RESEARCH BRIEF
DISPLACEMENT TRENDS AND CHALLENGES IN AFGHANISTAN SINCE AUGUST 2021
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ABOUT SAMUEL HALL

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Our research connects the voices of communities to changemakers for more inclusive societies. Samuel Hall has offices in Afghanistan, Kenya, Germany and Tunisia and a presence in Somalia, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates. For more information, please visit: www.samuelhall.org

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GLOSSARY

Displacement  The movement 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 generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters.¹

Gender  The socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities of girls, women, boys, men, and gender diverse people influence how people perceive themselves and each other, how they act and interact, and the distribution of power and resources in society. Gender is usually conceptualized as a binary (girl/woman, boy/man) yet there is considerable diversity in how individuals understand, experience, and express it.²

Enclave  A distinct territorial, cultural or social unit enclosed within a territory.

Human security  Human security, in its broadest sense, embraces far more than the absence of violent conflict. It encompasses human rights, good governance, access to education and health care and ensuring that each individual has opportunities and choices to fulfill his or her potential.³

Migrant  An umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. The term includes a number of well-defined legal categories of people, such as migrant workers; persons whose particular types of movements are legally defined, such as smuggled migrants; as well as those whose status or means of movement are not specifically defined under international law, such as international students.⁴

Placemaking  A multifaceted approach to the planning, design, and management of public spaces around four key elements – sociability, uses and activities, comfort and image, and access and linkages.⁵ Successful placemaking includes members of the community, and creates spaces for them to participate in daily life in ways that make them likely to return and remain.

Social commons  Human-made commons, meant to protect individuals and societies. It focuses on the collective dimension of protection that is needed and on the collective endeavour to achieve it.

Urbanisation  The occurrence of an increasing proportion of a population that is living in urban areas.⁶

¹ IOM, 'Glossary on Migration', 2019.
² Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 'Definitions of Sex and Gender', modified 2015.
⁶ Ibid
LIST OF ACRONYMS

AFN  Afghan afghani (currency)
DfA  De Facto Authorities
FGD  Focus Group Discussion
IDP  Internally Displaced Person
IIE  International Institute for Environment and Development
IOM  International Organization for Migration
KII  Key Informant Interview
RADA Reintegration Assistance and Development in Afghanistan
SSI  Semi-Structured Interview

WHY THIS BRIEF?

The IOM commissioned Samuel Hall to conduct a series of four briefs, focusing on the topics of mental health, urban migration, infrastructure and basic services, and climate change displacement. This is Brief 3 of the series and complements the Infrastructure and Basic Services brief. This knowledge and learning is intended to enhance IOM’s understanding and migration response strategies and activities. The briefs are designed to be used by IOM and other interested stakeholders to inform future programming, including to develop evidence-based proposals and design interventions.
Urban migration has been a major trend in Afghanistan in the last decades, yet, the current humanitarian and economic crisis requires an updated understanding of urban integration trends. While the current share of the population living in urban areas remains comparatively low at approximately 25%, the rate of urbanisation between 2000 and 2010 was 4.5%. Furthermore, since 2010, the urbanisation rate has been between 3.2–5% per year, one of the highest rates in the region. While partially a result of natural urban population growth, there have also been strong displacement and migration trends towards urban areas. People on the move continue to represent a major component of urban labour, economies, and policies, and the experience of displacement programming has highlighted that urban displacement cannot be understood independently from the political-economy of the broader urban poor.

The events of August 2021 triggered international sanctions, which in turn saw the Afghan economy plummet. A report released in April 2022 found that during the last months of 2021, per capita income fell by approximately one third. The downward trend has continued since, with many rural respondents to research carried out by Samuel Hall in Afghanistan throughout May 2022 stating that they are no longer able to secure an income through daily wage work, or other forms of work, due to absence of employment opportunities.

Very little research has been conducted on the nexus between migration and urban integration since August 2021, to understand who benefits from, or is marginalized by access to urban services and jobs. Data indicates that the flow to urban areas is stalling, or reversing with internally displaced persons (IDPs) returning to rural areas — those who were able to after the cessation of conflict, and those forced to return by the DfA.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA USED

A qualitative methodology was employed throughout this research, providing respondents the time and space to provide freely formed narratives about their individual perspectives and experiences. Such an approach (as opposed to a quantitative approach) was crucial in the current context. A significant degree of nuance and a great deal of richness was captured in the data generated via focus group discussions (FGDs), semi-structured interviews (SSIs), and key informant interviews (KIIs). Research was conducted in provincial capitals spanning three regions of the country: Kabul in the centre, Jalalabad in the east, and Herat in the western region.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This brief examines urban migration dynamics, exploring the key drivers of migration, alongside patterns of migration post-2021, and the economic benefits of urban migration. It answers three research questions:

1. What are the dynamics of integration of people on the move into the labour force of urban economies, and is there a net benefit of urban migration?
2. What are the patterns of urban economic integration and people on the move contributing to markets, across time and space, that can be learned from?
3. In a context where urban migration is being questioned, what are the challenges and benefits to be considered, and for whom?

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12. Research carried out for the mental health research report which is also part of the RADA research series.
Two FGDs (one male and one female) were conducted with urban migrants in each city, with a diversity of sampling in terms of background including ethnicity, age, and district of origin. The FGDs were designed to discuss urban migration with migrants themselves, including integration into labour markets and the economy, challenges, benefits, and other aspects of urban migration. SSIs were conducted with business owners to gain insight into the perspective of employers. In total ten SSIs were conducted: six with male business owners and three with female business owners. The SSIs were designed to provide another angle of perspective on integration and the needs and contributions of urban migrants to the economy.

Five remote KIs were conducted with academics and economic and development professionals with expertise in urban migration. Data generated through KIs provided broader contextual knowledge against which to triangulate data and frame narratives from respondents to FGDs and SSIs.

All respondents who participated in this research provided informed, voluntary consent. The consent form was read aloud to respondents to account for illiteracy, with researchers recording the respondent’s verbal consent. Respondents were reassured that they could skip questions or withdraw from research at any time without negative consequences.

Additional quantitative data was sourced from the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) and presented in this report, notably to contextualise mobility patterns to and from urban areas.

**KEY HIGHLIGHTS**

This research brief presents the findings of research carried out by Samuel Hall and commissioned by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to inform stakeholders on urban migration trends since August 2021. Data collection in Afghanistan was carried out in May 2022. Three key findings emerged:

1. Contrary to decades of rural–urban migration prior to August 2021, urban migration is stalling or reversing due to the declining economy, which has dried up city-based employment opportunities. Access to employment opportunities, services, and infrastructure, perceived as one of the biggest advantages of urban migration, have reduced and impact rural–urban migration trends.

2. Peri-urban, informal areas remain clusters of hope for migrants as “social commons” where rent and land are cheaper, where they can access protection and share resources – however they are under threat. With a decrease in community resources, urban migrants spend the majority of their salaries on transport, due to the distance from their places of work and key services they need. Lack of access to adequate shelter, urban expenses, lack of transferable skills, and low or non-existent salaries present significant challenges to urban integration and the need to protect urban social commons. The prevailing economic conditions have increased fears, especially in urban areas, that migrants will “steal” the few remaining jobs, while there is increased competition for work in both the formal and informal sectors.

3. Forms of discrimination in urban areas are on the rise. For instance, employers exploit urban migrants, paying them less than host community members, even where they are educated or have a recognised skill set. Prior to August 2021, respondents report that construction and the Afghan armed forces were the dominant employers of urban migrants. Now, many urban migrants are unemployed due to business closures. Urban migrant women suffer: many women were relegated into unemployment by de facto authority edicts. For uneducated, or low-skilled women, several opportunities within the informal sector remain – but are significantly underpaid, resulting in forms of precarious labour.

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15 Initially, researchers had planned to conduct SSIs with an equal number of male and female business owners. However, due to the current political climate in Afghanistan, two dominant factors obstructed access to women of this category. First, edicts issued by the de facto authorities have significantly restricted women’s mobility, rendering it almost impossible for many to continue to manage both a business and employees. Second, the rapid economic decline has seen many businesses close down. For this reason, researchers were unable to access an equal number of male and female business owners.
I. DYNAMICS OF URBAN MIGRATION

STALLING AND REVERSAL OF URBAN MIGRATION SINCE AUGUST 2021

Mobility trends – both between provinces and to neighbouring countries – increased around August 2021 with the advance of the Taliban and ongoing conflict. Those who migrated during the summer of 2021 tended to be economically more vulnerable, especially ex-government employees and soldiers, who moved to cities to protect themselves. Under the former Afghan government, army officers and young people migrated into urban areas in the province to escape the Taliban. Following the Taliban takeover, many returned to their places of origin, as they felt that security had been restored. However, this was not possible for everyone – with many forced to remain in displacement in urban areas. Some interviewees, notably in Nangarhar province, spoke of people with strong connections to the Taliban migrating into urban areas, to procure jobs in the new ministries. There is a prevalent trend of migration from urban areas to rural areas across Afghanistan. The migration is a mixture of return after displacement (both forced and unforced), as well as migration in search of income and livelihoods amid widespread economic crisis.

IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) data counts over 4.5 million returnees between January 2021 and April 2022. This includes an estimated 2 million IDPs who returned to their areas of origin in the months of October and November 2021 alone. IDP returnees include those able to return to their areas of origin after the cessation of conflict, and those who have been forced to return. The Taliban – the new de facto authorities (DfA) have made concerted efforts for hundreds of thousands of displaced persons from urban areas to return to rural areas of origin since late 2021. This has included closing informal settlements in urban centres, for example, around Qala-e-Naw in Badghis province and Kabul.

Returns from urban to rural communities have increased under the DfA’s rule, as employment opportunities have drastically decreased. Many businesses, including those that employ migrants, have been forced to downsize because of political and economic downfall. In the last nine months, many urban migrants have gone back to their provinces of origin – as they have not found better economic conditions in urban areas compared to their home provinces. For those migrants who own property in their communities of origin, returning home means no rent, and often no need to pay for electricity and water. For migrants who also own land, they are in many cases able to survive off their own lands (unless the land has been affected by drought: see the IOM brief on Climate Change for more information).

“It has changed a lot because there are no employment opportunities across the country – neither in urban areas nor in rural areas but still, there is some possibility of work opportunities in urban areas and that’s why the people come to the urban areas like before. But some people who have lands in the rural areas, have returned to their areas of origin to cultivate their lands but there is no water as they have been affected by droughts.”

“These days, I see urban migrants go back to their provinces because they can at least work on their farmlands there.

16 SSI4, Female Business Owner, Nangarhar Province, 11 May 2022.
24 SSI4, Female Business Owner, Nangarhar Province, 11 May 2022.
and make a living there because the costs in their villages are less than here. In the villages, they don’t have to pay for home rent, electricity and water bills, and most of the food items that they cultivate.”  

There are still, as is expected, Afghans migrating to urban areas: IOM counted 83,140 displaced people moving to Kabul between January and April 2022. In addition to people forced to flee their homes, urban migration trends continue in search of livelihoods, to join family members, for marriage, and for education.

Urban migration trends are local and must be contextualised at the sub-national level: counter to the trends reported by interviewees in Kabul and Nangarhar provinces, interviewees in Herat reported more migrants to urban centres since August 2021. Due to drought in neighbouring provinces, such as Badghis, and speculation about available job opportunities in Herat city, larger numbers of migrants have been concentrated in lower income neighbourhoods in the last few months. Herat was the only province where interviewees spoke of a net positive migration from rural to urban centres since August 2021 – largely due to the impacts of multi-year drought in western provinces. According to interviewees from the host community, this has contributed to development of previously underdeveloped areas of the city.

“If it hadn’t been for the migrants, this community wouldn’t have developed as much as it is now. It was a barren land 20 years ago with a very little number of houses. It has changed into a proper township now.”

Concentration points: Areas of destination

Focusing on key areas of destination in the urban centres of the three provinces included in this study – Kabul (Kabul province), Jalalabad (Nangarhar province), and Herat (Herat province), this subsection highlights urban migration trends since August 2021

When possible, people have returned to their home provinces, as security levels are deemed to be equal in the provinces and urban areas under the DfA. Many urban migrants previously settled in Kabul have returned to their provinces of origin since August 2021, due to:

- Increased competition for limited jobs
- Reduction in available jobs, especially in the construction industry due to increased cost of construction licenses under the DfA, which employed the majority of urban migrants in Kabul
- Factories and material industries can only sell certain styles of clothing under the DfA, which has reduced income for shopkeepers
- Reduction of available and acceptable work for women has driven many to return to their communities of origin
- Lower cost of living, especially for urban migrants who own homes and/or land, who are able to sustain themselves via farming
- People are able to earn higher wages in the agricultural sector within their home provinces, compared to urban areas, post August 2021.

Perceptions about urban migration since August 2021 have changed, as people no longer see it as a way to improve their livelihoods and access to basic services. People now either choose to remain within their communities or attempt to migrate abroad, rather than move to urban areas: there is now a lack of employment opportunities, access to education, and other basic services. People from drought-impacted areas are still migrating to urban areas in western Afghanistan, such as Herat, as they are unable to make a living back home.

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25 SSI2, Male Business Owner, Kabul Province, 10 May 2022.
27 FGDS, Female migrants, Herat Province, 27 May 2022.
28 SSI8, Male Business Owner, 29 May 2022.
29 SSI9, Female Business Owner, Herat Province, 25 May 2022.
the characteristics of the communities where urban migrants tend to concentrate.

Over the last decade, Afghanistan’s urbanisation has largely been informal in nature, with cities expanding rapidly without the development of spatial plans and limited access to formal land and housing. As a result, Afghan urban areas are defined by informal, low-density sprawl, which increases socio-spatial inequality and infrastructural deficiencies. Cities in Afghanistan have high potential to accommodate future urban growth within existing urban areas by utilising available vacant plots. However, there has been a bias against urban migration on the part of some international organisations and donors, bolstered by perceptions that the majority of people in need of support live in rural areas, as well as belief that Afghan urban areas are ‘full’. UN Habitat writes that while “Afghanistan’s formal housing sector is unable to supply affordable housing at sufficient scale to meet the need arising from the growing number of urban low-income and poor households.”

The report goes on to say that; “If properly planned, residential land use can be optimized by densifying housing development through infill construction on available vacant plots. The available vacant plots can potentially meet the need for urban land for housing in the coming decades.” There exists, therefore, the potential to continue to accommodate urban migrants with careful planning and political will.

The main urban areas of destination amongst those interviewed for this research were Dashte Barchi in Kabul, Naw Abad in Herat, and Majboorabad in Nangarhar. These urban neighbourhoods share similar characteristics: they tend to be more recently founded, low income, and underfunded in terms of public spending. They represent social commons where communities organize themselves and support each other, building up their own urban neighbourhoods in forms of collective and informal decision making.

“... The people of Naw Abad are very poor. We have around 12-13 shops on this road; however, the shopkeepers can’t carry on their business for more than a year. For example, if someone starts selling sandwiches here, then he would fail sooner than later. So, people wouldn’t be able to work more than the specified period. Next, someone else would establish a dairy shop at the same place. He would also fail sooner than later. People have very weak economies here.”

Each of the three areas can also be understood as urban ‘gateways and estuaries’ – areas where new

31 Ibid, p. vi.
32 Ibid
34 Ibid, p. XV.
35 SSI1, male business owner, Kabul, 10 May 2022.
36 SSI8, Male Business Owner, Herat Province, 29 May 2022.
38 SSI8, Male Business Owner, Herat Province, 29 May 2022.
urban arrivals initially stay when they move to the city, living alongside migrants who have been residents over longer time periods. Newer migrants move to estuaries to network and feel protected among familiar social networks. This includes moving to areas dominated by the same ethnic groups – such as Hazara in western Kabul (Dashte Barchi) and Pashtuns in Naw Abad in Herat. It also includes those of similar social backgrounds, such as rural districts around Afghanistan’s eastern provinces and returnees from Pakistan in Majboorabad, Jalalabad. The idea of gateways and estuaries demonstrates the dynamism of urban migration. One dynamic is that migrants engage in placemaking and social networking in specific ways – with networks, social structures, and urban geographies all playing universal but also context specific roles in migration. Another pattern is the dynamism of migration itself – that it is not a static, one-way movement from one rural location to one urban location, but rather people will move within cities and neighbourhoods for a multiplicity of reasons. This complicates urban integration programming but does not preclude area-based recommendations associated with the provision of services, with interventions that account for and consider evolving dynamics having higher chances of responding to different migration patterns in different areas.

Migrants from all over Afghanistan, tied along ethnic and tribal lines find in specific neighbourhoods a form of ‘spatial commons’ where they can access collective arrangements that are open to new arrivals, without being subject to regulatory practices – they instead build on cultural and informal practices.

“There is a mix of all peoples in Naw Abad. The Pashtuns are the natives and form a majority. Herat has a lot of migrants, as people have come because of the problems in the country. For example, it may be due to the drought in parts of the country. As the value of real estate is lower than in other regions, people from all over Afghanistan come here. The houses are simple in structure, so they cost less. This is not the case for all parts of the city. This is a place for poor people. People settle in this community because the land is cheap and they can easily find a job here.”

Urban areas as changing spaces of protection and social mobility

These spatial commons have provided Afghans with an entry point into cities as spaces of refuge but also as spaces of hope: a response to longer term aspirations, notably for children and future generations.

The drivers of urban migration in Afghanistan have been varied and complex, interlinking drivers of forced migration with hopes for improved futures. In 2021, study respondents cited a sequence of events specific to their geographic location, socio-economic status, responsibilities, and identity – and to their hopes for their future, at a time of political uncertainty and change. Respondents explained:

“We migrated to Kabul due to droughts and unemployment in our village.”

“We had been displaced due to war and unemployment.”

The most cited reason for embarking upon migration to an urban area was the lack of economic opportunities in the respondent’s community of origin. In a context such as Afghanistan where residents do not have access to any form of adequate social security, it is crucial that at least one household member is employed on a full time, or daily basis. Respondents pointed not only to the greater number of opportunities available in cities, at least prior to August 2021, but also the diversity of opportunities available. Narratives point to how, prior to August 2021, the cities enabled them to take different jobs to either maintain an employed status, or access an improved salary – showing the potential of urban areas as spaces of both protection and social mobility:

“I was teaching in a private high school before applying for the job vacancies which were announced by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Currently, I am working in a government orphanage for girls.”

“I work as a conductor but if not available, I will [substitute my income] with daily waged work.”

40 SSI8, Male Business Owner, Herat Province, 29 May 2022.
41 FGD2: R1, male migrants, Kabul, 10 May 2022.
42 FGD6: R2, male migrants, Herat, 22 May 2022.
43 FGD1: R2, female migrants, Kabul, 9 May 2022.
44 FGD6: R5, male migrants, Herat, 22 May 2022.
Some respondents who were fathers also stated that migrating to the city would provide their children with better employment prospects in the future, because of access to better education in cities, combined with a greater number of opportunities, including higher paying, professional opportunities – especially in relation to the more limited options for education and diverse employment in rural areas. This illustrates how urban migration has traditionally been viewed as a step towards poverty alleviation and social mobility, to benefit the younger generations.

A second frequently cited driver of urban migration was the ability to access health, education and other forms of infrastructure which were not present in rural communities of origin, particularly electricity. Most respondents did not have access to health clinics or hospitals in their communities of origin, rendering healthcare inaccessible due to the prohibitive costs of transport. Additionally, there was a widely articulated understanding that healthcare provision is of a higher quality in cities. Access to schools and universities was also extremely important to respondents, particularly those with career goals, as education was perceived to be of a lower standard in rural areas, with poorer, less adequate facilities. Although Afghan cities are large and chaotic, education establishments were perceived as more physically accessible in cities due to the presence of public transport networks. Furthermore, for respondents who originate from a village that does not have a school, in cities, the schools are closer to home for them. As one respondent in Kabul explained:

“The people who live in the village can’t even access 20% of the urban services and facilities, such as electricity, clinics, paved roads, hospitals, and educational opportunities. These urban services and facilities were available and more accessible in the city, so we decided to migrate to Kabul.”45

The third most cited reason for migrating to urban areas was to escape conflict and insecurity, though as illustrated above, this was often coupled with absence of employment opportunities in the community of origin.

Electricity was a much-discussed theme throughout FGDs, with respondents frequently citing the absence of it in their community of origin. For those urban migrants who now have access to electricity, it was recognised as completely life-changing for a variety of reasons, not least being able to heat their homes without having to search for, or buy, firewood. For many respondents, the ability to access basic services and infrastructure heavily influenced them to stay in their urban setting rather than return to their rural community.46

Additional drivers of migration cited by respondents were having to give up on traditional forms of livelihood such as growing crops or rearing livestock, due to either the effects of climate change now rendering such activities untenable, or the economy being such that raising livestock was no longer financially viable.

“In [my community of origin] the people mostly worked in agriculture and raised dairy animals, and the government didn’t support agriculture in our village.”47

“The people in our village earn a seasonal income; they work hard for one year and they harvest their agricultural products in one season. Yet, their income from agriculture isn’t enough to cover their living expenses. It is the same case with raising livestock. There aren’t proper grounds in our village for raising dairy animals. I decided to migrate to Kabul, so I wasn’t the only breadwinner anymore and my [adult] children could work.”48

Meanwhile, a much smaller number of wealthier respondents indicated that for families of a more comfortable financial status, urban migration presented a vehicle through which to achieve social mobility through access to higher education and increased access to networks of wealthy people along with the resources and opportunities such networks can provide.

45 FGD2: R3, male migrants, Kabul, 10 May 2022.
46 FGD6, male migrants, Herat, 22 May 2022.
47 Rural development was a key focus of the former Afghan government: “Agriculture, as a critical developmental sector, has been at the heart of all initiatives, interventions, and projects that have been carried out by GOs/NGOs in rural areas.” (Savage et al 2009; Pain and Shah 2009). ‘Such support has been, and continues to be, decisive for rural development, poverty reduction, and dealing with consequences of climate change and extreme weather events.’ (Asadullah Jawid and Menusch Khadivi, Adaptation to climate change in Afghanistan: Evidence on the impact of external interventions, 2019, p.65). This includes rural development programmes in conjunction with international partners. However, as this data denotes, support for agriculture was not possible in all rural areas or to a sufficient extent to facilitate sustainable economic growth and opportunities. See for instance the increasing rural poverty before the events of August 2021 in: The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Organisation, Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2016-17.
48 The respondent was in the 55-60 age bracket and had migrated to Kabul eight years prior FGD. This indicates that his children were above working age rather than child labourers, supported by the participant noting the work his children performed included work as security guards.
49 FGD2: R2, male migrants, Kabul, 10 May 2022.
II. URBAN MIGRATION’S NEW FORMS OF PRECARITY AND DISCRIMINATION

In a context of economic collapse and the erosion of solidarity mechanisms (in both rural and urban areas), urban migration became, in our data, an experience of precariousness and discrimination.

THE DIFFICULT TRANSITION TO URBAN CONTEXTS

Most respondents described how they had migrated to urban areas as an entire household. This trend noted among respondents reflects existing data from the Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey of 2017, which states that male migrants outnumber female migrants by only a small percentage: 56.7% male and 43.3% female.\(^{50}\) Forced displacement features heavily in the migratory patterns of urban migrants, causing entire households to relocate. In addition to these drivers of migration, the Afghan migration landscape is characterised by women migrating for marriage (to live with their husband’s family); a phenomenon which counter-balances a single male migration narrative.\(^{51}\) This complex web of drivers renders rural communities of origin less attractive, or less secure for family members who would otherwise likely remain behind. The effects of climate change and conflict do not discriminate and thus necessitate the relocation of each household member.

The transition from rural to urban economy is difficult for migrants and IDPs from agricultural villages. Most male respondents to this research possessed skill sets entirely developed around animal husbandry, or arable farming; skills which are not transferable to the urban context. Consequently, finding a stable or sustainable source of income proved to be difficult for many. Illustrating this point, a female business owner in Nangarhar described how migrants struggle to find jobs during their first few months in a new city. She stated that they sometimes need several months to network, form relationships, understand the culture of the city, and thus access employment opportunities.\(^{52}\)

This period during which migrants are unsettled and unable to find work results in consumption of any savings or safety net, and can see the migrant’s household economy decline significantly.

Urban migrants now face more challenges accessing services compared to hosts in the same community, not least due to their disproportionate poverty, exacerbated by lower income, and an overall decrease of service provision, increasing tensions and competitions, locally. This was illustrated by this respondent in Jalalabad:

“When we migrated here, I enrolled my son in the school and bought a blue uniform for him, but after some time he wore out the uniform. One day he told me that the teacher doesn’t allow me to come to school because I don’t have a uniform and shoes. I told him to stop going to school, because I didn’t have money to buy new uniforms or shoes for him. Due to our poverty, I took my son out of school.”\(^{53}\)

Access to shelter was the most cited challenge for migrants. Migrants to urban areas tend to select locations on the edges of cities, where rent is more affordable, as they often struggle to find decent housing. Many migrants interviewed reported having to decrease their food intake and spending to be able to afford their rent and bills. Migrants in urban areas are under enormous financial pressure and debt; many interviewed for this study reported paying higher rents and earning lower salaries. This contributes to migrants feeling out of place in urban settings, and places them at risk of discrimination, racism, and extortion. Expectations from family members often increase the pressure they face to find work and send money home.

Identification and documentation issues also made accessing services and jobs difficult for migrants. Certain jobs in urban areas require ID documents (such as tazkiras, Afghan identity documents) which many rural migrants do not have and cannot afford to buy. School enrolment also tends to require identification

\(^{50}\) Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Organisation, Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2016-17, pp. 42-43.

\(^{51}\) It should be noted here that the sample for this research was not representative.

\(^{52}\) SSI4, female business owner, Nangarhar, 11 May 2022.

\(^{53}\) FGD3, R2, male migrant, Nangarhar, 10 May 2022.
documents for children, which migrants are again, often unable to afford.

An inability to integrate into the urban economy results in many migrant households living in positions of extreme poverty and precarity. The IOM Afghanistan Chief of Mission observed in 2018 that; “Often, particularly in urban environments, IDPs and returnees settle in so-called ‘informal settlements’ in close proximity to economic centres where the income earners of the family try to find daily labour. The conditions in these settlements are dire, with extremely low standards of hygiene and limited access to water.”

This observation is reflected in the narratives of many respondents. Indeed, respondents to this research indicated that the transition into an urban context and urban economy is easier for wealthier migrants, who often have a higher level of education and are more able to access the urban labour market. This was not largely different across different migrant groups: although returnees are sometimes perceived as being better educated, or having gained experience which can be valuable to employers, different categories of returnees have significantly different needs and experiences. Additionally, wealthier migrants are able to maintain relations in their community of origin, a practice which is often impossible for more impoverished migrants due to the costs associated with transport and communications.

Destabilising changes and uncertainties in the labour market

In the different urban environments studied, migrants are perceived as a lower stratum of society, with several interviewees, both migrants and business owners, referring to a situation in which migrants are often exploited, regardless of their level of skill, education, or social capital. Employers confessed that educated migrants are recognised as being valuable assets, yet stated they are paid lower salaries, as employers prey on their more precarious circumstances and dependency on work for survival, having been removed from support networks. Building upon these exploitative practices, although most urban migrants undertake migration as a household, there is a preference among many employers for migrants who are either single, or whose families have remained in the community of origin. The reasoning for this is that the migrant will be more willing to work longer hours, or even sleep at their place of work. This is likely to be particularly the case for low-skilled forms of employment, especially in the construction sector, which has undergone significant changes, first with the destabilising impact on the local economy of the withdrawal of NATO and US forces in 2014, and then more dramatically since August 2021.

The majority of migrants to urban areas tend to be lower skilled, having largely worked in the agricultural sector in their communities of origin. Given the absence of agriculture in urban areas, migrants typically find work in low skilled or informal sectors, which carry risks. Migrants often gather at roundabouts to search for work or find work in the streets. Those migrants who return to urban areas from abroad – especially those who are skilled – tend to have an easier time finding work and reintegrating.

Since August 2021, migrants reported increased difficulty finding work in both the formal and informal sectors. According to respondents, prior to August 2021, construction was the dominant field of employment for urban migrant men, providing both building and sales-related jobs. Although women engage in the agricultural labour force in rural areas, construction jobs in urban areas are not available to migrant women. The sheer number of migrants employed in construction prior to August 2021 meant that news of employment opportunities was easily accessed through word of mouth:

“I asked my neighbours and they took me to work. So, I became acquainted with them… I worked with them in the construction field for some time.”

Additionally, given the nature of the work involved, there were often opportunities available for low-skilled, uneducated workers who were willing to work for far less than a native of the city. A respondent in Kabul explained, “it was easier for urban migrants to find jobs that required heavy physical work, like construction jobs.” The reason for this is likely that a higher proportion of the native urban population has a sufficiently high level of education that they focus on gaining employment in semi-skilled, or skilled fields, with higher salary expectations.
FORMALITY, INFORMALITY VS. GENERALISED PRECARIOUSNESS

The forms of income generation that remain a significant part of the current economic climate largely revolve around the informal sector. Informality has clear advantages in a historically undiversified and predominantly agricultural economy such as Afghanistan’s; in particular, it is more resilient to socio-economic shocks while providing easier access to employment for young people, IDPs and the unskilled. Informality also brings additional risks in terms of health and safety, income security and decent work, with documented cases of bonded and child labour.

In the current humanitarian crisis, the formal/informal distinction is losing its relevance and giving way to a form of generalised casualisation of employment: the informal sector is fast the only avenue for income generation for IDPs and migrants from rural areas. Employers who would fall under the formal sector; such as government institutions and large companies, apply an informal approach to hiring urban migrants. As a key informant who works for the International Institute for the Environment and Development (IIED) explained, urban migrants are almost uniformly viewed as cheap labour to the extent that even if employed by the government, they will be subcontracted and thus comprise part of the informal sector. Finally, among the forms of income generation most frequently reported in urban centres and peripheries since autumn 2021, the most extreme forms of harmful coping strategies have now been widely developed. In a context of an aggravated humanitarian crisis, families are prepared to do anything to survive, particularly when the mechanisms for socialising migrants and IDPs are eroded, which makes integration more difficult.

Child labour remains a concern for those who have migrated with their families to urban areas, as some children are forced to gather trash and beg for money in the streets. Others are encouraged by parents to work along with their education to help support their families — this practice has increased since August 2021, given the prevailing economic conditions. Thus, many children of migrant workers are deprived of education, regardless of more access generally in cities compared to rural areas. Migrants in Herat spoke about the lack of support from the previous government and current de facto authorities to help them integrate socially and economically within urban areas. This kind of support is much needed, especially as migrant workers were often most impacted by the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, as well as the economic collapse of Afghanistan since August 2021.

Most respondents pointed out that the employment sector has changed dramatically since the Taliban returned to power. Previously, international organisations and businesses invested in construction alongside the former national government and Afghan businesses. The events of August 2021 have resulted in a significant number of construction projects being put on hold, resulting in loss of income for construction workers. These workers were often employed on a daily-wage basis without any form of labour security.

In a similar vein, several respondents pointed to how prior to August 2021, many urban migrant men gained employment with the national armed forces. The Afghan military represented an important sphere of employment for rural families with low household incomes, but since the DfA took up governance, these forces were disbanded.

A third popular source of income for urban migrant men prior to August 2021 was factory work. Again however, due to the rapid economic decline the country has experienced over the past year, many factories have closed, rendering a significant proportion of migrants unemployed. More generally, urban migrants tend to work in the service economies, food economies, domestic services, and transports, depending on the economic base of the city.57

Crisis nepotism and ethnic fragmentation

Traditionally, the distinction and possible tensions between urban and rural areas have been mitigated by the strong roots of urban dwellers in their provinces, districts, and communities of origin, which are often more rural or peri-urban, as well as by the strong social cohesion existing at all levels of Afghan society. Howev-

57 KII, IIED, 10 June 2022.
er, today’s reality is leading to multifaceted crises with a real risk of atomisation of Afghan society. This has consequences for the capacity of migrants to integrate effectively into urban centres.

Migrants moving to urban areas for the first time face social challenges and issues adapting to the city culture, primarily related to urban etiquette and norms, employer and employer relationships, and traffic laws. They report feeling lost, and only able to find employment through their networks (if those were able to support). Absence of documentation, limited or no local connections with community leaders, and discrimination from hosts contribute to their vulnerability and prevent them from fully integrating into urban areas. Interviewees who had migrated spoke of being viewed as dehati, a derogatory term to define rural people. Many migrants are often taken advantage of, due to their unfamiliarity with city rules and life, with some reporting neighbours or employers viewing them as “backwards.” Additionally, many migrants face discrimination because of their ethnicity or province of origin. In many cases, migrants must learn the local dialect – for example, Hazaras often must learn Pashto, even in multi-ethnic areas such as Kabul, to receive equal treatment.

There is a phenomenon of fragmentation along ethnic and family lines, with preferences given to hiring family members over skills or qualities. This form of ‘crisis nepotism’ is increased by economic distress and the erosion of mutual aid and social integration mechanisms, which produce an atomisation of the labour markets. Newcomers to the labour market – especially internally displaced persons – are of course the most penalised by such reflexes. City-based employers often prioritise hiring migrants from their own ethnicity or tribe on the basis that they will understand each other better in terms of culture and work expectations. Additionally, in the increasingly fractured social context of Kabul, respondents stated that it is easier to trust people from their ethnic identity group. This is reflected by many migrants facing discrimination in new urban locations le of their ethnic and linguistic differences.

Perpetuating this pattern of employment is many employers will also only hire a migrant if somebody can act as a guarantor on their behalf. This practice reinforces the need for urban migrants to build networks among their ethnic and tribal groups and presents an obstacle to broader, inter-group integration. It is for these reasons that urban migrants, especially those from the same ethnicity, typically concentrate themselves in communal enclaves within cities.

Migration settlement patterns often form ethno-homogenous neighbourhoods and enclaves, facilitating integration in some ways, yet obstructing it in others. However, such community structures prove to be crucial in sharing personal networks, which can facilitate employment opportunities, referring community members to services, and aiding new migrants in navigating city culture. Employment environments spoken of during FGDs and SSIs illustrate the need for such support networks and solidarity among particular ethnic groups, particularly minorities, as these groups are often discriminated against in the labour market.

A Hazara woman in Kabul demonstrated this clearly while describing her experience of migration and her success in securing a good job with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs:

“Although the salary is not sufficient, I am satisfied with the job. However, the deputy for the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs who came here for the procurements and evaluation tried to fire me because I belong to the Hazara ethnicity.”

Women’s socio-economic resilience is impacted by a lack of rights

Women urban migrants have been greatly affected by the changes in authority and the economic situation since August 2021. Under the DfA’s rule, their employment opportunities have greatly been reduced and limited. Many female migrants have selected to return to their places of origin, as women are now limited to certain sectors of employment, such as healthcare, education, and humanitarian work. When households migrate to urban areas, the ways in which women contribute to the family income may be more diversified, due to a wider range of activities (skilled and unskilled) in urban areas. By contrast, due to prevailing social norms, it is often more socially acceptable for women to work in villages, especially in agriculture, as many women are engaged in carrying out tasks that can be done within their homes.

58 The mental health-focused companion report in this series found that the current humanitarian crisis (characterised by severe poverty, high unemployment, low wages, inflated prices and consequential escalating debt) has caused a significant decline in community health. This mental health crisis is affecting both displaced and host community populations, resulting in increasing social tensions and exacerbating community fragmentation.
Even prior to August 2021, women had many social barriers to accessing employment, and often could not work alongside men: the 2016–2017 Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey (ALCS) counted the rural rate of unemployment for females at 39.1% while in urban areas, it was a significantly higher 56.3%. This contrasts to 19.0% of rural men and 18.4% of urban men counted as unemployed. This historical trend has been confirmed since August 2021: women originating from rural areas often recognised that despite the trials of urban migration, life in urban areas is far less challenging than the lifestyle experienced by most rural women. One female respondent in Kabul pointed to this improvement in lifestyle, while also indicating an element of solidarity that exists among migrant women, describing how:

“Migrants can experience individual and group awareness and improvement which makes life for them more comfortable. For example, in rural areas, the women have to work both outside and inside of the house; however, in cities, women can stay home or work outside of the house without enduring the hardships that they are going through in rural areas. Additionally, migrants can have access to electricity and other technological facilities in cities that ease their work.”59

Although job opportunities have been dramatically curtailed for educated and skilled women, for uneducated, or low-skilled women, several opportunities within the informal sector remain. Among these roles, carpet weaving, tailoring, or production of other handicrafts were most cited. Data generated through FGDs illustrated that in the current economic climate, women have taken advantage of these opportunities to generate a supplementary household income alongside their husbands. The work migrant women performed varied but was uniformly low in pay. Some women engaged in tailoring and embroidery,60 while others cooked food which their husbands could then sell in the streets.61 This supplementary employment pattern was particularly dominant among the wives of illiterate, low-skilled, daily wage earning men.

By contrast, a significant proportion of female migrants who attended FGDs in Kabul stated they had initially migrated to pursue a university education. Education had, prior to August 2021, assisted them in securing good jobs; yet conversely, they also stated that they would have taken up any form of employment that they were offered.62 However, working migrant women – whatever their level of education and skills – tend to earn less money than men, and their income often serves as a supplement to their husband’s earnings. Women also face other barriers to employment, such as lack of education and reduced mobility.

The effects of the current employment landscape are not uniformly clear cut for urban migrant women. Educated urban migrants (both men and women) often found employment in healthcare and education. While these opportunities may remain available for men, they are fewer due to cessation of the foreign investment which provided core funding for health clinics, hospitals, and schools.63 Many women who had previously worked in these sectors were relegated to unemployment by various Taliban edicts. In instances where the women who participated in this research have continued to perform these forms of income generation, the amount they make is often meagre and acts as a supplementary income to whatever their husbands, and increasingly also children, can generate.64

Migrants are moving back to rural areas throughout Afghanistan, in search of livelihoods and security (Credit: Samuel Hall 2022).

60 FGD5, female migrants, Herat, 27 May 2022.
61 FGD4, female migrants, Nangarhar, 10 May 2022.
62 FGD1, female migrants, Kabul, 9 May 2022.
63 Mohammad Samin, ‘Afghanistan’s Addiction to Foreign Aid’, The Diplomat, 19 May 2016; WHO, ‘Afghanistan’s health system is on the brink of collapse: urgent action is needed’, 24 January 2022; and Kelly Kimball, ‘World Bank Freeze Leaves Afghanistan Bracing for Economic Impact’, Foreign Policy, 1 April 2022.
64 Pamela Constable, ‘Boys in Afghanistan are Becoming Breadwinners for Their Families’, Washington Post, 23 April 2022; and Save the Children, ‘Afghanistan: A Fifth
III. CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS ASSOCIATED WITH URBAN INTEGRATION

URBAN INTEGRATION IN CONTEXT

Within the current context, challenges related to urban integration have increased. Prior to August 2021, urban migrants were seen as more beneficial to host communities for the reasons explored above. The prevailing economic conditions have increased fears—especially in urban areas—that migrants will “steal” the few remaining jobs, while there is increased competition for work in both the formal and informal sectors. Against this backdrop, this section addresses both the challenges and benefits of urban migration and (re)integration in Afghanistan. First, key challenges in urban integration are identified as a result of poor urban planning, management, and funding, which has led to precarity of residents within these communities. Secondly, this section also highlights the positive contributions of urban migration for local communities and economies.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR URBAN INTEGRATION

Although Afghan cities have been a source of development and economic drive, poor management and inadequate investment in the urban population led to a situation wherein the urban poor were becoming poorer even prior to August 2021.65 By 2014 for example, 78.2% of urban households had fallen below the poverty line.66 Additionally, urban areas are characterized by high levels of food insecurity and poor diets.67 The current humanitarian crisis has created a tense situation wherein the urban poor, who already lived in poverty, had few resources to ensure resilience before the current humanitarian crisis hit. In conjunction with scarce resources, the humanitarian crisis has generated a sense of competition between the existing urban poor and newer migrants, who may be perceived as a threat, dramatically reducing social cohesion and the ability of migrants to integrate. This is succinctly illustrated by the quote below:

“Most people who have lived in Kabul for 20 years or more are very sly and they act like wolves. Deceiving others has become a culture in Kabul. The wolves look for ‘simple’ people to deceive. Urban migrants are very ‘simple’ and honest, so they are deceived by the people who are like wolves.”68

Ensuring that physical and social needs are met is crucial for placemaking among displacement-affected and migrant-hosting communities. Currently, not only are migrants ignored in terms of urban planning and policymaking, but they are reduced to a lifestyle characterised by struggle and insecurity. Migrants are exploited by employers, paid less than the urban host population (even in cases where they may be more qualified), and their residency status is more precarious than that of hosts within the same neighbourhood.69 Previous studies in Afghanistan found that 75% of urban poor households possessed tenancy or home ownership documents (deeds), whereas in comparison, only 15% of IDP households in urban areas held such deeds. This illustrates the vulnerability to eviction of many IDPs and certain migrants.70 Aside from the precarity in residency tenure experienced by migrants, and particularly IDPs, in Afghan cities, other protection gaps remain a concern, and disproportionately affect some migrant populations more than others. In 2019, education, health, and livelihoods were found to be the key sectoral gaps after housing, land, and property rights for IDPs in ur-
Urban areas, but bearing in mind the significant degree of mixed migration in Afghanistan, this need is likely to extend beyond recognized IDPs to the broader migrant population.

**Post August 2021: multiple risks of societal atomisation**

Since August 2021, resources in the country have been limited and the provision of basic services, such as healthcare and education, has been severely curtailed. Some respondents point to the crowding of residential areas and commercial streets as a result of urban migration, which they perceive as a hindrance for their business. Moreover, there is concern that the reduction in infrastructure, including functioning health clinics, electricity, and water, combined with the incoming migrant population, will result in people in need being unable to access doctors, and other essential services, thus negatively affecting the host population. Such an acute competition for resources has changed the perception of migrants and IDPs. They are now seen as competitors, burdens on the community, and even scapegoats.

The inter-ethnic tensions and intra-community partitions are not new to the country, but have been accentuated by the current dynamics of urbanisation, which are strongly influenced by the new political situation. With the departure of part of the urban elite, the economic collapse, and the continuation of the logic of social fragmentation and ethnic segregation, the dynamics of precariousness already observed in Afghan urban centres have accelerated. They have particularly affected the categories of the population most exposed to social and economic vulnerability. New arrivals in urban areas, especially IDPs forced to leave rural areas that have become uninhabitable, are of course among the most exposed, due to their often very limited social and economic capital, their lack of networks within the cities, and implicit stigmatisation:

“Sometimes this segregation is implicit, barely perceptible. You have the boundary of a camp of displaced people that stops on one side of a busy street. It is very unlikely, if not impossible, for IDPs to go to the other side of the street to send their boys to school or buy basic necessities. The camp enclave is there, intangible. (...) this situation has increased since (August 2021) with a multiplication of social, ethnic and societal fault lines within the communities.”

Likewise, hosts in urban areas perceive IDPs as potential sources of danger, particularly during the current economic crisis. Many expressed concerns that IDPs would be unemployed and turn to drugs and/or crime to cope, particularly without the presence of extended families and support networks. Others pointed to an increase in begging among people they believe to be urban migrants. As this respondent succinctly illustrates, urban migrants, once viewed as a benefit, are increasingly being viewed as a burden:

“At the change in the government, many businesses have declined and many factories have shut down. Therefore, nowadays the urban migrants are not working and they are like burdens on the urban society. Some of them are forced to start begging in the streets and commit crimes like theft.”

Circular and seasonal migration often complicates (re)integration for both migrants and municipalities. Migrants engaged in seasonal migration often have fewer assets. Additionally, limited or no data is collected on circular and/or seasonal migrants, which makes it challenging for city authorities to accurately estimate populations of urban areas. This can contribute to the idea that migrants are undesirable. Increased levels of circular and seasonal migration requires extending social protection systems, regardless of location, in order to ensure that everyone has access to the same social benefits.

**BENEFITS OF URBAN INTEGRATION**

**Benefits for urban migrants**

Female urban migrants identified several benefits for women in moving from rural areas to urban ones. Women in Herat, Kabul and Nangarhar all highlighted that women’s lives in rural areas can be challenging and difficult. Urban migration meanwhile means that women can live their lives – in the words of a female urban migrant in Kabul – “without enduring the hard-
ships that they are going through in rural areas.”

In rural areas, women often have to work in demanding agricultural labour alongside working within the household. Women “bring fodder, rear cattle, and prepare straw and water for livestock.” This work, while considered employment (see the higher rates of employment for women in rural areas than urban areas in the 2017/2018 ALCS), may often give less material benefit to the women than employment in urban areas. Women in urban areas can more easily engage in embroidery and tailoring. Male urban migrants seconded this point of benefit too, with one urban migrant claiming that one of the biggest advantages of urban migration was that women can contribute to households financially, with more opportunities for women to work in cities. More highly-educated women can work in offices or services – opportunities non-existent in rural areas. These jobs for higher-educated women, it must be noted, are under heightened threat in the changed political context, with professional-working women immensely fearful that they will be barred from work outside of the home.

Many urban migrants sent money back to families in other parts of the country, which created safety nets back home. However, profits made through the urban labour market have decreased significantly since August 2021, as unemployment has increased throughout Afghanistan, in both rural and urban areas. Access to health and basic services was often lower for migrants than hosts due to prohibitive costs, however, despite the disjuncture between what migrants expected in terms of access to services in urban areas prior to migration, and what they experience once in the city, many migrants reported better access to these services in urban contexts compared to their communities of origin. Prior to August 2021, urban areas also typically had a higher presence of NGOs and other organizations offering aid and assistance. The benefit to urban migrants is also more plainly apparent in light of the continued aspirations and actions of people migrating to towns and cities themselves, for the diversity of reasons highlighted throughout the research such as livelihoods, education, networks, and culture.

However, the few positive success stories remain anecdotal, in an environment of chronic poverty and the erosion of traditional systems of social cohesion. The few cases of women who mention a situation that is “less bad” in the city than in rural areas are not the norm but the exception. These are individual cases of livelihoods, in a country now hit by a humanitarian crisis unprecedented in the country’s history, a crisis that affects migrants and non-migrants alike, IDPs and host communities.

Benefits for host communities and business owners

Business owners interviewed during this research stated that from an employer’s perspective, there are considerable benefits of urban migration. Urban migration benefits businesses in multiple ways, including in “lower input costs, greater collaboration and innovation opportunities.” They added that these benefits also have a positive impact on the urban economy, infrastructure, and service provision for cities more generally.

1. In keeping with the general consensus among respondents, employers favour urban migrants because they are often sources of cheap (albeit) lower skilled labour:

2. Some arrival migrants bring skills with them to open businesses and employ others

3. An influx of people creates additional demand (housing, consumables), which is good for the local economy

“The urban migrants who come to Kabul from provinces need jobs and they work better at lower wages. This helps the business very much because the urban migrants help reduce the human capital costs.”

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75 FGD1, R3, Female, Kabul, 9 May 2022.
76 FGD4, R2, Female, Nangarhar, 10 May 2022.
77 FGD5, Female, Herat, 27 May 2022; FGD2, R2, Male, Kabul, 10 May 2022.
78 FGD2, R2, Male, Kabul, 10 May 2022.
79 FGD1, Female, Kabul, 9 May 2022.
80 FGD1, Female, Kabul, 9 May 2022.
81 KII IIED, 8 June 2022. Also: External Review Comments (Jolyon Leslie).
83 SSI1, male business owner, Kabul, 10 May 2022.
Newly established businesses and those impacted by economic decline favour urban migrants as employees to reduce outgoings in terms of salary. Employers often justified this preference for urban migrants based on lower pay by pointing to how some migrants have — through this integration process — started their own businesses and in turn created jobs within their communities. Migrants too have pointed to they or their family members working in urban areas for others and then using the savings (and the acquired skills) to start their own enterprises. Wealthy migrants particularly can make significant financial contributions to urban economies as a result of having more disposable income to spend.

“I suppose that displaced people are good for the economy of the city. When the displaced come to another city and start working honestly, you will see a big difference. Humans are like flowers: wherever they go, they beautify the place. When you start a business, you have to spend a [certain] amount to receive a [certain] amount. If [the migrant] rents a house, the owner benefits; if he rents a shop, the owner also benefits. It is a service to others. People will buy from him and he will get some income and others will solve their problems.”

Although migration towards urban areas can strain resources, the increased population of cities can act as a catalyst for authorities to build more infrastructure, such as roads, hospitals, and housing, as happened under the former Afghan government using funding from the international community. The catalyst can also extend to providing the space for communities to organize themselves, as has traditionally been the case in Afghanistan, through the existence of neighbourhood-specific ‘social commons’. However, historically, the Afghan government has not always had the capacity to integrate new populations, resulting in tension between host and migrant populations over scarce resources and increasing competition for employment opportunities. Reintegration programming and urban planning for integration had not progressed in real terms. Moreover, the first episode of Taliban rule in Afghanistan showed that maintaining, managing, and developing infrastructure and services was not a priority. Recent statements by Hibatullah Akhunzada, head of the DfA, have confirmed that finding solutions to the humanitarian crisis or ensuring the management of services and infrastructure is not a governing issue. This further links to the potential of area-based approaches that target geographical areas rather than singling out individual categories of beneficiaries.

**Benefits for local and national development**

In Afghanistan, cities have been a significant source of economic and social development, with urban-based economic activities accounting for over 50% of Afghanistan national GDP in the years before 2021. The global literature aligns with the experience of the urban migration research participants: employers and urban migrants alike point to the benefits of urban migration to wider economic development, including through enhanced employment opportunities (at least before the recent economic collapse). One urban migrant noted that in cities, “people can work as blacksmiths, carpenters, or tailored and educated people can find jobs and work in offices. The only jobs in the villages are agriculture and livestock.” It also includes heightened consumption and spending in local economic markets — contributing to demand in construction, and business-owners pointing directly to how they see links between urban migrants and the customers and income they can make, and then the taxes they contribute.

Both higher-value jobs and higher demand links to increased productivity and contributions to local businesses and economies which a diversity of stakeholders confirmed. Finally, beyond the short- and medium-term benefits to development, urban migrants continually stressed their aspirations for their children of being able to access better education and prospects than those in remote rural locations — with the firm idea that young people will be able to have better lives for themselves and contribute to wider development through better education, skills, and jobs.

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84 [FGD4, R1, Female, Nangarhar, 10 May 2022]. A female urban migrant noted that her husband was working for a cooked-food vendor, and eventually took a loan to start his own food preparation and vending sole-trading enterprise. Also: [SSI7, Male, Herat, 28 May 2022]. “When my students grasp enough skills, they would start running their tailoring shops in their original communities.”

85 SSI5, male business owner, Nangarhar, 10 May 2022.

86 UN-Habitat ‘State of Afghan Cities Report’, 2015

87 FGD2, R3, Male, Kabul, 10 May 2022

88 SSI7, Male, Herat, 28 May 2022; SSI4, Female, Nangarhar, 11 May 2022
The events of August 2021 have seen a reversal and stalling of urban migration due to the political climate and economic decline. These factors have resulted in the closure of many businesses and corresponding loss of employment opportunities for urban migrants, especially as construction jobs have decreased with the accelerated economic collapse. This new reality increased the vulnerability of all rural communities as well as urban localities, for host community members as well as for migrants or displaced persons. All are now more severely exposed to acute and long-lasting vulnerabilities, with no hope of improvement in the short or medium term. This does not mean that migrants in urban areas do not suffer from specific problems or that they are not victims of specific discrimination. The stigma and discrimination against migrants is now exacerbated, at a time of generalised humanitarian crisis, felt by all, across urban and rural areas.

A double logic must be put in place: 1) to favour an area-based approach to programming, centred on a better knowledge of specific urban fabrics and contexts, focusing on building and enabling social commons; 2) to understand the problems and aggravating factors suffered by urban migrants and IDPs, paying specific attention to intersectionality (notably ethnicity, age, and gender).

Based on the interviews conducted with members of the host and migrant communities, and key informants, there is a clear need for more targeted programming and response to facilitate the integration of migrants in urban areas in Afghanistan, and aim to change the lens from fragmentation and atomization to environmental, social, and economic sustainability. The below solutions were given as potential solutions to help urban migrants:

![Figure 1. Recommendations for durable solutions to urban integration](image)
Environmental sustainability: Advocate and act for urban and rural migrants

1. Facilitate anonymised data collection on urban migration patterns more broadly, including seasonal and circular migration dynamics, to improve urban planning and delivery of services in towns and cities. Although data on migration and urbanisation exist, comprehensive data combining migration and urbanisation are lacking. Now, more than ever, there is a greater need to collect migration data at the urban level, as well as a need to align migration management at the national and local levels.

2. Further develop and extend area-based approaches. This includes multi-sectoral responses beyond traditional, single-sector programmes targeting particular categories of people or those of a certain displacement ‘status’. Area-based approaches should still account for the dynamism in migration, including urban inflows where recently arrived migrants move to areas with similar social groups for networking and protection. Coordinated efforts to harness urban migration for the benefit of all should focus on breaking the cycle of urban poverty through better provision of basic services. Although urban migrants can be more vulnerable than poor members of the host community, exclusionary measures – such as limited provision of services – often concern both populations. Evidence-informed responses in services should also include rural areas, so that people can have more choice and agency. Area-based approaches recognise that most issues (urban) migrants face cannot be separated from the wider challenges in (urban) development and humanitarian response, while still acknowledging the differences in experience and needs as highlighted through the research.

3. Provide climate-adaptive solutions and training in both rural areas and urban locations. Today, in a fragmented society, maladaptive practices (deforestation in particular) can lead to displacement. It is essential to promote adaptive (or even transformative) strategies at the community (rural) level but also in urban areas, especially for migrants from drought-affected areas who wish to return home. This could include the provision of drought-resistant seeds – such as grasses, ground covers, shrubs and trees – and the installation and provision of training on water-saving irrigation tools, such as micro-irrigation and drip irrigation.

4. Coordinate a principled response for safe, voluntary and dignified return of displaced persons from urban areas. The DfA are proceeding in their plans to force the displaced out of informal settlements to rural areas of origin. The international community must advocate for principled displacement return. This includes sensitive policy efforts to identify a) who can safely and voluntarily return to areas of origin and b) understand the conditions in areas of origin, given that many displaced people may have no home or lands to return to, no social connections to their areas of origin, and face significant protection concerns, including persecution. These efforts should be undertaken while recognising the large numbers of IDPs who have already returned since August 2021. The policy responses should also see where targeted support would help in either urban areas or rural areas of origin based on the changing context and demographics of these areas, with an emphasis on balancing principled advocacy and the need for support towards (re)integration.
Social sustainability: Inclusive policies for urban basic services and housing

1. **Shift from a labelling approach to an intersectional approach.** Since most urban migrants experience the same issues as the urban poor, traditional sectoral programming based on individual categories and ‘status’ (IDP, returnee, host, IDP-returnee) are considered no longer appropriate. This is a major driver in why area-based approaches are increasing in traction and importance for working in areas of high urban migration (see Recommendation 3). While most agencies and organisations must think with labels to develop strategies and programmes, it is essential to prioritise a more territorial approach (area-based, localised) to consider systemic and structural issues, while doing justice to specific issues (discrimination, segregation, lack of documentation, lack of skills, gender-based violence, exploitation and abuse, child labour, etc.) that are often exacerbated among migrant and displaced communities.

2. **Ensure that the voices of migrants are included in policies and programmes through participation and inclusion in intervention design and local existing governance mechanisms.** This includes existing urban governance structures, such as shuras (community development councils), or gozars (social urban units found in Kabul city). This is in addition to international-backed urban responses where urban migrants, along with the diversity of people living in urban areas seeing high migration take part in various aspects of programming (see recommendation on area-based approaches below). Participatory and inclusive responses should foster better links between local leaders, members of the host community, policymakers, programme practitioners, and urban migrants themselves. Overall, linking migrants with participatory forum planning in urban areas can ensure that their voices are counted as part of city planning efforts, to facilitate representation and service delivery.

3. **Work with and empower local governance actors.** This includes local structures (such as community development councils or shuras) and grassroots organisations with experience of and dedication to addressing urban issues for migrants and non-migrants alike. In an era of political vacuum and lack of real government (at least in terms of basic services to the population), only a decentralised model of governance seems capable of revitalising the social and societal fabric in rural and urban areas.

Economic sustainability: Promote decent urban employment

1. **Improve the working conditions of urban migrants.** This should be gender-sensitive, particularly relevant in Afghanistan where women’s work opportunities are under immense threat. The international community should work to improve women’s economic opportunities and positions in cities. This should further be disaggregated and tailored in recognition of different women – with the knowledge of how some women contribute by working from home while other more highly-educated women desire to continue to work in professional and higher-skilled jobs. Decent work should also include a lens on children and youth, with child labour increasingly prevalent in urban areas amidst the economic collapse in Afghanistan.

2. **Organise the informal sector via groups or committees of informal workers.** This could be done via the establishment of a council to help migrants register, find jobs, and become familiar with their communities. Traditional forms of apprenticeship and mentorship (Ustad Shagerdi, in Mazar-e-Sharif) could be further developed to ensure the maintenance of traditional skills and the introduction of bridges between generations. International organisations, local NGOs and CSOs can support self-organised measures of informal workers.

3. **Provide training and workshops for migrants.** These training sessions could be led by previous urban migrants. Curricula and pedagogic content should be based on rapid market analyses, to identify the skills gaps (labour market) and socioeconomic needs (economic market), while avoiding the mistakes made in recent programming, which trained cohorts of beekeepers, tailors, and coders, regardless of market needs.
REFERENCES


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