

Enhanced Voluntary Return and Reintegration Package for Afghan Refugees (EVRRP)

Funding Proposal



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1. Background/Context

1.1. Voluntary Return Trends

Over the past three decades the voluntary repatriation of Afghans has taken place in waves during moments of change when refugees considered that prospects for peace and stability had improved. These return movements have been overlaid with refugee outflows during the times of conflict. Since 2002, over 5.8 million Afghan refugees have returned home. More than 80 per cent of them (4.7 million) were assisted through the largest voluntary repatriation program in the history of UNHCR. About 3.8 million returned from Pakistan and more than 900,000 from the Islamic Republic of Iran. The majority of these returns took place during the peak period of 2002-2008.

In recent years, the rate of voluntary return has been decreasing significantly, hitting a historical low in 2013 and 2014 with some 39,000 and 17,000 returnees respectively. While many have decided to postpone their decision on return pending a better understanding of the impact of the complex 2014 transition processes in Afghanistan, in general, the majority of Afghan refugees have cited economic concerns and limited absorption capacity (lack of livelihoods, land, shelter and limited access to basic services) in Afghanistan as main obstacles to return and sustainable reintegration.¹

1.2. Demographics of the remaining refugee population

After more than 35 years of protracted displacement, millions of Afghans still remain outside of their country, constituting over 20 per cent of refugees globally and 40 per cent of the world's protracted refugee population. Pakistan remains the world's top refugee hosting country (1.6 million registered Afghan refugees) while the Islamic Republic of Iran is host to the largest urban refugee population globally (950,000 registered Afghan refugees). In addition, according to estimates, there are over 2 million undocumented Afghans in these two principal host countries.

In Pakistan, children and youth (below 24 years) constitute nearly 70% of the Afghan refugee population,² a fact that underlines the vulnerability of the displaced communities but also points to the significant human capital that these new generations can offer in the context of the future reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. Since most Afghan refugee households (90%) have moved to Pakistan between the years 1979-1985, the majority of the registered refugee children and youth are second or third generation, born in Pakistan. Many have never visited Afghanistan, lack linkages with their ancestral country of origin and will therefore require strong incentives for return and adequate opportunities for sustainable reintegration.

¹ The limited absorption capacity is linked to the chronic underdevelopment of the country. Ranking 175 out of 186 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index, Afghanistan continues to be one of the least developed countries in the world. More than one third of the total population lives below the poverty line, 9 million are estimated to be in need of humanitarian aid, an estimated 8 million are food insecure, and more than half of the children under the age of five years are malnourished.

² See UNHCR Population Profiling and Verification of Afghan Refugees (PPVR), 2012.

1.3. Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees to Support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration and Assistance to Host Countries (SSAR)

The Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR), developed by the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan with the support of UNHCR, and endorsed by the international community in 2012, continues to serve as an overarching framework to identify and implement lasting solutions for Afghan refugees in the region, while providing assistance to host communities.

In 2014 portfolios of projects were developed in each country concerned to support the outcomes of the regional SSAR at national levels. Creation of conditions for return and sustainable reintegration are a fundamental component of the implementation of the SSAR in Afghanistan. In the Islamic Republics of Pakistan and Iran, the activities focus on provision of assistance to refugees and their host communities, with a particular focus on building the Afghan refugee human capital in preparation for return and reintegration.

1.4. Return assistance provided at present

Refugees wishing to return to Afghanistan with the assistance of UNHCR must approach UNHCR's Voluntary Repatriation Centres (VRCs) in the country of asylum to register for return and sign a Voluntary Repatriation Form (VRF). Upon return to Afghanistan, returnees are assisted through one of the five Encashment Centres (ECs) where they receive approximately USD 200 per person (USD 1,200 per family of an average size of 6). This return cash assistance consists of a transportation grant (between USD 30 – 70, depending on the distance from the area of departure in the host country to the area of origin in Afghanistan), and a short-term integration grant of USD 150. At the VRCs, returning refugees are briefed on mine awareness, access to legal aid and education procedures in Afghanistan. They can benefit from transit facilities for overnight stay and basic health services. Children under the age of 5 are vaccinated against polio and measles. Based on vulnerability, returnee families may benefit from shelter assistance and other support measures (more than 220,000 vulnerable returnee and IDP families have benefitted from UNHCR's shelter programme). Activities aimed at improving co-existence between returnees and local communities in return areas include rehabilitation and construction of small-scale infrastructure for water, sanitation and hygiene systems. Often, these projects include a cash-for-work component, with opportunities for both returnees and local communities.

While more than 30% of Afghan returnees in 2014 cited the UNHCR assistance package as a pull factor to return, the return cash grant is mostly expended to cover travel expenses and to meet the immediate basic needs upon return, with little funds left to support efforts at self-reliance and sustainable reintegration (access to housing, land or creation of livelihoods). With the economy currently in recession and a limited absorption capacity generally, it is estimated that 40% of returnees are unable to reintegrate effectively and remain in need of long-term assistance.

The ability to access income generation activities and livelihoods remains of primary importance in a country with scarce regular employment opportunities and steeply increasing pressures on the labour market (with an estimated 400,000 new labour market entrants each year.)

2. Momentum for Action

2.1. Developments in Afghanistan

Following a series of complex transitions in 2014, notably the first democratic handover of power, Afghanistan now enters a new chapter in its history. The security transition and ongoing political consolidation, including the establishment of the National Unity Government and steps taken towards the formation of the new Cabinet, signal positive developments as the country embarks on a path of reconstruction and reconciliation, towards the fulfilment of vision of stability, economic growth, development and self-reliance.

At the London Conference on Afghanistan in December 2014, President Ghani articulated the outline of a comprehensive reform programme and priorities of the new Afghan Government, entitled “*Realizing Self-Reliance: Commitments to Reform and Renewed Partnership*”. While a detailed reform implementation strategy is expected to be devised at the upcoming Senior Officials Meeting in Kabul in mid-2015, immediate reforms are being introduced to address priorities in seven critical areas:

(i) security and political stability; (ii) tackling corruption; (iii) better governance; (iv) restoring fiscal sustainability; (v) reforming development planning and management; (vi) bolstering private sector confidence and creating jobs; and (vii) ensuring citizen’s development and human rights. The latter priority area highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to improving the well-being of refugees and IDPs within a framework of a solutions oriented national refugee and repatriation policy.



The final Communique of the London Conference on Afghanistan entitled “*Afghanistan and International Community: Commitments to Reforms and Renewed Partnership*” acknowledged the assistance provided by the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan in hosting millions of Afghans over the years, as well as the impact on their economies, and called on the international community to provide further support to voluntary return and reintegration of Afghans in their homeland. This call echoed previous appeals made at international conferences on Afghanistan (Kabul Process), including the Tokyo Declaration adopted in July 2012.

2.2. Developments in host countries

The two principal host countries of Afghan refugees – Islamic Republics of Pakistan and Iran – have continued to honour the letter and spirit of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) by upholding temporary asylum space and providing refugees with access to basic services, such as healthcare and education, and livelihood opportunities. Yet, the protracted

nature of Afghan displacement and the associated burden on host communities, coupled with dwindling donor support in the context of competing global humanitarian crises, have created a sense of asylum fatigue in the host countries. As such, and in view of the positive developments towards consolidation in Afghanistan, it is increasingly important to acknowledge the immeasurable support provided by host countries to Afghan refugees for nearly four decades, including by addressing their legitimate expectations to see increased voluntary return trends in the near future.

Furthermore, the challenging economic conditions and limited livelihood opportunities in the sub-region, as well as the national security imperatives and impending expiration of the Tripartite Agreement on Voluntary Repatriation and of the validity of PoR cards in Pakistan in December 2015, have created a sense of uncertainty among Afghan refugees, in some cases leading to spontaneous “unprepared” returns. It has been long and unanimously acknowledged by the international community that sustainable return and reintegration of Afghan refugees is key to future stability and security of Afghanistan and the sub-region. On the contrary, unprepared returns without adequate prospects for full and effective reintegration can trigger further displacement, constitute a disproportionate burden on local communities with meagre resources, induce tensions and prompt resort to negative coping strategies, including radicalization of the dispossessed people, particularly the youth.

3. Rationale & Objectives of the Enhanced Voluntary Return and Reintegration Package (EVRRP)

The positive developments in Afghanistan offer an unprecedented impetus to further advance the pursuit of solutions for Afghan refugees and support the fulfilment of the aspirations of Afghans outside the country to exercise their legitimate “right to return” and take active part in the rebuilding and reconciliation processes in their homeland.

At the same time, the potential increase in voluntary repatriation trends will need to be accompanied by comprehensive reintegration efforts underpinned by robust development initiatives to ensure sustainability of returns. While full and effective reintegration will be a gradual and challenging endeavour, linked to Afghanistan’s overall absorption capacity, the new Government of National Unity has taken the ownership of the process and initiated important steps, including bilateral discussions on the subject with the Government of Pakistan – host to the world’s largest protracted refugee population, and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

2015 as a landmark year in Afghanistan and the sub-region thus presents a unique window of opportunity to make meaningful progress on lasting solutions for Afghan refugees. The Enhanced Voluntary Return and Reintegration Package (EVRRP) is a unique and innovative approach to complement this solutions endeavour. In addition to sending a message of support to the Afghan people, the support of the international community for the EVRRP is an important demonstration of solidarity and burden-sharing with the neighbouring countries that have hosted Afghan refugees for several decades.

The EVRRP was developed after a thorough analysis of the lessons learned and experiences gained over the past decade of supporting return and reintegration of more than 5 million Afghan refugees.

3.1. Objectives of the EVRRP

Complementary to the broader efforts of the Government of Afghanistan to create incentives for return and conditions conducive for sustainable reintegration, the EVRRP introduces an enhanced **multi-purpose cash grant** which will help to:

- **Incentivize return and anchor returnees by strengthening their coping mechanisms throughout the initial return period and kick-starting their reintegration process.** Empowered beneficiaries will have the needed flexibility to prioritize and self-direct the received financial assistance according to their individual needs, whether in rural or urban areas, i.e. to access basic services (land, housing, education, health), and/or in support of self-reliance upon return (business start-up, small entrepreneurial activities, purchase of productive/livelihood assets, etc.);
- **Bring subsequent dividends for local economies and communities by injecting the received assistance into local markets.** This can further facilitate greater interactions between returnees and local communities, increase economic ties and social cohesion and reduce tensions, especially during the early stages of return often marked by competition over meagre resources;
- **Mitigate the negative consequences of unprepared return** and support the efforts of the Government of Afghanistan to ensure **organized and phased return, in view of the current constraints on the absorption capacity.**

3.2. Proposal for EVRRP – a one year Pilot

Initial Target Population:

16,600 families (of an average size of 6) or **100,000 individuals**

Composition of the EVRRP:

It is proposed to complement the currently provided return cash grant of USD 200 per individual/average of USD 1,200 per family (average size of 6) with the inclusion of an **additional long-term reintegration component of USD 3,000** irrespective of the family size.

Instalments:

It is proposed that the EVRRP is disbursed in three installments:

- 1st installment (return grant) of USD 200 per individual payable immediately upon return to cover the essential needs;
- 2nd installment of USD 1,500 to cover the mid-term needs 3 months upon arrival;
- 3rd installment of USD 1,500 payable 3 months after the receipt of the 2nd installment;

Resource requirements:

Total of max USD 5,000 per family x 16,600 families = **USD 83 million**

Transfer Modalities:

The first instalment will be disbursed at one of the five encashment centres. The second and third instalments will be payable through the M-Paisa technology which allows Roshan (a mobile phone operator) customers to send and receive payments and manage their bank accounts on users' mobile phones. This method enables users to make person-to-person money transfers, disburse and repay microfinance loans, disburse and receive salaries, pay bills, and receive money from abroad via Western Union.

The service facilitates the transfer of funds using a mobile phone through Short Message Service (SMS) and an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system. The IVR based menu, an important feature in Afghanistan where 70% of the population is illiterate, is available to customers in Dari, Pashto and English. M-Paisa is powered by Roshan's robust mobile network, which spans across 240 cities and towns in all of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.³

Monitoring:

The EVRRP beneficiaries will be monitored as part of UNHCR's larger refugee returnee monitoring system. To avoid fraud and/or the abuse of the reintegration package, UNHCR and/or a partner will maintain contact with beneficiaries to ensure that the assistance has been received and to verify the location of the returnee family after the first and second instalment. Approximately three months following the third and last instalment of cash assistance, UNHCR will carry out a home visit for returnee families participating in the return monitoring programme and conduct an assessment of the impact.

4. Resource Mobilization

Within the framework of the Joint Resource Mobilization Strategy, adopted by the Quadripartite Steering Committee in 2013 to support the implementation of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees, the concerned Governments and UNHCR will approach non-traditional and traditional donors to secure funding for the Enhanced Return and Reintegration Package. Donor briefings and stakeholder events may be organized to achieve this objective. Engagement of the GCC donors will be pro-actively explored as a first step in this joint resource mobilization process.⁴

The Tripartite Commission frameworks, as well as the Quadripartite Steering Committee meeting held in May 2015 have served as platforms for further nuancing the contours of EVRRP and resource mobilization modalities.

³ Further details on the technology can be found on Roshan's website: <http://www.roshan.af/Roshan/M-Paisa.aspx>

⁴ The final declaration of the 2012 OIC international ministerial conference on "Refugees in the Muslim World" endorsed the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees and "called for its effective implementation, through enhanced international cooperation, to promote voluntary repatriation and sustainable reintegration of Afghan refugees in safety and dignity, in order to resolve one of the largest and longest protracted refugee situations in the world."

5. Linking EVRRP with development initiatives in Afghanistan

While the provision of EVRRP can help to incentivize voluntary return and support its recipients to cope during the initial stages of the return and reintegration process, the package is only complementary to broader efforts of the Government of Afghanistan aimed at creating long- term incentives for durable return and conditions conducive for sustainable reintegration by bolstering the country’s absorption capacity. To meet this objective, it is crucial to ensure that the new reform agenda and Afghanistan’s social and development priorities take into account the needs of returnees and Afghans still outside of the country early on throughout the critical transformation period.

In his inaugural speech, President Ghani highlighted balanced development across the country inclusive of all segments of the society, and good governance, as essential pre-requisites for ending the “national refugee problem”, noting that unless all refugees return home, Afghanistan will not be a fully-fledged country. He further committed to bringing these vulnerable groups, including women and youth, to the forefront of the country’s political, economic and social agenda. As he further alluded in his closing remarks at the London Conference, the broader political, institutional and economic reforms will include targeted measures aimed at enhanced service delivery, re-calibrating the approach to development planning and prioritizing youth empowerment. The envisaged establishment of the National Migration Management Board under the auspices of the President himself, is yet another high-level demonstration of the importance attached to the issue of refugee returns by the Government of Afghanistan.



Against this background, the Government of Afghanistan, with the support of the international community, can help to translate this vision into action by facilitating the inclusion of returnees into development planning and programming at local, provincial and national/sector levels, inter alia, by:

- Reflecting the needs, but also potential (human capital) of returnees throughout the envisaged revision and re-conceptualization of the **National Priority Programs (NPPs)** and ensuring that returnees and displaced fully benefit from these programs by channeling investments into both rural and urban areas of high return. The reform agenda notes future priorities of NPPs on national infrastructure, employment and human capital development plan; national program for private sector development; and national programme for effective governance;
- Utilizing the **National Solidarity Program (NSP)** which has a significant potential to reach returnee and internally displaced communities and contributes to their sustainable reintegration due to its wide national coverage, community-based and participatory approach, as well as credibility among donors, service providers and beneficiaries;
- Prioritizing **community-based (bottom-up) investments and quick impact projects** with high visibility benefiting both returnees and local communities in areas of high return;
- The new reform agenda highlights private sector growth, investment in extractive industries, infrastructure, services, agriculture and trade as the main pillars of Afghanistan's future economic development. Over the years and with the assistance of the countries of asylum and international community, Afghan refugees have developed considerable and relevant skills in these areas with which they can contribute to the reconstruction and development process. It is thus necessary to ensure that future growth and job creation plans take this enormous human potential into account.
- Reflecting the vulnerabilities and cross-sectoral needs of returnees in the draft social policy for Afghanistan, as well as the "Citizen's charter of fundamental economic rights" envisioned by the new Government, can help to address some of their vulnerabilities.
- **The SSAR Afghanistan portfolio of projects**, developed in 2014 to support the in-country implementation of the Solutions Strategy, seeks to reinforce the synergies between humanitarian and development interventions. Apart from activities to support voluntary repatriation, the portfolio includes a wide range of projects aimed at facilitating sustainable reintegration, including in the area of shelter, access to services, livelihoods, food security, environmental and social protection and capacity building. Implementation of such community-based projects in the areas of high return can help to complement broader development initiatives of the Government.