

# Addressing HIV amongst Most-at-Risk Populations in Humanitarian Settings

## Afghan Refugee Drug Users in Peshawar, Pakistan

### Context

Pakistan is host to approximately 1.7 million registered Afghan refugees, one of the largest refugee populations in the world. The refugees mostly live in village-like camps and urban areas in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) previously known as the North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan.



Since March 2002, approximately 3.5 million Afghans have voluntarily repatriated from Pakistan to Afghanistan with UNHCR's assistance. Repatriation has slowed in recent years with approximately 270,000 refugees returning home in 2008, and 50,000 during the first half of 2009. The reduced numbers are largely due to the deteriorating security situation, uncertainty around the elections, and poor infrastructure and services in many areas of return in Afghanistan.

Afghans share a similar culture and societal norms as well as social problems with that of the local Pakistani population; the latter includes drug use, notably heroin (both injecting and smoking). Harm reduction and rehabilitation services that specifically meet the needs of Afghan drug users are extremely limited.

Pakistan has over 0.7 million opiate users of whom 150,000 are injecting drug users (IDUs). HIV prevalence among Pakistan among IDUs continues to increase and is now over 20%. In Peshawar, the HIV prevalence among IDUs was 13% in December 2007 and had risen to 27% by July 2009 as reported by a local NGO (DOST

Foundation); 8% of IDUs in Peshawar are Afghan refugees.

### Actions for Change

Afghan IDUs are at a high risk of contracting HIV due to several factors. As they often live a more marginalized life as a refugee than local Pakistanis, they often lack family support which leads to challenges in accessing care and support services. They have high rates of shared needles (50% in the last six months) and unprotected sex (25% in the last 6 months). Afghan drug users receive fewer addiction treatment services on average compared with Pakistani drug users.



UNHCR's implementing partner, DOST Foundation, developed and delivered a targeted HIV prevention programme to high risk Afghans living in Peshawar. DOST Foundation was established in August 1992 and has pioneered the development and implementation of programmes for drug demand reduction and harm reduction in the KP province of Pakistan.

## **Interventions and Positive Outcomes**

### **Services for Afghan refugee street-based Drug Users in Peshawar**

DOST received support from UNHCR from 2007 to 2009 for its HIV prevention programmes among different Afghan refugee high risk groups. In 2009, Afghan street-based drug users in Peshawar, including IDUs, were provided with a comprehensive range of HIV prevention services. The project strategy was to reach street-based drug users through mobile teams and drop-in centers.<sup>1</sup> The services included:

- HIV information and education
- Voluntary counselling and testing and sexually transmitted infection management
- Referral for addiction treatment
- Condom education and distribution
- Needle and syringe exchange
- Care, support and referral for treatment assessment for clients living with HIV

However there were particular challenges in reaching Afghan refugees in Pakistan. These included:

- Afghan drug users had limited or no access to existing drop-in/outreach services as these services were far from where they were congregating
- Majority do not have family support or families live far away from the drug user
- Many do not have a refugee status registration document and thus, there was fear of police

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<sup>1</sup> Pakistan has not introduced opiate substitution therapy

How these challenges were addressed:

- Established drop-in/outreach centres near sites where Afghan drug users congregate
- Trained more Afghan outreach workers, peer educators and healthcare workers; thus, Afghans reaching Afghans was vital to the success of the programme
- Developed Afghan information-education-communication materials that were context appropriate and able to be understood by low literate audiences
- Reached out to drug users in refugee villages that were further away from existing services
- Advocated with police, Afghan Commissionerate, community elders and health staff for their increased acceptance and understanding of these services

Through its prevention efforts UNHCR and DOST made significant advances in the prevention of HIV among Afghan drug users. From April to December 2009, the following achievements were noted:

- Over 775 drug users, including 129 (17%) Afghans, received HIV and harm reduction information and counselling
- 95 IDUs, including 24 (25%) Afghans received specific harm reduction services including needle syringe exchange
- 516 drug users and other high-risk persons, including 267 (52%) Afghans, were provided with HIV voluntary counselling and testing services
- 71 drug users, including 46 (65%) Afghans, were provided with sexually transmitted infection management
- 171 drug users, including 26 (15%) Afghans, were referred for detoxification and addiction treatment
- 21 HIV positive drug users, including 7 (33%) Afghans, were provided with care and support including assessment of need for anti-retroviral therapy

## **Conclusion**

It is important to consider and address the specific risks and vulnerabilities of Afghan refugee substance users (e.g. mobility, low economic status, low literacy, poor HIV and substance use knowledge, and uncertainties of registration and legal status) to improve access and utilisation of appropriate services. UNHCR and DOST were able to address and overcome many of these challenges together with the Afghans in order to provide services to reduce the harms and consequences associated with drug use and HIV.

