From Return to Rebuild

for Afghan Returnees and Host Communities

UNDP REGIONAL BUREAU
FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

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Executive Summary

Decades of conflict, economic stagnation, and climate shocks in Afghanistan have eroded local resilience, leaving most households unable to meet even their most basic needs. Over three-quarters of Afghan families experience subsistence insecurity and require support for food, housing, and healthcare. In 2024, 95% experienced a major economic shock such as loss of income, livelihoods, or productive assets, pushing millions deeper into poverty.[1] Essential services across the country are at breaking point, and environmental pressures continue to worsen.

Against this backdrop, the 2025 return of over 2.3 million Afghans has sharply intensified pressure on already fragile systems.[2] Most returnees arrive involuntarily, often without savings, assets, or official documentation. Their arrival has increased competition for jobs, water, and housing, further straining social cohesion and local services. Many host communities that had previously absorbed displaced families are now at the limit of their capacity, with declining living standards evident across all population groups.

Recent devastating earthquakes in Nangarhar, Kunar, and Samangan provinces, flash floods, and a severe drought this year have taken a heavy toll on lives and livelihoods. The August 2025 earthquakes in the Eastern provinces have affected provinces experiencing some of the highest concentrations of returnees in the country. One million people were affected by the earthquakes, and 8,378 homes were damaged or destroyed.[3] Already fragile infrastructure, health services, and education systems were also all affected, forcing many families, especially those without secure tenure, into further displacement. Recovery is slow, and many affected areas remain dependent on community coping mechanisms and humanitarian relief.

The burden has been particularly heavy on returnee women and girls. Restrictions on their ability to move outside the home severely limits their access to education, healthcare, and livelihoods.[4] Women-headed households, more prevalent among recent returnees, face disproportionate barriers to to secure housing, gender-appropriate facilities, and safe mobility, elevating protection risks and economic vulnerability. These gendered constraints compound inequality and weaken community recovery. In some provinces, one in four returnee households are headed by women[5], lifting restrictions and making targeted investments that enable their participation in local economies is essential to sustain families, stabilize return areas, and drive long-term recovery.

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[1] UNDP Afghanistan Socio-Economic Review 2023-24, https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/publications/afghanistan-socio-economic-review

[2] https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan (accessed 30 October 2025)

[3] Eastern Region Afghanistan Earthquake- Joint Rapid Recovery Needs Assessment- United Nations, World Bank, European Union, Asian Development Bank, 2025.

[4] UNDP Afghanistan Socio-Economic Review 2023-24, https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/publications/afghanistan-socio-economic-review

[5] An estimated 26% of returnee households are female-headed in Mehtarlam District, Laghman Province, and 17% in Surkhrod District, Nangarhar Province. (Durable Solution Program Data Collection Survey Report, East Region (Nangarhar/Surkhrod & Laghman/Mehtarlam), UNHCR, UN Habitat, 2025).

Taken together, the overlapping stresses of chronic poverty, large-scale returns, climate and seismic shocks, declining aid, and gender-based exclusion have created a perfect storm. Fragile host districts bear the burden of displacement, eroding social cohesion and putting community resilience under pressure.

Yet amid these challenges lie opportunities. Returnees bring valuable skills and the determination to rebuild their lives. With the right support, the influx of returnees can catalyze local recovery, revive economies, improve services, and build social cohesion.

UNDP's area-based approach focuses on empowering communities to turn displacement into recovery by linking immediate livelihood support with investments in shelter, basic community infrastructure, services and economic enterprises. This integrated model, already being tested through programmes such as the Participatory Action for Integrated Development Assistance to Areas of Return (PAIDAAR) in the North East region of Afghanistan, demonstrates that when livelihoods, housing, social services and social cohesion initiatives are delivered together, stability and self-reliance follow. Scaling such solutions now can protect fragile gains and anchor durable recovery in districts under pressure.

Methodology:

This brief draws primarily on data from the Whole of Afghanistan Assessment (WoAA) 2025, a nationwide, multi-sectoral assessment of 48,711 households, including 1,505 returnee households, carried out by REACH Initiative. The assessment was conducted during July and August 2025 through in-person, household-level interviews across all 34 provinces of Afghanistan, with sampling designed to ensure representativeness across male- and female-headed households; displacement groups – including returnees, IDPs; and non-displaced host communities.

Additional evidential insights - including on recent earthquakes, gender, and education - are drawn from UNDP, complementary assessments and reports by other UN agencies (UNHCR, UN-Habitat), Durable Solutions Working Group assessments, and reports by humanitarian coordination platforms (Asia Displacement Solutions Platform – ADSP). These sources are cited throughout.

Challenges in the Areas of Return

Afghanistan's local communities face mounting pressure as overlapping crises converge with large-scale returns, eroding local resilience and deepening poverty. More than 4.5 million people have returned to Afghanistan since September 2023, swelling the population by more than 10% increase at a rate that accelerated in 2025. Mass returns have occurred against a backdrop of sharp economic decline stretching back to 2021, weak capacity in social and economic institutions following the years of conflict, shrinking aid, and recurrent climate shocks. In many districts, overstretched host communities and recent returnees now compete for the same scarce jobs, housing, and basic services. Weak local systems and limited investment compound the strain, risking further displacement and instability unless targeted recovery support is scaled up.

Most returnees are concentrated in rural areas already struggling to meet basic needs. About 75% of overall returnee households[6] (including 83% of recent returnee households), 71% of host community households, and 56% of households of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) live in rural areas, in often overcrowded, multigenerational households averaging five to eight members.[7] Many of these communities previously absorbed multiple waves of IDPs and the latest returnee influx – largely unplanned and involuntary – has further intensified demand for work, shelter, and services. Roughly half of recent returnees from Iran have settled in the Central, Central Highlands, Northeastern, Northern, and Western regions, while returnees from Pakistan are most prevalent in the Eastern, Southeastern, and Southern provinces.[8]

[6] The 2025 WoAA defines returnees as individuals who have experienced cross-border displacement and have returned to Afghanistan. Recent returnees refer to those who returned in 2025, while non-recent returnees include those who returned in 2023 or 2024. Households who returned prior to 2023 are classified as part of the non-displaced host community. This categorization also applies to internally displaced persons (IDPs).

[7] Whole of Afghanistan Assessment, 2025.

[8] Ibid.

Livelihoods and Employment

Debt and low income trap households in cycles of financial vulnerability. In focus group discussions in the Western region in 2025, returnee unemployment ranged from 80 to 95%.[9] Debt is widespread: 88% of returnee, 85% of IDP, and 81% of host community households report being in debt, with typical amounts ranging between AFN 25,000 and 60,000, or USD 373–900 (see Figure 1). About one-third of returnee households and nearly one-quarter of host community households rely on loans to meet everyday needs. Returnee households report the lowest average monthly income (AFN 6,623/$101), with host community household incomes only slightly higher (at AFN 8,475/$130).[10] (See Figure 2).

FIGURE 1: Households Experiencing Debt by Community

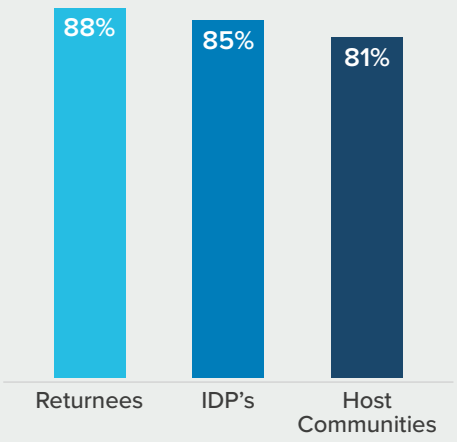
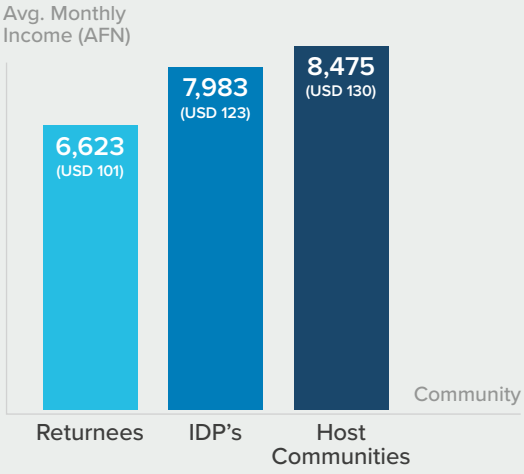


FIGURE 2: Average Monthly Households Income by Community



The arrival of returnees has intensified the struggle for work in communities, heightening economic precarity for all households. Host community households rely on a fragile mix of livelihood activities: casual/daily labour (52%), agriculture (45%), and small businesses (24%), while 67% of returnee households also depend on casual/daily labour.[11] Many returnees report having worked in skilled and semi-skilled professions in Iran, including construction, tailoring, mechanics, and agriculture, lamenting that "we have skills but no money to start a business."[12] In several areas, men cycle between underemployment and migra-

[9] Durable Solutions Working Group, Western Region, Afghanistan, Post-Arrival Returnee Data Validation & Focus Group Discussions Report, July 2025.

[10] Whole of Afghanistan Assessment, 2025.

[11] Ibid.

[12] ADSP Research Brief. Durable Solutions Analysis in Herat, (Samuel Hall) July 2025.

tion to urban areas or abroad, strategies that are not available to women-headed households. As competition for limited opportunities grows, many accept lower wages or longer hours, threatening livelihood security for both host and returnee households.

Poverty drives widespread food insecurity and child malnutrition. Community consultations in areas of return in 2025 indicate increasing incidences of child malnutrition. Research in Herat in early 2025 showed that 40% of IDP households and 42% of returnees recorded poor Food Consumption Scores, with host households generally faring better, likely due to greater access to land or livelihood opportunities.[13]

Women face the highest barriers to employment. Across host and returnee populations, women's labour force participation hovers at an alarmingly low 6%, with women confined largely to small-scale home production or survival activities linked to debt. A reliance on informal, low-paying work leaves female-headed households in economic stress. These dynamics exacerbate gender inequality, limit household coping capacity, and heighten further vulnerability to poverty, food insecurity, and debt.[14]

[13] Ibid.

[14] UNDP Afghanistan Socio-Economic Review 2023-24

Assets and Assistance: No Safety Net

Households are depleting their assets and relying on negative coping strategies. Across high-return areas, 90% of households report negative coping strategies, including borrowing, meal reduction, or selling assets.[15] In the Eastern region for example, 31% of host community, 36% of returnee and 43% of IDP households report selling items in order to be able to afford food, which is traditionally a strategy of last resort. In the Northern region, more than half of returnee households and a growing share of host community households have also resorted to asset sales.[16]

External support remains insufficient and inadequate in meeting rising needs. 76% of host community and 64% of returnee households report receiving no aid in the past year, with gaps even wider among IDP households (83%).[17] (See Figure 3). As international assistance shrinks and returnee numbers grow, the burden is being passed down to already vulnerable local communities. Return areas show signs of systemic stress which, left unaddressed, may tip into wider displacement and economic and social breakdown.

FIGURE 3: Aid Recovery in Past 12 Months by Community

A lack of official documentation prevents returnees and vulnerable households from accessing housing, services, and livelihood opportunities. In Injil district, in the Western region, returnee households report that their lack of birth or marriage certificates limits their ability to rent or purchase land. In Herat City, costs associated with documentation restrict access to housing and schools.[18] Women, young people born outside Afghanistan, and women-headed households face the greatest barriers, often encountering discrimination from local authorities. Many IDPs and returnees frequently rely on informal tenure documents or have no documentation at all, increasing insecurity and exposure to exploitation.

[15] Durable Solutions Working Group, Western Region, Afghanistan, Post-Arrival Returnee Data Validation & Focus Group Discussions Report, July 2025.

[16] Whole of Afghanistan Assessment, 2025.

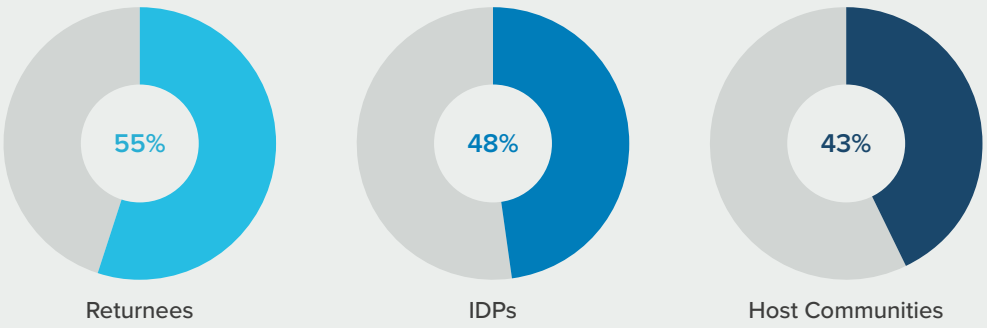
[17] Ibid.

[18] Durable Solutions Working Group, Western Region, Afghanistan, Post-Arrival Returnee Data Validation & Focus Group Discussions Report, July 2025.

Basic Services: Declining Access and Rising Vulnerabilities

Health systems are overstretched, and households are forced to defer care for survival. In return-affected areas, particularly in the Southeastern, Southern, and Western regions, chronic shortages of functional health facilities, qualified staff (particularly female), and affordable services leaves households unable to access healthcare. Furthermore, over half of returnee households (55%) report forgoing medical care to afford food; 43% of host community and 48% of IDP households do the same.[19] (See Figure 4). Recent returnees report even higher levels of skipped care, due to weak informal networks and unfamiliarity with local services. On the ground, clinics are overwhelmed: in the Western region, community consultations indicated that health facilities may serve over 500 patients per doctor per day. Clinics often only operate from 08:00 to 14:00, and some families have to walk more than seven kilometers to access care.

FIGURE 4: Households Sacrificing Healthcare for Food, by Community



Access to water is increasingly unreliable, and water quality is unsafe. Competition for water is rising, as returnees join host communities relying on already-fragile sources such as seasonal rivers, shallow wells, or unimproved springs. In the Central Highlands, 45% of recent returnees rely on open springs or unprotected wells, compared to 28% of host households.[20] In the Western region, families walk 30 to 45 minutes to collect water; wells dry up in summer, and water salinity is widespread. Inadequate sanitation, with 20 to 25 people sharing a single latrine, further increases contamination and health risks, particularly for women and girls.

[19] Whole of Afghanistan Assessment, 2025.

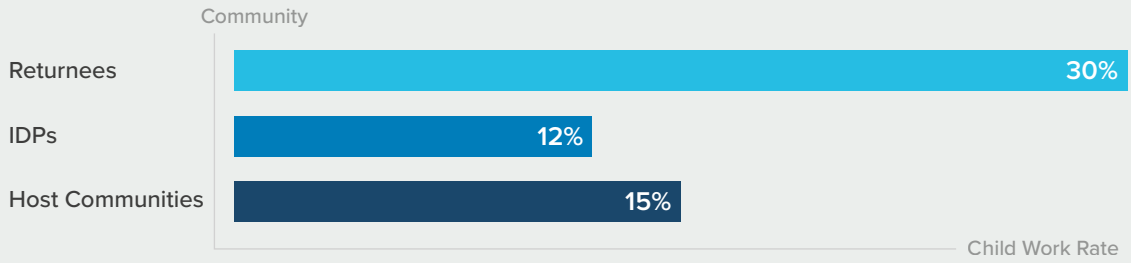
[20] Whole of Afghanistan Assessment, 2025.

Education

Access to schooling is limited. Poverty, distance, overcrowding, and a lack of official documentation hinders access to education for returnee children. In the Western region, students have to walk for up to 90 minutes to reach overcrowded schools, with one teacher per 70 to 100 students.

Economic pressures force families into relying on child labour and exacerbate gender disparities. In the Southern region, 30% of returnee children (including 35% of recent returnee children), 12% of IDPs, and 15% of host community children work to support families.[21] (See Figure 5). Girls are often tasked with household chores or caregiving, while boys are sent to informal markets, farms, or construction sites. Overall, only 23% of girls in high-return areas have completed primary school, compared to 45% of boys.[22]

FIGURE 5: Percentage of Households with Children Working to Support Their Families - Southern Afghanistan



Housing and Shelter

Overcrowding and housing insecurity threaten households across all groups. Even before the latest returnee influx, access to housing was fragile for rural and underserved communities. Over 52% of returnee, 35% of IDP, and 35% of host community households report insufficient space or the absence of basic sleeping items.[23] (See Figure 6). In the Central Highlands, 76% of returnee households lack adequate shelter space, compared to 52% of host community and 71% of IDP households. The Eastern region also shows a particularly high concentration of housing scarcity, with over 60% of households across all groups lacking sufficient space and essential sleeping items.[24]

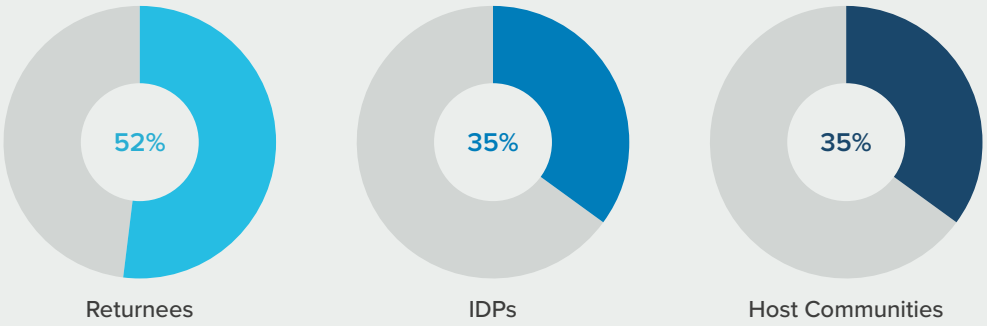
[21] Ibid.

[22] Durable Solution Program Data Collection Survey Report, East Region (Nangarhar/Surkhrod & Laghman/Mehtarlam), UNHCR, UN Habitat, 2025.

[23] Whole of Afghanistan Assessment, 2025.

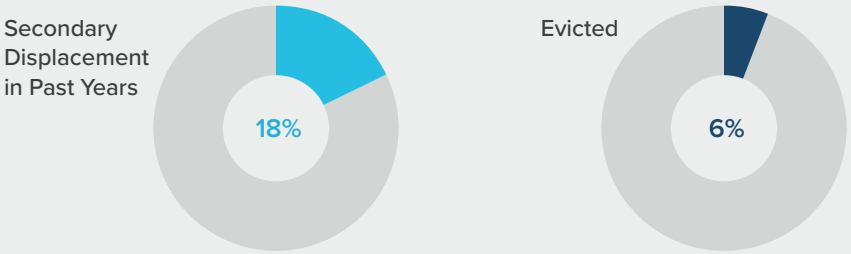
[24] Ibid

FIGURE 6: Households Experiencing Insufficient Space or Lacking Bedding Items, by Community



The housing crisis affects all groups, but returnees are disproportionately exposed to housing insecurity. Some 18% report having been displaced again in the past year (secondary displacement), and 6% have been evicted. (See Figure 7). Among recent returnees, these figures are notably higher: 33% reported secondary displacement, reflecting their more tenuous integration.[25] Even long-settled IDPs and host communities report shared occupancy, damaged structures, and lack of formal tenure, highlighting a systemic crisis of land and shelter security in areas of return. Rental costs have surged 100 to 300% in some areas, with averages ranging from AFN 3,000–5,000 per month. In Injil and Gozara districts in the Western region, most returnees live in tents or degraded structures; in Herat City, 70 to 80% of returnee homes are in poor condition.[26] These pressures force families to adopt negative coping strategies such as taking on debt, reducing meals, or co-habiting with other households.

FIGURE 7: Returnee Households Experiencing Secondary Displacement or Eviction



Recent earthquakes have intensified vulnerabilities and further strained local resilience in areas of return. Damage to markets and small-scale trade disrupts livelihoods and heightens economic uncertainty, while high-impacted zones report widespread destruction of local infrastructure, pushing households' coping capacities to the limit.

[25] Whole of Afghanistan Assessment, 2025.

[26] Durable Solutions Working Group, Western Region, Afghanistan, Post-Arrival Returnee Data Validation & Focus Group Discussions Report, July 2025.

Women and Girls' Vulnerability

Economic opportunities for women remain extremely limited and largely informal, deepening exclusion and eroding household resilience. Women are confined mostly to informal or precarious roles, and female-headed households consistently report access to income and secure shelter as their top unmet needs. Restrictions on mobility and employment, limited access to essential services, and endemic poverty combine to exacerbate vulnerability, with girls, even those younger than sixth grade increasingly pulled out of school to support domestic work or income generation.

Women and girls face heightened protection risks linked to poor housing, lack of access to basic services, and social exclusion. Women report increasing difficulty in reaching clinics due to cost, distance, and the shortage of female staff. Sanitation is often inadequate and a lack of lighting and privacy increases protection risks. Overcrowded housing and insecure water sources also increase exposure to the risk of gender-based violence (GBV). In rural districts, women and girls report feeling unsafe traveling to fetch water, attend school, or work. Evidence from Herat shows over 50% of recent IDPs report GBV as a major risk, compared to 33% among host communities.[27] Economic pressures are also forcing families to resort to child labor and early marriage. Traditional community decision-making mechanisms, including shuras and jirgas, often exclude women and youth, limiting their voice in resource allocation, protection, and recovery planning.

Conclusion

Returnee and host communities face overlapping, compounding crises that make rebuilding their lives difficult. Widespread unemployment, food insecurity, inadequate housing, limited access to health and education, and unsafe water intersect with challenges in accessing official documentation, weak social protection systems, and exclusion from decision-making. Women, girls, and female-headed households experience these pressures most acutely, facing high risks of gender-based violence, economic marginalization, and social exclusion.

Left unaddressed, these intertwined challenges risk fueling cycles of deprivation, tension, and further displacement. However, targeted interventions that address livelihoods, services, housing, and protection can harness the resilience observed on the ground, seizing an opportunity for sustainable recovery and development.

[27] ADSP Research Brief. Durable Solutions Analysis in Herat, Samuel Hall July 2025.

Towards Sustainable Solutions: Strengthening Fragile Host Areas Under Pressure

Targeted interventions can alleviate pressure and build resilience. A strategic, area-based approach is urgently needed to reinforce the absorptive capacity of host communities, while ensuring returnees are integrated without overlooking the needs of long-term residents. Joint assessment and planning approaches would bring together local stakeholders, community groups, and the UN to formulate joined-up solutions that create a continuum from relief to recovery. UNDP is well placed to coordinate the integration of these joined-up approaches. UNDP and partners are implementing area-based recovery programmes across eastern, northern, and central regions, improving access to energy, health, water, and jobs for both returnees and host communities. These efforts build on UNDP's broader humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach, working with UNHCR, IOM, and UN-Habitat under the Durable Solutions Working Group.

Investing in both short-term relief and long-term recovery is essential. Strengthening local infrastructure, expanding access to healthcare, education, water and energy services, and ensuring reliable social protection can alleviate immediate hardship while reducing future vulnerability. UNDP's ABADEI programme provides a tried and tested model in this regard, which could be scaled quickly to support the transition from short-term needs to longer-term recovery.

Investing in women's empowerment and protection is central to sustainable recovery. Culturally sensitive and principled livelihood programmes for women, support for women-led MSMEs, safe access to health and education, protection measures, and inclusive community mechanisms are critical to restoring household resilience and reinforcing community cohesion.

Economic empowerment and livelihood development for job creation are also key: tailored programmes that integrate livelihood support, skills training, MSME support and value chain development can help households regain an economic footing and reduce reliance on negative coping mechanisms, while creating opportunities for women and youth to participate fully in local economies.

Improving access to finance in areas of return will strengthen economic recovery. Without strengthened financial institutions and access to affordable finance, MSMEs that have the capacity to grow and generate jobs in areas of return, will not be able to do so. UNDP is implementing a robust, sustainable and scalable approach to access to finance, one that strengthens financial markets, enterprises and proto entrepreneurs through de-risking lending programmes, introducing new Islamic finance products and supporting financial services grounded in the needs of local enterprises.

Climate resilient infrastructure will safeguard communities for the future. Investing in flood protection, irrigation walls, solar mini-grids will strengthen resilience and set communities up for success in the future.

Building social cohesion and strengthening governance and transparency will support thriving, peaceful and prosperous communities. This means investing in inclusive community representation platforms, ensuring transparent oversight of projects and easy and well understood pathways to official documentation to enable access to housing, land and services.

Promoting regional coordination for joint/integrated programming. This entails strengthening cross-border coordination to support Afghans returning in Iran and Pakistan who are due to be returned through livelihood skills training tailored to local market demands in Afghanistan, the provision of toolkits in host countries to help returnees establish businesses upon repatriation, and capacity development of border and security agencies to ensure the dignified and humane handling of refugees.

Principled advocacy remains vital. Sustained diplomatic engagement by Member States can help protect vulnerable populations, promote conditions that enable voluntary and dignified returns from Pakistan and Iran, and uphold women's and girls' rights to education, healthcare, and legal identity. The de facto authorities too have a role to play, in allocating more resources locally to support returnees and host communities, and in implementing more transparent budgeting and financing processes so communities can see what is being spent.

Urgent action is needed now, before the challenges in the areas of return entrench displacement, exclusion, and instability, and fuel fresh waves of displacement and outward migration. Yet with timely, area-based investments, there is an opportunity to transform these challenges into the building blocks for inclusive recovery.

Afghanistan cannot afford delay, nor can the region. The Afghan people are not passive recipients of aid but agents of recovery. With the right support, they can rebuild resilient, inclusive communities. Now is the moment to invest in hope, stability, and dignity.