved access to education).

The community led total sanitation (CLTS) approach has been rolled out, significant changes have been observed in a short amount of time with communities constructing their own latrines at the household level. This has demonstrated the effectiveness of community-led approaches and will contribute to the sustainability of activities.

### 5 CONCLUSIONS

As this brief essay has detailed, humanitarian aid organizations in the context of Afghanistan have been playing significant role to strengthen the resilience of Afghan's especially the returnee families from Iran and Pakistan. Land dispute, lack of livelihood opportunities, hygiene and sanitation, conflict and unsustainable return to the country after decades have led them to deal with many challenges.

By implementing divers integrated interventions, the resilience of the families improved, and their vulnerability is reduced leading them to have good access to safe drinking water, improved sanitation facilities with avoiding open defecation practices, involvement of families with regular income generation activities and general awareness of communities about rights of women and children have been improved.

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