Unprepared for (re)integration

Lessons learned from Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria on Refugee Returns to Urban Areas

PART A: Setting the scene
Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the 102 key informants interviewed across the world, and the agencies, donor and research organisations behind this report. Policy-makers, mayors, civil society actors, international and national NGO and UN representatives, as well as community leaders, spoke to our teams on behalf of the Afghan, Somali and Syrian refugees who, across the years, have taken part in assessments and research, candidly sharing their fears, concerns, aspirations and hopes. Our gratitude goes to the many men, women, youth and children who agreed to share their experiences in the hope that the data will help to improve their and other refugees’ lives. This research was completed thanks to the specialist input of a global technical advisory group, whose members include Anna Stein, Aude Galli, Brooke Lauten, Farida Bena, Kim Mancini and Saskia Baas, and who were joined by Tine Jacobsen and Maria Pade Lange, whose contributions strengthened the final report. These contributions were made possible thanks to the country and regional specialists guiding the work of ADSP, DSP and ReDSS.

Special thanks go to the authors and the research team at Samuel Hall led by Dr Nassim Majidi, with contributions from Sorcha O’Callaghan, Marion Guillaume, Nicholas Ross, Saadia Ali, Jawid Hassanzai, Ibrahim Ramazani, Abdul Basir Mohmand, Preethi Nallu and Camille Kasavan.

This publication was commissioned by the Danish Refugee Council in partnership with International Rescue Committee, Norwegian Refugee Council, Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat, Durable Solutions Platform and Asia Displacement Solutions Platform, and was researched by Samuel Hall.

Durable Solutions Platforms and Secretariat

Steering Committee

Research Team

This report should be cited using the following reference style: DRC/IRC/NRC/ReDSS/DSP/ADSP/Samuel Hall (2019) Unprepared for (Re)Integration: Lessons learned from Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria on Refugee Returns to Urban Areas.

Front cover photo: A man prepares to load his luggage to leave the reception center in Berbera, Somaliland 2015 © Axel Fassio / DRC
Key concepts and definitions

Displaced persons are persons or groups of persons, including asylum seekers, refugees and internally displaced persons, who are outside their homes or places of residence for reasons related to fear of persecution, conflict, generalised violence or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order.

Durable solution is achieved when displaced persons no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement. It can be achieved through sustainable (re)integration at the place of origin (voluntary return), local integration in areas where displaced persons take refuge or in another part of their country based on their choice. For refugees, it can also be achieved through resettlement in a third country. (ReDSS)

Host community refers to the community within which displaced persons reside. (GCER)

Internally displaced persons are persons or groups of persons who have been 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 generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised state border.

Non-refoulement is the cornerstone of refugee protection. Set out in Article 33(1) of the 1951 Refugee Convention, it requires that “no contracting state shall expel or return a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his (or her) life or freedom would be threatened”.

Preparedness refers to a proactive and planned response to emergency, disasters or, in the context of this study, to situations of return. The IASC speaks of preparedness as an inter-agency, common and planned approach. Preparedness is multidimensional and multilevelled, at individual/household, community, organisational or state levels. (IASC)

Refugee is a person who, “…owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his (or her) nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself (or herself) of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his (or her) former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it”. (Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention) 1951 Convention refers to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (also known as the 1951 Refugee Convention).

Sustainable (re)integration – There is no universal definition of the term “(re)integration”. The IASC Framework highlights eight criteria to be used when considering whether durable solutions have been achieved, namely: safety and security; adequate standard of living; access to livelihoods; restoration of housing, land and property; access to documentation; family reunification; participation in public affairs, and access to effective remedies and justice.

Meanwhile, UNHCR sees (re)integration as “equated with the achievement of a sustainable return – in other words the ability of returning refugees to secure the political, economic, (legal) and social conditions needed to maintain
life, livelihood and dignity, (and) a process that should result in the disappearance of differences in legal rights and duties and the equal access of returnees to services, assets and opportunities”.6

Voluntary repatriation is the return to country of origin “on refugees’ free and informed decision”.7 The essential requirement for repatriation to be voluntary is the counterpart of the principle of non-refoulement. The facilitation of voluntary repatriation is one of the basic functions of UNHCR.8

Youth is defined by the UN as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24.

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7 Adapted from IOM (2019) Glossary on Migration.
PART A
Setting the scene
Global compacts, return and (re)integration

Introduction

In 2016, the Government of Kenya announced that the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps – home to approximately 600,000 refugees – should be closed for reasons of national security. A renewed statement on the closure of Dadaab in 2019 targeted the remaining 210,556 (mainly Somali) refugees, despite NGOs and UNHCR indicating that many areas of Somalia were not conducive to large-scale returns. In 2018, over 800,000 Afghans returned to Afghanistan, following mass forced returns of Afghan refugees in 2016, and despite the country facing the highest level of civilian violence on record. Meanwhile, the UN predicts that 250,000 Syrians may return in 2019 despite continued violence. As these three contexts illustrate, there is a pressing need to ensure respect for the core principles of voluntariness, safety and dignity in returns, especially as these are increasingly occurring against a backdrop of protracted conflict.

Recognising the need to address refugee situations that are protracted and large-scale in nature, the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) is a global framework for responsibility-sharing between states that sets out to:

- ease pressures on host countries
- enhance refugee self-reliance
- expand access to third-country solutions
- support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity

Given that host countries are reluctant to agree to integrate refugees on their territory in the long-term, and that resettlement options are available to only a few of the world’s most vulnerable refugees, return to one’s country of origin remains the most commonly envisaged pathway to durable solutions. The GCR focuses little attention, however, on what happens after return. Evidence from Afghanistan and Somalia shows that returnees are likely to have displacement-related vulnerabilities long after their return. Returnees who become internally displaced, who eke out a living in squatter camps or who are forced to move again cannot be considered to have found a durable solution to their displacement. While return is starting to be better understood, it is too rarely seen as part of a process. (Re)integration is often not prepared for in advance, nor is it regarded as a responsibility that goes beyond that of the country of origin. There remains a critical gap in support to the processes linking return and long-term (re)integration.

This study addresses this gap by highlighting operational lessons learnt on refugee returns and (re)integration.

The report underlines findings of relevance to global commitments under the Global Compact on Refugees, informing the pledges, contributions and exchange of good practices that are expected to be made at the first Global Refugee Forum (GRF), to be held in December 2019. More specifically, this study informs discussions and decisions around:

26 IOM (2019). Afghanistan weekly situation report, Jan–Dec 2018. This figure includes the return of registered refugees (15,699, according to UNHCR (2019d) Afghanistan – Operational Fact Sheet, 29 February 2019), as well as 805,850 returnees from Iran and Pakistan not registered as refugees.
29 Reuters (2018). 250,000 Syrian refugees could return home next year: UNHCR.
30 UN (2018). Global Compact on Refugees
31 See for instance the GCR, where reintegration is only mentioned six times and briefly: United Nations (2018). Global Compact on Refugees.
32 DRC/Mixed Migration Centre (2019). Distant Dreams: Understanding the aspirations of Afghan returnees
33 Sturridge, Bakewell and Hammond (2018). Return and (Re)integration after Displacement: Belonging, Labelling and Livelihoods in Three Somali Cities
35 Hanid, Christensen and Zetter (2015).
Responsibility-sharing – The GCR contributes to thinking beyond proximity to a crisis as the primary criterion to define state responsibility. Instead, it calls for “predictable and equitable burden- and responsibility-sharing” across world governments. This study contributes to this shift in thinking, by identifying areas where responsibility-sharing and action on supporting countries of origin on return and (re)integration could be improved, as well as highlighting gaps and areas where action on responsibility-sharing is still missing.

Triggering the linkage between humanitarian response and longer-term planning – This report centres on follow-throughs required to make (re)integration a reality, syncing the content of operational lessons learnt to the content of global discussions. While (re)integration is inherently a developmental concern, it has traditionally been led by humanitarians. Governments and development actors are only just beginning to show interest in the process.

Unpacking key concepts: return and (re)integration

This report uses the concept of ‘return’ rather than ‘repatriation’, although these terms are often used interchangeably to refer to refugees returning to their country of origin. Return (unlike repatriation) is often paired with (re)integration to indicate that, together, they may be part of a progressive process towards the achievement of a lasting solution to displacement. This choice recognises that return is not a durable solution in itself: sustainable (re)integration is. The process starts before the return journey begins and continues until well after arrival.

The study uses the concept of ‘sustainable (re)integration’ (hereafter referred to as (re)integration) to reflect the durable solutions process as defined by IASC (Box 1). There is, however, no commonly agreed definition of (re)integration. The concept encompasses (re)integration to places of origin, integration to new areas of settlement in countries of origin and/or the integration of people who may have been born or spent...
their entire lives in exile and who are encountering their country of origin for the first time.

Study objectives, methodology and scope
Undertaken as a global partnership between the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), with support from ECHO’s Enhanced Response Capacity, the report reflects the three agencies’ commitment to promoting durable solutions for displacement-affected populations.

The research has been anchored in the specialised guidance of three platforms at the regional and country level: the Asia Displacement Solutions Platform (ADSP) in Central Asia, the regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (ReDSS) in East Africa and the Horn of Africa, and the Durable Solutions Platform (DSP) in the Middle East in relation to the Syrian displacement crisis. These platforms work to promote collaborative and collective research, learning and policy development within their respective regions of influence.

The study addresses gaps in knowledge on (re)integration by focusing on lessons from operational practices in Afghanistan and Somalia. While the lessons from this study are also relevant to Syrian returns, it must also be recognised that, in the Syrian context, spontaneous refugee returns are occurring on a very small scale and under conditions widely regarded as not being conducive to safe, voluntary or dignified return. The study aims to inform programming and policy beyond these three contexts, as a global report that advocates for (re)integration to be mainstreamed in global policy discussions, regional commitments, and national and local planning to support returnees and communities of return.

The study included empirical research in host countries (Kenya, Jordan and Lebanon), as well as return settings in Afghanistan (Kabul and Jalalabad) and

### Box 1. The IASC Framework on Durable Solutions

The IASC Framework highlights eight criteria that are to be used in considering whether durable solutions have been achieved.
- safety and security
- adequate standard of living
- access to livelihoods
- restoration of housing, land and property
- access to documentation
- family reunification
- participation in public affairs
- access to effective remedies and justice

How can preparedness be effectively addressed and what lessons can be drawn from the operational response on return and (re)integration to urban areas in Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria?

1. Factors: What factors influence return patterns and sustainable (re)integration? Which factors are common and which are divergent across the three contexts?

2. Lessons on sustainable (re)integration: How can returnees, receiving communities, governments and organisations be more effectively prepared so as to lay the ground and work towards sustainable (re)integration? What has worked and what could work?

The research uses two primary lenses:

- **Returns to urban areas that are not people’s places of origin:** The idea of refugees returning home is often misconceived. For the many who do not return to their areas of origin, return can mark the beginning of a long process of establishing new social and economic networks in new urban communities. The research analyses the significance of return to urban centres that are not their areas of origin on returnees’ prospects for (re)integration.

- **Gender and age:** Women and youth are among the groups that are most impacted by return, yet (re)integration programmes are often neither gender- nor youth-sensitive. This research explores the implications of return and (re)integration on young and on female returnees with a view to informing (re)integration programming.

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Lessons learned from Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria on Refugee Returns to Urban Areas

Somalia (Mogadishu and Kismayo), with a specific focus on urban areas with high levels of return. A qualitative methodology was adopted, as summarised in Table 1.

The empirical work was grounded in a thorough literature review, examining over 150 pieces of secondary literature from academia, the grey literature, project documents and media sources across the three contexts and globally. These were ranked according to their relevance to the study theme and were used to determine both the state of knowledge on (re)integration and the existing knowledge gaps. For a detailed methodology, refer to Annex 1.

Context of return and (re)integration

Global context

The literature and discussions around return have grown since the 1960s, culminating, in recent years, in a global call for standards and agreement on suitable conditions for return and (re)integration. These trends have informed the 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (Global Compact for Migration or GCM) and, to a certain extent, the Global Compact on Refugees (or GCR). The GCR addresses the gaps between asylum and responsibility-sharing, expanding the commitments by states to support not only asylum seekers within their own borders, but also to support states that, by default of “geography and proximity to crisis”, have found themselves bearing a disproportionate responsibility for refugees.

When it comes to return, the GCR calls for stakeholders to support policies, investments and programmes that can “facilitate the socioeconomic (re)integration” of refugees and their “integration in national development planning”. The GCR suggests ways of supporting countries of origin to enable returns in safety and dignity (objective 4), and reminds stakeholders that it should be “an overriding priority to promote enabling conditions for voluntary repatriation”. In this way, the GCR seeks to support and incentivise the implementation of existing principles through responsibility-sharing agreements. These commitments are in the early stages of implementation.

Globally, returns are subject to fluctuating political contexts, are often involuntary, and may sometimes be in violation of the principle of non-refoulement. Surveys capturing refugee intentions highlight this concern: in 2014, fewer than 3% of Dadaab residents wanted to return to Somalia, 84% of Afghans surveyed in Pakistan in 2011 wanted to stay, and 85% of Syrians surveyed in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon in 2018 did not intend to return within 12 months. However, returns still occurred in each of these contexts.

The politicisation of returns has operational implications. Not least is whether and how operational

Table 1. Research Tools Used for Empirical Data Collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data collection</th>
<th>Workshops</th>
<th>Key informant interviews</th>
<th>Focus group discussions</th>
<th>Household case studies</th>
<th>Operational case studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan (Kabul and Jalalabad)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalia (Mogadishu, Kismayo, Nairobi)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria (Amman and Beirut)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global (Geneva, Nairobi)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td><strong>102</strong></td>
<td><strong>21</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

42 UN (2018b). Global Compact on Refugees; see: https://www.unhcr.org/5c658aed4
47 UNHCR (2018a). Fourth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees’ Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria (RPIS).
agencies should engage. The humanitarian imperative requires humanitarian organisations to respond where there is need – including to support returnees. This includes establishing whether conditions in countries of potential repatriation are conducive to safe and dignified return.\(^48\) Research further highlights the need to support sustainable (re)integration for returnees in these difficult circumstances.\(^49\)

**Country contexts**

Returns to Afghanistan have occurred against a backdrop of increasing conflict and civilian deaths\(^50\) and growing internal displacement due to conflict and drought. In Afghanistan, 2016 saw a surge in returns, with over 1 million documented and undocumented returns from Iran and Pakistan; in 2017, this number dropped to just over 610,000, only to go up again in 2018, with over 800,000 undocumented returnees alone, according to IOM.\(^51\) Refugee returns are adding to existing numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Governments’ diminishing appetite for hosting refugees, especially at a regional level, have exacerbated pressures to return, often leaving Afghan refugees with no other choice. The Afghan government has expanded its efforts to include (re)integration as a national policy priority and to mainstream refugee (re)integration in its national development plans.

In Somalia, protracted internal and cross-border displacement, rather than return, dominated mobility narratives in the 1990s and 2000s, although hundreds of thousands of spontaneous and organised refugee
returns to Somaliland and South-Central Somalia occurred over this period. A voluntary repatriation programme signed in 2013 was ramped up in 2016 as part of efforts to close Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya. This was in spite of a food security crisis – coupled with insecurity and conflict – verging on famine, and widespread concerns that Somali refugees were being returned involuntarily to places not conducive to return and with very limited absorption capacities. Since 2016, returns from Kenya have dropped significantly. In 2018, only 7,559 refugees returned from Kenya to Somalia, according to UNHCR – a huge drop in 2017, when 35,403 returned. In 2019, the Kenyan government renewed its intention to close the camp. Refugees in Dadaab remain in a situation of protracted displacement, with no right to work or move, while local populations depend on the refugees’ presence for their well-being and livelihoods.

Different factors are at play in Syria. Although humanitarian organisations still do not consider the situation suitable for safe returns, there have been some limited increases in refugee returns since 2016. In 2017–2018, UNHCR recorded almost 107,000 Syrians returning spontaneously from Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan. Although defined as self-organised returns, in some contexts, these were in fact facilitated by host governments, non-state entities and private individuals – humanitarian actors have not been involved. While Syrians may want to return eventually, in part due to the lack of prospects as well as experiences of discrimination in exile, humanitarian organisations and UNHCR do not consider that conditions for a safe, voluntary and dignified return currently exist. A 2018 report acknowledges that, “talking too early about or funding assistance programmes that intentionally or incidentally encourage returns to Syria – where fighting still rages, income generating opportunities are rare, access to services is scarce, and durable solutions are lacking – may result in unintended harmful outcomes.”

Structure of the report

This report speaks to two audiences:
- an audience of governmental, civil society, intergovernmental, non-governmental and other international practitioners working to improve humanitarian and development operational and policy approaches to (re)integration based on principled action
- an audience of policy-makers working on the implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees

It is structured around three core parts:
- **Part A** sets the scene by introducing the global context, the concepts and the case studies on which the rest of the report is based. It makes a case for linking operational lessons learnt to the global calls for responsibility-sharing, to accompany the implementation of the GCR. It continues by providing an overview and synthesis of existing trends and factors influencing return and (re)integration (Chapter I).
- **Part B** presents ten lessons learnt across three phases that link return with sustainable (re)integration. These phases are preparedness for return (Chapter II), immediate support to return (Chapter III) and long-term support for sustainable (re)integration (Chapter IV). These lessons are broken down across three chapters, with examples of emerging or good practices that can be scaled and replicated across contexts. This part represents the bulk of the research and of the insights gathered from practitioners and communities on their experiences of (re)integration programming.
- **Part C** concludes on global implications and recommendations to improve practice on returns and (re)integration (Chapter V).

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52 A tripartite agreement, Governing the Voluntary Repatriation of Somali Refugees Living in Kenya, was signed between the governments of Kenya and Somalia, with UNHCR, in 2013; see: https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5285e0294.pdf
54 DSP (2017a). Unsafe but Home: Returns to Jarablus and Tell Abiad
Key factors influencing return and (re)integration and implications for programming

Factors that influence return patterns and sustainable (re)integration

Why are refugees returning?

Politics is a significant factor driving refugee returns. Host governments often have a political interest in reducing the number of refugees on their territory and asylum space, an interest that may be linked to economic and security considerations. The European response to the refugee crisis triggered a shift in state response to refugees’ needs globally. This response, which intensified the negative rhetoric surrounding refugees and migrants and increased the number of returns and deportations, has been mimicked in other regions. In Afghanistan, involuntary returns from Pakistan and Iran continue and, in some cases, are increasing. Somi returns from Dadaab in 2016–2018 occurred in a context of diminished rations and allegations of harassment by officials, and there are signs of increasing pressures in some of the countries hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees.

The political and conflict situation in countries of origin also continues to play a role in influencing decisions to return; this is particularly true when it comes to decision-making on who will return first and how. Split and circular returns provide a popular option for families to balance political pressures to return from host countries against concerns about security in the country of origin. As frequently expressed in focus group discussions (FGDs), one family member will usually return home first, before deciding if it is safe for the rest of the family to join them. Although conflict is not the sole source of insecurity at home, ongoing and existing conflict patterns in countries of origin still have a significant impact on refugees’ considerations about whether to return. In all three countries in the study – Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia – conflict patterns are recurrent and have not ceased. Whether conditions are suitable for returns in these three locations remains questionable, even as returns are ongoing.

However, while safety and suitability for return play a role in decision-making, a more significant factor in these considerations is the condition of life in the host country. Syrian families interviewed for this study in Lebanon highlighted the negative hosting situation as a driver for return, many of them articulating a feeling that, at this point, things cannot be worse in Syria than they are already in Lebanon. As one Syrian mother in Lebanon describes it: “I hear that things are OK in Aleppo but I am most concerned about the safety of my children, as I have heard about [the] kidnapping of kids on the streets [there]. Mostly, because of the lack of [the] proper rule of law and the chaos that has taken over Syria since the conflict. But I am also worried about their safety here, in Shatila, given how the streets are rough and they are exposed to constant risks… My kids do not get any sun in the camps; they are stranded in the one room when I am working. I have no support system. I see their health is suffering. And they are not as well as they could be.”

Afghan FGD participants who have returned from Pakistan, as well as Somali returnees from Dadaab, also highlight challenging living conditions in hosting countries. The data reveals that specific reasons for leaving a host country include a combination of the following: forced evictions, overcrowded housing or camps, abuse from police and harassment from local authorities, a lack of educational opportunities for refugee children (in Pakistan) and a lack of work opportunities, all combined with, and in some cases a consequence of, political pressure for refugees to return.

Returnees, therefore, “place more importance on push-factors in the place of displacement, such as a deterioration in the economic or security situation or a lack of assistance/basic services”, rather than on an

58 WFP (2017), WFP Cuts Food Rations For Refugees In Kenya Amidst Funding Shortfalls; Nyemari (2018), Kenya: Global Compact on Refugees must be quickly anchored in national policy.
actual improvement of the situation at home.\textsuperscript{59} Similar concerns at play in Somalia and Afghanistan have, in the past, resulted in a number of actors questioning the degree to which these returns were entirely voluntary.\textsuperscript{60} Negative drivers of return may leave refugees with only bad options, leading to a reluctant return, which, while perhaps not physically coerced, may not be actively desired or entirely voluntary either.

Refugees find themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place: on the one hand, staying in a host country that has limited resources (and, sometimes, limited political will) to implement dignified and long-term living conditions, in a context where resettlement is hoped for but extremely unlikely; on the other hand, return to a country of origin where conflict remains unresolved and return conditions are uncertain.

What is the current state of (re)integration support?

For refugees who do make the decision to return, the journey does not end on arrival in the country of origin, but continues long into the (re)integration process. Achieving sustainable (re)integration depends on a variety of factors, including the specific destinations of return, the availability and strength of networks in these locations, and the gender and age of the returnees. Yet, these factors are rarely prioritised in return and (re)integration programming, which often centres on immediate challenges rather than longer-term efforts. There remains a significant gap in accountability for people who often return involuntarily with expectations and promises that are unfulfilled.

Approaches to support for return and (re)integration have varied significantly, and these different experiences highlight important implications for whether and how returnees can be supported:

\begin{itemize}
  \item In Afghanistan, status rather than need has framed (re)integration support, with key informants adding that support remains reactive to emergency needs rather than reflective of long-term programming.\textsuperscript{61}
  \item In Somalia, the focus has been on durable solutions,\textsuperscript{62} with area- rather than status-based approaches. Working towards collective outcomes for displacement-affected communities has been identified by government and other stakeholders as central to achieving durable solutions. Consortia programming approaches are gaining in importance as they allow partners with different strengths and areas of expertise to work together to address gaps. Despite such efforts to address humanitarian–development divides, however, humanitarian agencies continue to provide much of the support to returnees, while gaps remain in transitioning from return towards sustainable (re)integration. Another gap has been in measuring sustainable (re)integration among durable solutions actors.
  \item In Syria, returns have yet to occur on a significant scale. The humanitarian and development communities have used the period between the current situation of displacement and possible large-scale future returns to create coordination mechanisms and standards for ensuring that preparations do not overtake the need for sustained protection in refugee-hosting countries.\textsuperscript{63} These have not yet been tested; essentially, organisations are working with several unknowns as the timing, scale, locations and key actors who may be involved remain to be determined.
\end{itemize}

Across these contexts, the support offered for (re)integration is consistently insufficient, especially in the context of Syria, where few NGOs have access and where information is often unverifiable. ADSP’s recent review of the evidence around displacement in Afghanistan also notes that existing research on the topic focuses thematically on “access to economic opportunities for displaced Afghans, followed by access to land and housing and access to legal and civil rights”.\textsuperscript{64} Little attention has been given to the social dimension and needs for sustainable (re)integration. Significant informational gaps exist pre- and post-return. Returnees gather information prior to return primarily from personal networks, and informational support available in the country of origin mostly relates to migration, rather than (re)integration.

\textsuperscript{60} Human Rights Watch (2016). Though returns from Kenya have decreased, as previously noted, the threat of Dadaab’s closure continues to impact choices. A 2019 NRC article notes: “The threat of the Kenyan government closing Dadaab refugee complex after almost 30 years is also a determining factor on why young refugees decide to leave [Kenya].” NRC (2019). Leaving safety, returning home to fear.
\textsuperscript{63} See UNHCR (2018c) Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy: Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria, which has been expanded upon by NGOs to identify which activities are currently permissible without incentivising returns.
Finally, the politics of return has a significant impact on whether (re)integration support can be funded or implemented, and whether these gaps can be filled. Because states tend to be more focused on getting refugees to leave their territory, the attention of host or potential resettlement countries tends to fade beyond their own borders, while less attention and support is given to what happens after. Evidence from Afghanistan and Somalia shows that returnees are likely to have unsupported displacement-related vulnerabilities long after their return. Returnees who become internally displaced, who eke out a living in squatter camps or who are forced to move again cannot be considered as having found a durable solution to their displacement.

**Factors that affect refugees’ return choices and (re)integration across contexts**

**Return aspirations and expectations**
Return trends are driven, in great part, by changing governmental priorities, conditions in host countries and those in countries of origin. Despite variations in contexts, aspirations and expectations are common. When possible, refugees want to keep options open. Potential support, in return, can be weighed against keeping their legal status in exile. Return – like all mobility – is a strategy deployed across family

65 DRC/Mixed Migration Centre (2019). Distant Dreams: Understanding the aspirations of Afghan returnees.
networks to manage risks and opportunities associated with displacement. FGD participants in Somalia highlight a common dynamic of returning to “see if they can succeed” without giving up the safety net of camps (where their wider family is still based) if they cannot achieve this success. Similarly, Syrian families interviewed for this study emphasise the importance of flexibility in their return journey, of being able to move back and forth between host and origin countries in order to make better return decisions and to keep options open if conditions in a return area worsen or do not meet expectations.

Returns are often staggered or split to maximise employment, access to services and other opportunities available to the household across contexts, and to take into account safety concerns specific to individual family members; for instance, in the case of Syrian men who may be conscripted if they return, but whose female family members may return home to reunite with family.\(^{68}\) While this is a common situation, the decision is not an easy one, and many families interviewed express anxiety around this separation and the stress it causes their families. As one Syrian father explains about his wife and children returning before him: “The biggest challenge will be constantly worrying about them. I will be spending every moment of the day worried about them. That is why I would rather not send them at all… But I can’t do much as my wife wants to leave and their education has suffered here. It is a difficult choice.”\(^{69}\) In some cases, the success of this strategy itself may be mixed: family separation has been shown to lead to greater vulnerability in cases where families have not had the time to adequately prepare for this separation.\(^{69}\)

Some returns are circular, with returnees migrating back to their host country, once or many times over a period of time,\(^{70}\) either as a planned strategy, or as a coping mechanism in the face of unexpected difficulties. The re-return to Iran or Pakistan for Afghan returnees, or for Somali returnees back to Kenya, show that return is not a one-directional process. However, re-migration to the host country to be with family may conflict with sustainable economic and social factors, such as access to safe housing and stable employment opportunities.\(^{71}\) FGD participants in all three contexts describe shelter needs and employment opportunities as key reasons for the continued back-and-forth movement between host and origin settings.

Voluntary returns are often based on limited, outdated or even inaccurate information, with many relying on anecdotal information from family and friends. FGD participants in Afghanistan and Somalia frequently highlight the loss of trust, disillusionment and regret that occurs when this information is incomplete or inaccurate. One Somali FGD participant expressed a common sentiment, stating, “I would go back [to Dadaab] if I had the money… My life has been difficult in Mogadishu. If someone would pay for my life somewhere else, I would take that opportunity and go and not come back because I feel that I was tricked to come back and not given everything I was promised.”\(^{72}\) There is a clear need for accurate and neutral information to assist potential returnees in making truly voluntary decisions.

Programming and political return agreements, as they currently stand, often do not take into account the human and family dilemmas that refugees consider carefully prior to their return; this programming and these agreements, when they do exist, are often linear and do not provide the flexibility required for dignified decision-making.

In addition to these common return hopes and decision-making processes, subgroups have specific needs that must be taken into account when designing programming. The following sections explore the existing information around population subgroups that have been identified in the literature and our research as being particularly vulnerable: returnees not in their areas of origin, female returnees and youth returnees.

Returns to urban areas that are not areas of origin

Access to strong social networks in locations of return is key to (re)integration. Returnees often move to urban areas when they cannot find opportunities or security elsewhere.\(^{72}\) When they move, their hopes may be high and not aligned with the reality on the ground.\(^{73}\) The literature shows that returnees who move to urban areas that are not their place of origin face increased (re)integration challenges.\(^{74}\)

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71 Key informant interview, UN-Habitat, Housing, Land and Property Task Force, Eastern Region Coordinator, Jalalabad (April 2019).
73 Sturridge, Bakewell and Hammond (2018).
74 Depending on the context and conditions abroad. One key informant (UNICEF Afghanistan) noted, “For children who grew up in Pakistan, and they come back to the village of their parents, with no facilities, no electricity, it’s a desert. It’s very difficult to adapt to this… maybe in the city it is better with more facilities, easier for them to adapt. In big cities, the youth can adapt better.”
Returnees to urban areas not of origin have more limited social networks. This, in turn, makes it more difficult to find adequate employment or to start a business, as access to labour markets and decent work opportunities is often mediated through family and community networks who have built foundations of trust in their area. One Somali participant described his struggle: "It is the most difficult for people like us, who know no one here; the people we knew are either all dead or have moved elsewhere. Trust is a major concern in Mogadishu, and if you are new and have nobody who knows you, people would not trust you as much." Subsequent focus group discussions in Somalia echo this sentiment, finding that those who return to urban centres without networks often struggle to find adequate shelter and may end up in IDP camps, which leads to diminished access to opportunities for long-term reintegration.

Returnees who wish to return to areas where they do have a strong social network – particularly those who are originally from more rural parts of the country – may also face difficulties accessing livelihoods opportunities, as there are simply fewer of these in more rural areas. Returnees may find themselves in a catch-22 situation, having to choose between returning to non-urban areas of origin, where social networks may be strong but economic opportunities limited, and settling in urban areas where economic opportunities may be greater in number but social networks will be weak. Fostering social capital in contexts where returnees are returning to a new area is crucial to facilitating access to livelihoods and improving social cohesion, mental health and overall well-being.

Skills are key to addressing livelihood challenges and building sustainable (re)integration: if they do not have skills adapted to the local context, returnees will have difficulty reintegrating in urban areas. Originally rural FGD participants in Afghanistan, for instance, describe difficulties learning the skills needed for adapting to urban life, and the disadvantage this puts them at when compared to their urban-raised counterparts. However, limited data exists about the actual skills and capacities that returnees bring with them, and whether they do in fact meet the needs of their context, making it difficult to design evidence-based programming around this.

Limited land and housing, in what are rapidly urbanising environments, are major impediments to (re)integration. Land titles (where they exist) have, in some cases, dated to previous generations, making it unclear where and if returnees will be able to return to their former homes. Improving infrastructure and security, therefore, represents a critical means of support for hosts and returnees, thereby promoting integration. Host community members who took part in focus group discussions in urban areas of Afghanistan generally speak positively of renting to returnees or supporting family members by sharing a house.

In these circumstances, the importance of fostering social capital in contexts where returnees are returning to a new area, as well as building opportunities outside of urban areas, is crucial.

Youth returnees

Youth are rarely considered a separate category in assistance, even though they represent one of the largest population categories in our three contexts. Smaller-scale research highlights the fact that the situations and experiences of youth on return often differ from those of older family members.

The literature suggests that the involvement of youth in decision-making and their enthusiasm for return is "mixed". Although some youth are among the most eager to return – for example, young Somali refugees in Kenya "express motivation and hopes for a drastic change in their lives upon return, through access to jobs" – youth who were reluctant to return, and especially those who have been deported, experience severe disillusionment and loss of hope. How decisions to return were made, therefore, has a significant impact on the ability of the returnee to (re)integrate and adjust, particularly from a psychological and social perspective.

For youth as well as children, in many cases, a return home is not actually a return to any recognised home; in

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76 Note that, on return, even those with networks may struggle due to the relatively weak absorption capacity of many of these networks.
78 DDG underlines the importance of “building trust between groups of people” in fostering social cohesion. DDG (2018a). Presentation of Social Cohesion – Programme Mainstreaming.
80 Key informant interview, NRC (2019).
81 DDG underlines the importance of “building trust between groups of people” in fostering social cohesion. DDG (2018a). Presentation of Social Cohesion – Programme Mainstreaming.
84 UNHCR/Samuel Hall (2015).
85 Save the Children Samuel/Hall (2018), 39.
both the Afghan and Somali contexts, many may have never been to their country of origin. (Re)integration can, therefore, be additionally challenging on several levels.

- From a security perspective, youth face specific risks and challenges. In Syria, fear of conscription or imprisonment on return prevents young men from returning.⁸⁶ In Somalia, young men face forced recruitment by Al-Shabaab,⁸⁶ while a recent study found that youth – whether displaced or not – express fears of Al-Shabaab-related violence, inter-clan or gender-based violence, and theft.⁸⁸

- Linguistically, many young returnees experience communication issues, as youth who have grown up in their countries of asylum may find themselves struggling to gain fluency in their native language on return.

- Culturally, youth who have grown up abroad may be perceived negatively, as posing a cultural threat to the status quo. Cultural differences can have implications on social and economic inclusion but may also give rise to new risks for returnees, which should be carefully considered in advance of return. UNHCR lists, in the risk profiles in its Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from Afghanistan, “individuals perceived as ‘westernised’”.⁸⁹ In Somalia, one returnee explains, “Another major challenge facing youth is the inability to integrate due to cultural barriers; the acceptable dress code in Somalia is different to... Kenya.”⁹⁰ This causes some youth to withdraw socially, or to engage mostly with other returnees. In some cases, youth may have more positive inclusion opportunities; radio dialogues in Somalia, for instance, have found that youth are more likely to call for socially cohesive approaches to support.⁹¹

- In terms of mental health, youth returnees to Afghanistan and Somalia have described needs that have been worsened by limited support and difficult (re)integration experiences.⁹² Research on returnees to Somalia found that contrasts between their actual and imagined life abroad and return to Somalia led many to exhibit signs of stress, anger and other symptoms.⁹³ It is likely that young people returning to Syria will face similar challenges; IRC has found that over half of Syria’s population needs mental health support.⁹⁴

- Educationally, young people face challenges in over-extended education systems, or may experience financial constraints to enrolment,⁹⁵ even as many see education as a key pathway for youth (re)integration. Just 61% of returnee households in Afghanistan were found to send all boys in the household to school, while 37% sent all their girls to school.⁹⁶ Some students face difficulties adapting to new curricula, a lower standard of schooling, the language of instruction, or a lack of access to higher education facilities in their place of origin or return. These challenges have impeded returns to Somalia, with families separating so their young ones can continue to benefit from the widely perceived higher quality of education in Kenya.⁹⁷ One Afghan returnee interviewed for this study also stresses the necessity of education: “Youth should be provided with a great education environment and employment opportunities, as they are the main difficulties... Without educational documents, they cannot get employed.”

Despite the additional challenges that returning youth face, they bring opportunities to their countries of origin – if well integrated and given the possibility to develop and build relevant skills. In Afghanistan, for example, youth returnees stress their desire to contribute locally to their country, but are frustrated by the lack of skills or means to do so.⁹⁸ Youth are underserved by both humanitarian and national assistance on return: support remains concentrated

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⁸⁶ World Bank (2019). The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis (p.74) notes that “Concerns about the mandatory military conscription for men aged 18-42 remained in place by mid-2018. This policy not only drove the departure of many young men and their families from Syria in the first place, it actively discouraged their return. Recent legislation has further complicated this issue. As of 2017, fines of up to $8,000 could be levied on male youth that do not register for military service within three months of turning 18.”

⁸⁷ DDG (2017), 22.


⁹⁵ One FGD participant in Afghanistan stressed, “I came here because I knew I would be free here and I was expecting to study here. It is better here now because it is my country and I am free, and it has a lot of good sides to it. I cannot study because of economic problems.”


⁹⁷ UNHCR/Samuel Hall (2015).

at household level, meaning that heads of household are more likely to be directly receiving it. As a result, youth are not integrated into institutionalised responses to return and (re)integration or to youth engagement. These returning youth require not just support, but ways of engaging within their communities of return.

Women in return and (re)integration

Women FGD participants highlighted specific challenges that most male respondents seemed to be unaware of or were less affected by. Research that focuses on the (re)integration of women returnees remains limited. An NGO worker interviewed for this study described the situations of returnee women and the gendered challenges they face: "The sense... from women was the sense of helplessness, which the men didn't talk about. Men were focused on accommodation. Basically, the women, when they described their first few days in the new location [of return], felt they knew nobody. They felt they could relate to no one. You know, 'in this new place, we feel that there is no one to save us from our husbands' – in terms of family violence. So... this is a different perspective."

Qualitative findings on gender challenges faced by returnee women can, however, be contradictory, and disaggregated data on women’s return aspirations and decision-making influence remains scarce. FGDs and previous research highlight the fact that, while male heads of households may have the final say for the entire family, the agreement of all household members, including women, is typically sought, particularly in Syria.99 Similarly, in Somalia, women have been found to be key actors in decisions to return, especially in cases of split returns.100 Interviews with potential female returnees in Lebanon, Afghanistan and Syria indicate that, in some contexts, women are at least as likely (if not more so) to press for return than men. As one Afghan woman explains: “Afghanistan is our homeland and we feel relaxed a thousand times more compared to Pakistan.”

Women often referenced social connections and social norms when discussing return in FGDs. Women living in contexts with significantly greater freedoms than they have or may have had in their area of origin may be reluctant to return. Among the differing opinions of boys and girls regarding return, for example, asylum seekers in Sweden have noted the increased burden for girls being forcibly returned or deported to Afghanistan after having spent years in countries where their rights were more respected.101 Evidence collected as early as 2001 shows that women and girls have an ambivalent attitude to return to Afghanistan, being vulnerable to harassment for the way they dress or finding that their mobility is more restricted than when they lived in Iran or Pakistan.102 Women, like youth, may face additional cultural pressures, as some of the behaviours of female returnees are perceived as untraditional and not conforming to social norms.103

The context of the host country matters when it comes to these feelings of return. Women refugees in Lebanon, for instance, as well as Afghan and Somali returnees, expressed enthusiasm for return and expressed belief in the value of being with their people, including returning to be closer to family and known community norms. As one Afghan woman we interviewed for this study explained: “When I was making the decision to return to Afghanistan, I discussed it with my husband... I thought, if my husband dies, I will be on my own, and [the] people of the community were Pakistanis. It would be better to return to our country before my husband dies; at least my compatriots would help me a little bit.”

Entering a gendered situation on return

The limited data shows that, on return, women generally face additional barriers to accessing support and livelihoods opportunities, in great part due to a lack of documentation and restricted spheres of mobility. These barriers present specific (re)integration challenges for female returnees:

- Barriers to accessing support are often higher for women, even when programming is targeted towards them. Particularly, in the most traditional segments of society, the traditional division of labour in the private sphere is replicated in the public sphere, often restricting both the mobility and ability of women to access assistance.104 Female focus group participants frequently commented on the mobility restrictions they faced due to social pressures. One female FGD participant describes this as follows: “Women face challenges because they cannot go out alone to buy stuff and they are harassed on the street. They are also harassed by their neighbours [who talk behind their backs].”

- In addition, women and girls, as well as people with disabilities, may face barriers to accessing

99 IMPACT Initiatives (2018). Picking up the pieces: Realities of return and (re)integration in North-East Syria, 25.
100 UNHCR/Samuel Hall (2015).
101 Save the Children/Samuel Hall (2018), 42.
Lessons learned from Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria on Refugee Returns to Urban Areas

information, education, community participation and decision-making at all levels. Social norms negatively impact female returnees even where economic opportunities are positive. In Somalia, although returnee women may actually be perceived as being more employable than men, this does not result in stronger (re)integration: male community members and returnees complained, in FGDs, that female employment has undermined traditional roles and upset family dynamics. Greater exposure to the workplace has, therefore, not necessarily improved women’s bargaining power or position in society.

- **Challenges in accessing civil documentation** has a multiplier effect on access to other services (education and, in some cases, health services) and fulfilling basic needs (for example, shelter). In the Syrian context, for example, marriages abroad may not have been properly registered. Without the required certificate, couples may be unable to get birth certificates for their children. This can also prevent widows or women who have been separated from their husbands from claiming marital property. In Afghanistan, only half of refugee returnee women and less than half of IDP returnee women possess a tazkera (official identification document).

- **Understanding gendered challenges** is made difficult by a lack of data disaggregation, which can obscure women’s experiences of (re)integration. For example, research on return migrants and perceptions of rights on return in Afghanistan indicate that perceptions and practices of family rights differ significantly between return migrants from Iran and those from Pakistan, as well as non-migrants, but makes no mention of the challenges faced by women. However, while it may be anecdotally clear that challenges are gendered, when case data is only available at a broader level, it remains unclear how this links to displacement.

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105 OCHA (2019), 33.
109 NRC (2017c).
110 NRC/Samuel Hall (2014).
Implications for programming: what stakeholders do not know

Gaps in the literature can be explained by difficult political or social contexts, the limited appetite for local integration as a durable solution and the lack of donor interest to fund longitudinal research in return settings. The previous sections explored the existing information around populations of returnees that are underserved in the assistance system, namely returnees not in their areas of origin, female returnees, and youth returnees. They show that the literature and data are still insufficient to understand their situations and needs in ways that could change the way policies and programmes have been conceived to date. These gaps undermine knowledge about how returnees fare and what type of support may be most beneficial for their (re)integration. Table 2 reviews key gaps in the literature.

Research and knowledge gaps (in particular, around how and where data is collected) exist and are an impediment to designing effective evidence-based programming. Improved data and evidence is explicitly recognised in the GCR as being critical to the development of effective solutions planning. In addition, the GCR highlights the role of responsibility-sharing in improving data collection, quality and management, and the importance of building broad consensus on approaches to be taken when it comes to data and evidence. If these plans of action are implemented, the added support that is needed for (re)integration-specific, comparative and longitudinal research can change return policies and programmes and result in a new generation of (re)integration policies and programmes.

Table 2. Data gaps

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<th>Category of data gap</th>
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| Monitoring and methodological gaps            | • Public monitoring and evaluation of (re)integration programmes is largely unavailable, limiting learning, accountability and information-sharing.  
• Centralised mapping for returnee (re)integration is not available; information is more commonly aggregated at sectoral level.  
• Breakdown by demographics (including age and gender) is limited. Samples remain limited at household level.  
• Research on returnees with disabilities is limited.  
• Data is short-term and is, at best, limited to the six months post-return. Understanding of progress towards sustainable (re)integration, the factors influencing it, and for whom, is a major gap.                                                                                           |
| Gaps in trend analysis                        | • Data is unevenly spread between refugee populations: little is known about the plight of returnees who were not recognised as refugees in their countries of exile, spontaneous returnees and returnees from countries where voluntary repatriation agreements are not in place. This makes it more difficult to address their needs through programming.  
• There is limited exploration of specific coping mechanisms linked to return and (re)integration. For instance, data gaps on split family returns and reunification have been highlighted in Somalia.  
• There is limited literature on defining when situations are conducive to returns from a human rights perspective, as well as on the appropriateness of returns based on human rights frameworks.                                                                                                                                 |
| Gaps in geographic coverage                   | Existing data on returns concentrates on specific contexts within each refugee crisis, to the detriment of other geographic areas:  
• In Afghanistan, existing research focuses on the situation post-return.  
• In Somalia, research on hosting contexts is concentrated on Kenya, despite significant returns from other contexts. There are large numbers of Somali refugees in Ethiopia (181,686 in 2019), and nearly as many Somali refugees in Yemen (250,500 in 2019) as in Kenya (255,754 in 2019).  
• In Syria, the literature focused almost exclusively on Lebanon and, to a certain extent, Jordan.                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
This report was produced with generous financial support from the European Union's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (ECHO). The views expressed herein should not be taken, in any way, to reflect the official opinion of the European Union, and the European Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.