



Photo Credit: Nick Ross, 2017

## Research Brief

# Durable Solutions Analysis in Herat

July 2025

## List of Acronyms

ADSP	Asia Displacement Solutions Platform
BHN	Basic Human Needs
CBPM	Community Based Protection Monitoring
DoLSA	Directorate of Labour and Social Affairs
DoRR	Directorate of Refugees and Repatriation
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
DS	Durable Solutions
EPDO	Equality for Peace and Development Organization
FCS	Food Consumption Score
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FHH	Female-Headed Household
GAM	Global Acute Malnutrition
HLP	Housing, Land & Property
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICCG	Inter-Cluster Coordination Group
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IRC	International Rescue Committee
KII	Key Informant Interview
MSNA	Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment
NADO	Network of Afghan Diaspora Organisations
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
PARR	Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration
rCSI	reduced Coping Strategies Index
ReDSS	Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat
SAM	Severe Acute Malnutrition
SSI	Semi-Structured Interview
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

## Introduction

### Why this Brief?

The Asia Displacement Solutions Platform (ADSP) is a joint initiative of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) which works to contribute to the development of comprehensive solutions for displaced populations in Asia. Established in 2018, ADSP focuses on research initiatives to build an evidence base for its members and other humanitarian actors to facilitate joint advocacy and common understanding around durable solutions.

Since 2022, Samuel Hall, a research organisation founded and based in Kabul, has been working with ADSP to build on existing data to create a space for research and advocacy on durable solutions. In August 2024, Samuel Hall and ADSP published the brief [Durable Solutions Analysis in Jalalabad/Nangarhar](#) which mapped and analysed durable solutions in Jalalabad. Developed between February and June 2025, this research brief follows the same methodology used in the Jalalabad brief, while focusing on the specific context of Herat in urban and peri-urban areas, which is home to internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees, especially from Iran. Understanding city-level data provides ways forward to fill in data gaps in support of durable solutions programming.

The aim of this research brief is to go beyond data mapping on durable solutions to incorporate data sources from ADSP members, Samuel Hall, UNHCR, UN Women, REACH, and UN-Habitat data, within a durable solutions analysis framework developed by the Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (ReDSS) in the East and Horn of Africa.

### Context

Afghanistan has experienced prolonged internal and cross-border displacement due to conflict, persecution, environmental hazards, poverty and socio-political instability. The province of Herat, in particular, faces a significant displacement crisis. In Afghanistan, as of March 2025, approximately 3.25 million individuals remain internally displaced due to conflict, with over 1 million IDPs having returned to their places of origin.<sup>1</sup>

IDPs and returnees from abroad often live in dire conditions, with limited access to services and facing a series of risks and obstacles in the realization of their rights.<sup>2</sup> In this context, their pursuit of durable solutions is often hampered, despite strategies and efforts from a variety of actors operational in Afghanistan.



As of September 2024, many IDPs were still present in Herat province, primarily due to conflicts, drought, and earthquakes. The total number of IDPs in the region is estimated to be over 275,000 individuals, particularly concentrated in Herat, Injil, and Zindajan districts – focusing on urban and peri-urban areas.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, Herat Province is a site of return – voluntary or forced – for thousands of Afghans. Over 1.2 million Afghans returned from Iran in 2024.<sup>4</sup> As of May 2025, UNHCR registered a total of 551,800 returns, including deportations, since the beginning of the year, 69% of them through the Dogharoun/Islam Qala crossing point.<sup>5</sup> Many of the displaced live in tents and improvised shelters and are dependent on humanitarian aid and livelihood support.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Afghanistan, [Afghanistan Situation Update](#), March 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Asia Displacement Solutions Platform, [Briefing Note: IDP returns in Afghanistan: are durable solutions possible?](#), October 2022.

<sup>3</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM), [Herat Earthquake Displacement Assessment: Key Findings Report on IDPs](#), December 2023.

<sup>4</sup> IOM, [Life on the Edge: Farhad's Journey Back to Afghanistan](#), February 2025.

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR, [Iran-Afghanistan: Returns Emergency Response as of 20 May 2025](#), May 2025.

<sup>6</sup> REACH, [Rapid Assessment of Internally Displaced Persons in Herat, Afghanistan: Displacement Profile](#), April 2015.



## Research Methodology

Table 1. Research Questions

Theme	Research Questions
<b>Context Analysis</b>	What are the living conditions in informal settlements in Herat for IDPs and returnees? How do outcomes in terms of legal safety, physical safety, and material safety differ among IDPs, returnees, and when compared to settled communities in Herat?
<b>Durable Solutions Programming</b>	What are the challenges and obstacles to local integration in Herat? How can achievement of durable solutions be supported? What further programmatic support and policy changes are needed to better support access to durable solutions in Herat? Are there promising practices and strategies to build on or replicate elsewhere?

This brief is based on data collected between 2023 and 2025 in Herat by a range of agencies.

Dataset	Surveys Conducted	Data Collection Period	Sample Composition	Thematic Focus
UNHCR Community Based Protection Monitoring (CBPM)	10,141	May - Dec 2023	90% IDPs, 10% host; 75% urban	Protection and safety concerns
UN Women	77	Oct 2024	Community leaders; thematic on gender and displacement	Community needs and gender-based challenges
UN Women	490	Oct 2024	61% host, 20% IDPs, 6% returnees; 81% women; urban / rural / peri-urban mix	Protection and restrictions for women
REACH PARR	315	2024	40% host, 20% IDPs, 20% returnees (mostly from Iran)	All durable solutions themes; high return areas focus
NRC MSNA	635	Dec 2024 - Jan 2025	25% host, 5% recent IDPs, 17% protracted IDPs, 36% returnees	All durable solutions themes; smaller sample for recent IDPs
UN-Habitat Spatial Profiling	24,227	Aug - Dec 2023	93% IDPs, 5% host, 2% returnees	Access to services, food security; informal IDP settlements

In addition, the research team conducted qualitative research using several tools to address gaps in the datasets, through:

- **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):** 12 high-level KIIs with representatives from the Directorate of Refugees and Repatriation (DoRR), UNHCR, IRC, Equality for Peace and Development Organization (EPDO), Network of Afghan Diaspora Organisations (NADO), IOM, UNDP, DRC, and UN-Habitat;
- **Semi-Structured Interviews (SSIs):** 10 SSIs, with 50% of respondents being women. The participants included four returnees, four IDPs, and two host community members;
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** six FGDs, ensuring gender balance (50% male, 50% female). These discussions included IDPs, host community members, and returnees in Injil, Zindajan, and Jebrael IDP settlements.

## Adapted ReDSS Durable Solutions Framework

The research team used the above data and applied the [ReDSS Durable Solutions Framework](#), with adaptations to reflect the Afghan context. Among these changes, a sub-criterion on access to energy sources was added. The ReDSS Framework is a rapid analytical tool that offers a snapshot in time to assess the extent to which durable solutions for displaced populations have been achieved in a particular context. There are three criteria – Physical, Material and Legal Safety – and 10 sub-criteria to assess whether a population has achieved or is on track to achieving a durable solution. These criteria reflect the existing eight IASC criteria. The data is plugged into the framework, and, with a traffic light system, each indicator reveals the status of progress to achieve durable solutions.

	The indicator is met or well on the way to being met. Displaced populations experience similar or better conditions than the host community and international / national standards (if applicable) are met.
	The indicator has not fully been met and obstacles exist. Conditions are inferior to the host community and international / national standards (if applicable).
	The indicator is far from met. The situation for displaced populations is significantly worse than that of surrounding communities, and national / international standards (if applicable) are not met.
	No data is available for this indicator or some data exists, but it is incomplete.

To increase the legibility and replicability of the ‘traffic light’ system for this ADSP research brief, the indicator table includes both absolute and comparative threshold figures as well as the data source, broken down by the relevant analytical layers of physical, material and legal safety. To create this table, indicators have been derived from a number of data sources including REACH, UNHCR, NRC and UN-Habitat – with a detailed data mapping having taken place before the compiling of the matrix to identify the most relevant indicators per dataset. The thresholds set for comparative figures are as follows:

- **If there is a five-percentage point (or less) difference between host communities and displaced communities**, the indicator is considered met or well on the way to being met and highlighted in green.
- **If there is a difference between a five-percentage point and twenty percentage point between host and displaced communities**, the indicator has not fully been met and obstacles exist, being highlighted in yellow.
- **Last, if there is over a twenty-percentage point difference between host and displaced communities**, the indicator is far from met and the situation for displaced populations is considered significantly worse than that of surrounding communities and highlighted in red.

## Key Highlights on Local Integration

### Physical Safety

Indicator	Sub-Indicators	Dataset	Absolute Status of Displaced Persons	Gap Analysis
<b>Protection</b>	Having suffered violent crimes or experienced safety incidents, including sexual and gender-based violence in the last 6 months	REACH PARR	4% Returnee from abroad households faced security incidents	Difference of four percentage points between hosts and returnees from abroad
	Facing discriminatory or arbitrary restriction of their freedom of movement	REACH PARR	2% IDP households (0% from abroad) faced discrimination	Difference of two percentage points between hosts and returnees from abroad
<b>Safety and Security</b>	Degree of access to police and judiciary, when needed	REACH PARR	39% IDP and 42% returnees from abroad have access to official judicial mechanisms	Difference of 30 percentage points between hosts and IDPs
	Feeling safe in current place of residence	REACH PARR	4.5/5% IDP and Returnees from abroad feel unsafe	Same scores for hosts and returnees from abroad
<b>Social Cohesion</b>	Facing stigmatisation (verbal violence, insults, exclusion, etc.) in their current place of residence	REACH PARR	4% IDP households faced stigmatisation	Difference of three percentage points between hosts and returnees from abroad
	Feeling accepted in the community of residence	REACH PARR	83% IDP and 87% returnees from abroad report feeling respected in community	Difference of two percentage points between hosts and returnees from abroad

### Material Safety

Indicator	Sub-Indicators	Dataset	Absolute Status of Displaced Persons	Gap Analysis
<b>Adequate Standard of Living, Access to Basic and Social Services</b>	Food Consumption Score (FCS)	UN-Habitat	40% IDPs score poor food consumption score (42% of returnees from abroad)	Difference of 18 percentage points between hosts and returnees from abroad
	Access to potable water, sanitation and hygiene	UN-Habitat	41% of returnees from abroad report having access to good quality water (72% IDPs)	Difference of 51 percentage points between hosts and returnees from abroad
	Prevalence of Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) / Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM)	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Access to healthcare	REACH PARR	39% of IDPs have access to health facilities (46% of all displaced)	Difference of 25 percentage points between hosts and returnees from abroad

	Access to formal education	MSNA NRC	Returnee from abroad households indicate enrolment rates of 32% for girls and 52% for boys	Difference of ten percentage points between hosts and returnees from abroad (for girls enrolment)
	Access to safety net interventions or remittances from abroad	REACH PARR	0% IDP and returnee from abroad households report access to remittances	Difference of three percentage points between IDPs and hosts
	Access to energy solution and sources	UN-Habitat spatial profiling	83% of IDPs have access to electricity. 95% of returnees from abroad have access to electricity	Difference of 16 percentage points between IDPs and Host
<b>Access to Livelihoods (Job Creation and Income Generation)</b>	Legal or administrative obstacles to employment or economic activity	NRC MSNA	0.4% of returnees from abroad faced legal / administrative problems	Difference of two percentage points between hosts and returnees from abroad
	Unemployment	UN-Habitat	93% IDP households have some type of employment	No difference between hosts and IDPs
	Sustainable employment conditions	NRC MSNA	1% of returnees from abroad count formal employment among their household sources of revenue	Difference of four percentage points between returnees from abroad and host community
	Poverty levels	REACH PARR	98% of IDPs are below the poverty line	Difference of eight percentage points between hosts and IDPs
<b>Housing, Land and Property (HLP)</b>	Housing quality	NRC MSNA	40-50% of displaced rate their shelter condition as good or adequate	Difference of 20 to 30 percentage points between displaced and hosts
	Mechanisms to ensure access to land and/or secure tenure	REACH PARR	8% of IDPs and 40% of returnees from abroad have customary tenure documents (and higher rates of only verbal)	Difference of 57 percentage points between hosts and IDPs
	HLP dispute resolution mechanisms	PARR	42% of returnees from abroad report having access to effective conflict resolution mechanisms	Difference of 26 percentage points between returnees from abroad and hosts
	Tenure security	NRC MSNA	43% of returnees from abroad and 40% of IDPs have a formal housing arrangement	Difference of 12 percentage points between IDPs and host

## Legal Safety

Indicator	Sub-Indicators	Dataset	Absolute Status of Displaced Persons	Gap Analysis
<b>Access to Effective Remedies &amp; Justice</b>	Violations suffered effectively remedied and a sense of justice restored	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Accessible mechanisms that have the legal mandate and actual capacity to provide effective remedies for violations suffered	NRC MSNA	17% of IDPs state that accessing legal identity, remedies, and justice is among the main risks faced by women.	Difference of one percentage point between hosts and IDPs
	Access to justice mechanisms	UNHCR CBPM	18% of IDPs report they have access to any judicial mechanisms	Difference of 45 percentage points between hosts and IDPs
<b>Participation in Legal Affairs</b>	No legal or administrative obstacles that prevent them from voting, being elected or working in public service	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Percentage of displaced populations participating in community or social organizations (youth / women / environmental / sports groups and others)	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Involved in public decision-making processes, or local reconciliation / capacity-building initiatives	UN-Habitat spatial profiling	Returnees from abroad have a participation rate of 77% and IDPs at 72%	Difference of three percentage points between IDPs and Hosts
<b>Access to Documentation</b>	Existence and effective accessibility of mechanisms to obtain/replace documents	NRC MSNA	12% of returnees from abroad and 14% of protracted IDPs do not know how to obtain Tazkira	Difference of two percentage points between returnees from abroad and hosts
	Holding birth certificates, national ID cards or other personal documents relevant to the local context	NRC MSNA	13% of returnees have no form of ID	Difference of one percentage point between hosts and returnees from abroad
<b>Family Reunification</b>	Unaccompanied and separated displaced populations children for whom a best interest determination is needed but has not been conducted	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Accessible and efficient family reunification mechanisms	REACH PARR	18% of IDPs and 25% of returnees from abroad have access to reunification mechanisms	Difference of 45 percentage points between hosts and IDPs
	Number of separated children	REACH PARR	40% of IDPs have families that have been separated. 8% of returnees from abroad have families that have been separated	Difference of 32 percentage points between hosts and IDPs



## Physical, Material and Legal Safety

### Physical Safety

As highlighted by the traffic light system, **physical safety across the indicators of security, protection, and social cohesion is generally high in Herat**. While some differences exist between host and displaced communities, these are less pronounced than the gaps observed in material and legal safety.

### Safety and Security

Reflecting this trend, **perceptions of safety are relatively positive among hosts and IDPs in Herat**. Armed conflict has declined since 2021<sup>7</sup> and host communities assess their safety relative to that experienced during the Republic era, where kidnappings, war, and harassment<sup>8</sup> were more commonplace. IDPs who fled conflict find Herat comparatively safe. Data from UNHCR CBPM supports this analysis, with 97% reporting that men and boys feel safe to move freely. Perceptions of safety were high across displacement status, urban or rural locations, and gender.<sup>9</sup> REACH PARR data confirms these findings with the majority of respondents reporting that they had not experienced key security concerns.<sup>10</sup> However, **female IDP respondents highlighted feelings of uncertainty** in their current place of residence. Perceptions of safety are shaped by past experiences of insecurity, and unfamiliarity with the new environment, as seen in interviews with IDPs for this study.

**Some host community members also share concerns over their safety, reporting an increase in theft and crime, which they linked to the arrival of IDPs in their area.** In qualitative discussions, hosts expressed frustration over petty theft, including the theft of solar panels, cables, and damage to shared resources. This concern was most pronounced among hosts in peri-urban areas.<sup>11</sup> As noted by a key informant: "Herat is a small city and cannot take this many IDPs and returnees. In the city, work opportunities are decreasing, and [the] prices of food items are on the rise. This has created a disorganisation in the city. It has led to thefts and criminal activities. Insecurity has taken over the city."<sup>12</sup>

According to REACH data in Herat PARR districts (Injil and Guzara), a large majority of households (90%) feel well represented in community leadership structures regardless of displacement status. However, **IDP and returnee<sup>13</sup> households are significantly less likely than host community households to report sufficient access to local dispute mechanisms** (69% of host community households vs. 42% of IDP returnees and 39% of IDPs).<sup>14</sup>

**UNHCR protection data suggests that IDP households have less dispute mechanisms available to them**, with IDP households most likely to report their problems to elders (30%). Host community households have greater access to local councils and religious leaders, with 48% of host households bringing their disputes to local mullahs as opposed to 22% of IDP households. **Discrimination appears to be a barrier to dispute resolution for IDP households.** Out of the 8% IDP households who had reported a dispute which was left unresolved, 82% of these households noted discrimination as the reason for the lack of outcomes. To respond to this, UNHCR has been providing IDPs with legal support,<sup>15</sup> but lack of education and little information about services and support leaves some IDPs feeling they cannot seek help.<sup>16</sup>

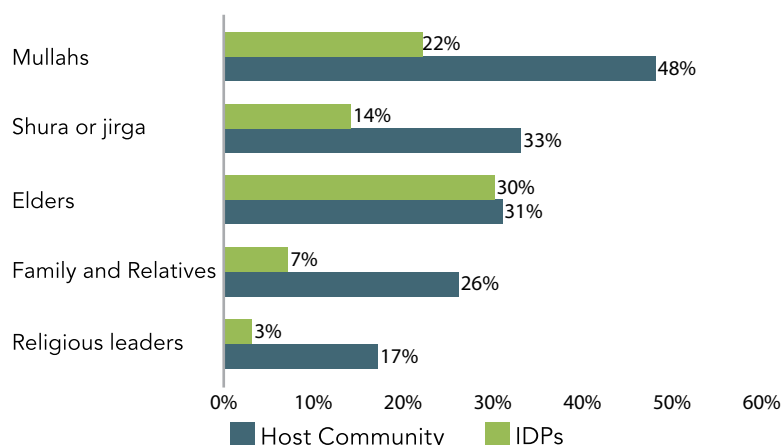


Figure 1: Who do you turn to in case of a dispute?

<sup>7</sup> ACLED, "Methodology and Coding Decisions Around Political Violence and Demonstrations in Afghanistan," ACLED Knowledge Base, 2 March 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Focus Group Discussion in Zindajan, Herat, Afghanistan with male hosts, and semi-structured interview with a female IDP in Zindajan, Herat; and Semi-structured interview conducted by Samuel Hall with a female IDP in Zindajan, Herat, Afghanistan, on 25 February 2025.

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR, Community Based Protection Monitoring (CBPM), 2023.

<sup>10</sup> REACH, Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration Dataset (PARR), 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Key informant interview with a male host in Zindajan, Herat, Afghanistan, on 25 February 2025.

<sup>12</sup> Key informant interview in Herat, Afghanistan, on 27 February 2025.

<sup>13</sup> Unless explicitly stated, the term 'returnees' always refers to returnees from abroad.

<sup>14</sup> REACH, Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration Dataset (PARR), 2024.

<sup>15</sup> UNHCR Afghanistan. "Legal Assistance" Support page, accessible at: <https://help.unhcr.org/afghanistan/support/legal-assistance/>

<sup>16</sup> Semi-structured interview conducted with a male returnee in Jebraeil, Herat, Afghanistan.

## Social Cohesion

According to REACH PARR data, **IDPs and returnees report feeling high levels of acceptance in the community** at 83% and 87% acceptance respectively, with a difference of only two percentage points with their host counterparts (89%).<sup>17</sup> **Many hosts recognise that IDPs have arrived out of force, not by choice, demonstrating empathy and understanding.** As one host explained: *“They come here out of necessity... How can we drive them away from us?”* In Afghan society, the home carries deep significance – as a symbol of stability, inheritance, and financial security. Consequently, many host families have opened their homes to accommodate the arrival of IDPs. One host described a process of gradual social integration:

*“At first, when they came here, they didn’t know anyone and were not familiar with the area. Only the male members arrived initially, and they were provided shelter. Then they brought their families. We visited them, invited them to our houses, and over time, they became part of the society, like any other family.”*<sup>18</sup>

**Alongside this understanding, frustrations also exist.** Welcoming IDPs within other households’ homes has led to overcrowding and cramped housing. Others struggle with the disparity in aid access.<sup>19</sup> Many hosts find that they are deprioritised in humanitarian service delivery.<sup>20</sup> REACH data indicates that **host communities are more likely to experience denial of access to services**, which was least common among returnees (8%) but highest among host community members (28%). Returnees were slightly more likely than hosts to report receiving humanitarian assistance in the past three months, while IDPs were the most likely to have received aid (46% of households).<sup>21</sup> **This imbalance in aid distribution has a knock-on effect on social cohesion.** While many hosts remain supportive of IDPs, others feel overlooked,<sup>22</sup> which could strain relationships between displaced and host communities over time. If sustained, it poses a barrier for long-term social integration. Short-term acts of generosity, stretched for long periods, impact perceptions of local integration in their communities being a durable solution for IDPs.<sup>23</sup>

**Fewer than half of the host community surveyed supported allowing more IDPs to settle in Herat**, with concerns over IDPs’ reported poor hygiene, air pollution, and environmental degradation, “often due to rapid and haphazard urbanisation and IDPs’ lack of resources – such as water and clean fuel for cooking and heating – and consequent coping strategies and adaptations.”<sup>24</sup> Some hosts expressed suspicion towards newcomers when they first arrived. As longstanding intergenerational relationships and networks form the foundation of social structures, unfamiliarity with new members of the community impacts perceptions of safety. One host participant explained:

*“Since people don’t know [IDPs] personally, some fear they might be thieves or untrustworthy, making it difficult to accept them into their homes. When a family moves from another place, we don’t know their background, their relatives, or their character, which naturally makes trust difficult.”*<sup>25</sup>

In Rodat-e Naw Village, Injil District, **communities seek to address this uncertainty through informal security measures.** Community leaders conduct background checks and ID verification on new arrivals, and individuals with known criminal records are reported to the authorities. Interestingly, this dynamic of trust-building also works in reverse, as some returnees actively engage in their communities as a form of social reintegration.

The **intersection of displacement and gender has an impact on feelings of discrimination.** NRC MSNA data suggests that 52% of returnees and 59% of protracted IDP households reported that discrimination, stigmatisation and denial of access to aid and opportunities were the primary challenges faced by women in their communities.<sup>26</sup> This was echoed in the qualitative data, as males reported feeling warmly welcomed by communities while women IDPs and returnees more frequently reported discrimination such as name calling, denial of services<sup>27</sup> and hostility upon first arrival.

*“When I first arrived in this area, unfortunately, I was not treated well. For example, when I went to the bakery to buy bread, I was mocked because of my Iranian accent. At the beginning, the situation was very hard for me. I faced racial discrimination in the market and everywhere else. At first people made fun of me, but over time I adapted to the community.”*<sup>28</sup>

<sup>17</sup> REACH, Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration Dataset (PARR), 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Semi-structured interview with a female host in Zindajan, Herat, Afghanistan.

<sup>19</sup> FGD with female hosts; Key informant interview with a female from an NGO in, Zindajan Herat, Afghanistan; FGD in Zindajan with male hosts.

<sup>20</sup> Semi-structured interview with a female IDP in Injil, Herat, Afghanistan.

<sup>21</sup> REACH, Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration Dataset (PARR), 2024.

<sup>22</sup> Semi-structured interview with a female returnee in Injil, and FGD in Injil, Rodat-e Naw, with male host.

<sup>23</sup> World Bank, Social Cohesion and Forced Displacement: A Synthesis of New Research (2022) and Chathurangane Jayakody et al., “Approaches to Strengthen the Social Cohesion between Displaced and Host Communities,” Sustainability 14, no. 6 (2022): 3413.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Key informant interview with a male host in Zindajan, Herat, Afghanistan, on 25 February 2025.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> FGD conducted in Jebrael with female returnees; FGD conducted in Injil, Rodat-e Naw, with female IDPs.

<sup>28</sup> FGD conducted in Jebrael with female returnees.

**A notable distinction emerged between how communities perceive IDPs versus returnees.** Both IDPs and hosts recognised that returnees have a right to come back to Herat, as they are reclaiming their ancestral land rather than settling somewhere unfamiliar. Among some male IDPs, there was a strong belief in restoration rather than IDPs' displacement. In Afghanistan, land is deeply tied to identity, continuity, and belonging. Returning is not just about finding shelter – it is a normative expectation, a restoration of historical continuity. This explains why returnees in central Herat, particularly those coming from Iran, have been warmly welcomed back. One host participant described this sentiment:

*"People have a compassionate attitude towards returnees and try to help them solve any problems they may face. There are no major social issues... Occasionally, some impolite people mock returnees because of their accent, but this is a rare occurrence. Overall, we feel comfortable and welcomed."*<sup>29</sup>

## Protection

**Rates of psychological distress are high: 85% of respondents reporting that they or someone in their family is feeling a level of stress which affects their daily capacity.**<sup>30</sup> The prevalence of distress is higher amongst IDPs as compared to host community members (95% vs. 84%) and higher in urban locations as compared to rural locations (88% vs. 76%). While symptoms of stress are similar amongst hosts and IDPs, these stressors appear to be more keenly felt by IDP populations:

- **Financial challenges:** 82% of IDPs reported a lack of food or financial challenges causing distress compared to 43% of host community members.
- **Health problems:** 39% of IDPs reported that health problems were a source of stress and 12% reported that their stress was caused by their child being denied access to education, which was reported by only 22% (health issues) and 2% (barriers to education) of host community members respectively.<sup>31</sup>
- **Behavioural changes in family members:** 37% of IDP households and 11% reported that household members had become more violent or aggressive, highlighting challenges faced in sourcing food, livelihoods and accessing services.

Further, NRC MSNA data highlights the **primacy of GBV as a risk for women, and for more recently displaced IDPs for whom GBV is ranked a major risk by over 50% of respondents** (Fig. 2) – significantly higher than the 33% reported by host community households. This coincided with a high proportion of households noting that the leading challenge faced by women and girls is a lack of remedial justice, particularly among recent and prolonged IDP households (47%).<sup>32</sup> **The risks of GBV are high while opportunities for redress are limited.**

### Freedom of movement for women is curtailed.

According to UNHCR data in Herat, 45% of IDP women in rural areas report that there are locations that women cannot go to (compared to only 6% of host community women in rural locations). Households in rural areas were more likely to report movement constraints due to a need for accompaniment (14% of households in rural areas vs. 5% of urban households).<sup>33</sup> However, women's movements in urban areas are more restricted (38% of households report restrictions compared to 31% in rural locations).<sup>34</sup>

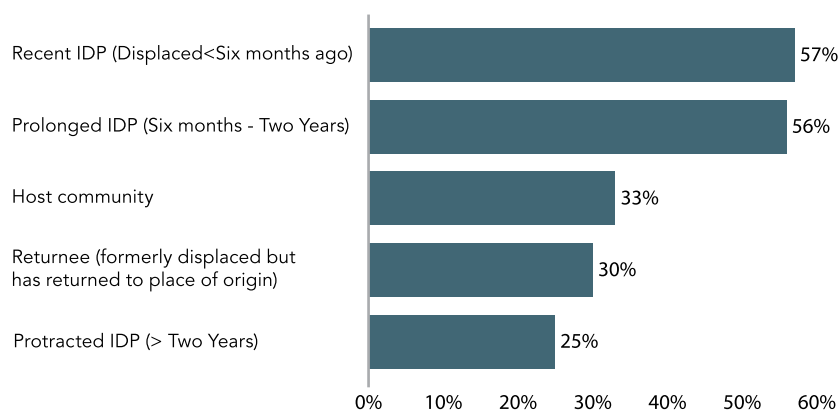


Figure 2: Risk of GBV by displacement type (Source: NRC MSNA)

<sup>29</sup> Semi-structured interview with a female returnee in Jebraeil, Herat, Afghanistan, on 26 February 2025.

<sup>30</sup> UNHCR, Community Based Protection Monitoring (CBPM), 2023.

<sup>31</sup> REACH, Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration Dataset (PARR), 2024.

<sup>32</sup> NRC, Multi-Sector Needs Assessment, 2024-2025.

<sup>33</sup> UNHCR, Community Based Protection Monitoring (CBPM), 2023.

<sup>34</sup> This is a result of sample size. There are more households in urban areas meaning it has a higher weight – however rural IDP women appear to be the most affected when looking at these groups individually.

## Material Safety

The traffic light system shows that both host and IDP communities face significant challenges related to material safety. However, **indicators such as food security, school enrolment, access to healthcare, quality water, and housing reveal substantial gaps between IDPs, returnees, and host households**, suggesting that access to and provision for such services is unequally distributed between host and displaced communities.

## Adequate Standard of Living, Access to Basic and Social Services

### Food Security

**Herat experiences food insecurity at lower rates than the national average.** According to IOM DTM, one-fifth of the population cannot afford three meals a day.<sup>35</sup> In 2021 and 2022, Herat households (including IDPs and returnees) relied less on food-related coping mechanisms, such as borrowing money or food, than other provinces. Data from UN-Habitat underscores the **correlation between displacement status and food security**. Host community households were 16 percentage points less likely than IDPs to have a food consumption score (FCS)<sup>36</sup> categorised as poor and 18 percentage points less than returnees.<sup>37</sup> There are a number of factors correlated with FCS score, with displacement status being the factor with the highest magnitude of effect (non-displaced households score 3.4 points higher than IDP households) when controlling for the gender of the household, household size, employment status, and presence of disabled or chronically ill members.<sup>38</sup> The next most influential factor is having a male head of household (those with male heads of households score 2.9 points higher than female-headed households). Having a member of the household employed was not significant in the FCS received, suggesting that food security issues have systemic roots which go beyond pure economic circumstances.<sup>39</sup>

Figure 3: Food consumption score by displacement status (Source: UNHABITAT).

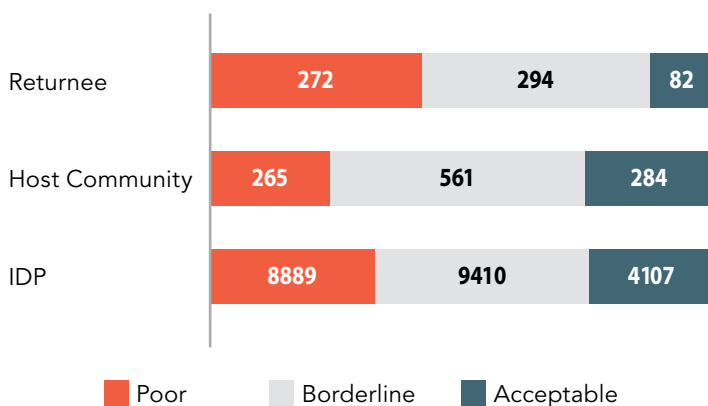
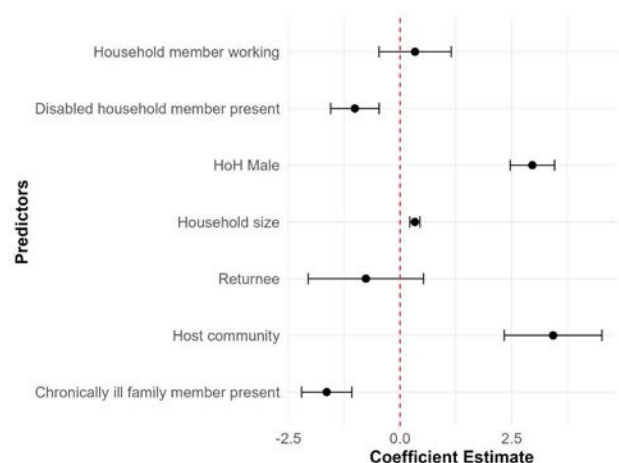


Figure 4: Forest plot of coefficients related to FCS (Source: UNHABITAT)



While displacement status is a strong predictor of weekly food consumption, it has little impact on the frequency of use of extreme food coping strategies when accounting for work status, presence of chronic illness or disability in the household, and family size. **The variable with the highest magnitude of effect is work status**, with households that have at least one working member scoring almost five points lower in the reduced Coping Strategies Index (rCSI).<sup>40</sup> This suggests that while employment does not necessarily impact the quality of food consumption, it prevents the use of the most severe negative coping mechanisms such as adults reducing consumption to enable children to eat.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>35</sup> IOM, "Afghanistan Baseline Mobility & Community-Based Needs Assessment: Herat Province, Round 15, March & April 2022," ReliefWeb, March 2022

<sup>36</sup> FCS is calculated by asking a respondent how many days their household ate 7 specific food groups (i.e. cereals, tubers, meats, vegetables, fruits, etc.). The types of foods are given weights according to their caloric and nutritional value and then the overall FCS is calculated by how many days in the week the household ate this food group. It has a call back period of 7 days. A higher number reflects a better score.

<sup>37</sup> UN-Habitat, Spatial Profiling Dataset, 2023.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> rCSI is calculated by asking a respondent which negative food strategies they use (out of five options). These are then weighted according to severity and overall rCSI is calculated by how many days in the week the household used this coping strategy. A higher number reflects a worse score.

<sup>41</sup> UN-Habitat, Spatial Profiling Dataset, 2023.

Figure 5: Reduced coping strategies index (rCSI) by displacement status (Source: UNHABITAT)

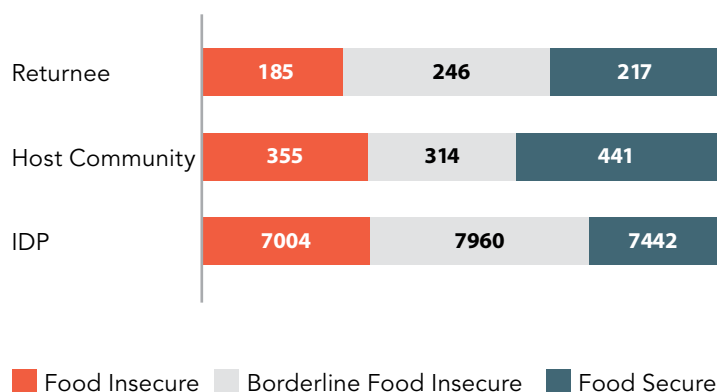
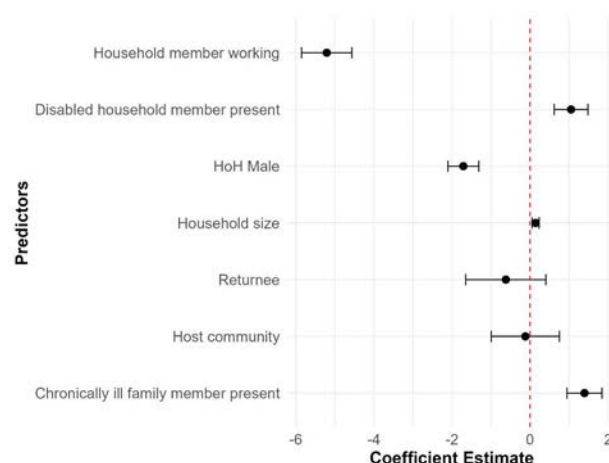


Figure 6: Reduced coping strategies index (rCSI) by displacement status (Source: UNHABITAT)



## Education

### Education services for IDPs, returnees, and local children are extensively supplemented by international actors.

UNICEF and Save the Children provide supportive programming, especially for girls. These restrictions, along with high rates of poverty, have contributed to a decline in national primary school attendance. According to UNESCO, primary school enrolment decreased from 6.8 million in 2019 to 5.7 million in 2022.<sup>42</sup> In Herat, many IDP children are kept from school to provide labour to support their families.<sup>43</sup>

### Enrolment rates vary depending on displacement status.

NRC MSNA data shows considerable variation in enrolment rates across different displacement groups. For instance, the 'recent IDPs' group (displaced less than six months ago) show remarkably high enrolment rates (60.7% for boys and 68.2% for girls), although comprising only 35 households. In contrast, groups such as 'returnees' and 'prolonged IDPs' (displaced from six months to two years) have notably lower rates.<sup>44</sup>

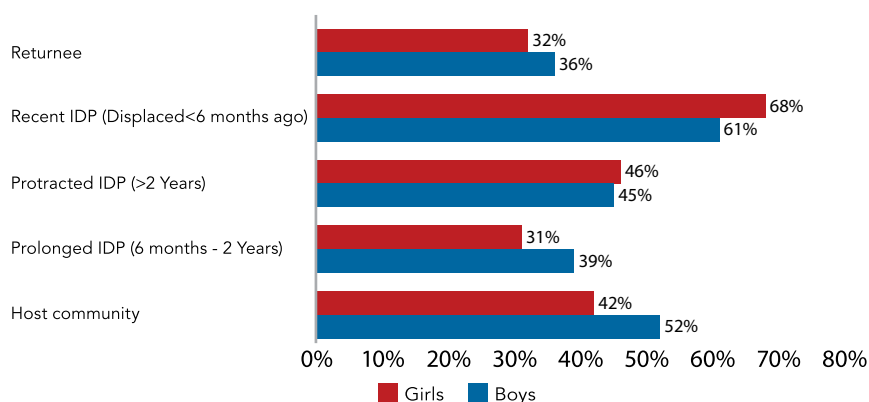


Figure 7: School enrolment rates. (Source: NRC MSNA)

### Access to education remains restricted for children due to economic considerations.

The most dominant barriers are labour pressures, particularly among prolonged IDPs (69% of IDP households). Many of these respondents reported that daily wage labour or work obligations force children out of school. Issues related to inadequate infrastructure and materials, and concerns about distance to school, also contribute to low enrolment rates.<sup>45</sup> As noted by a female IDP, education is available but remains expensive.

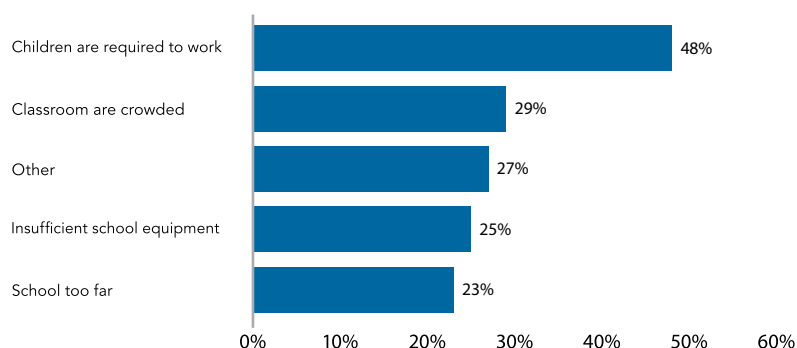


Figure 8: Reasons for non-attendance (Source: NRC MSNA)

<sup>42</sup> UN News, "Afghanistan: 20 Years of Steady Education Progress 'Almost Wiped Out'," August 14, 2024.

<sup>43</sup> Holloway et al., "Climate Change, Conflict and Internal Displacement," 2022, 22.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.



Systemic pressures – school closures, bans that affect female students, and other institutional barriers – are most reported among the host community (58%).<sup>46</sup> Among returnees, many cannot afford the necessary documents or the travel costs required to obtain them, making it difficult to enrol their children in school:

*"My children are not being accepted into the school. I have tried to enrol them in several governmental schools but some specific documents were needed and I cannot get them. The process is difficult and expensive. I have to go to Ghazni and then Kabul and then [return] to Herat city but I cannot afford this. We came to the city to have access to higher quality education, but such difficulties make us regret our decisions."*<sup>47</sup>

There are significant variations in priorities based on displacement status. Recent IDPs prioritise language (100%) and catch-up classes (67%),<sup>48</sup> while longer-term displaced populations and returnees focus more on infrastructure and material needs.<sup>49</sup>

*"If they [IDPs] want to start education again here, we would help them start it from the same class. We have coordination with the Directorate of Education as well. It is true for both returnees and IDPs."*<sup>50</sup>

## Health

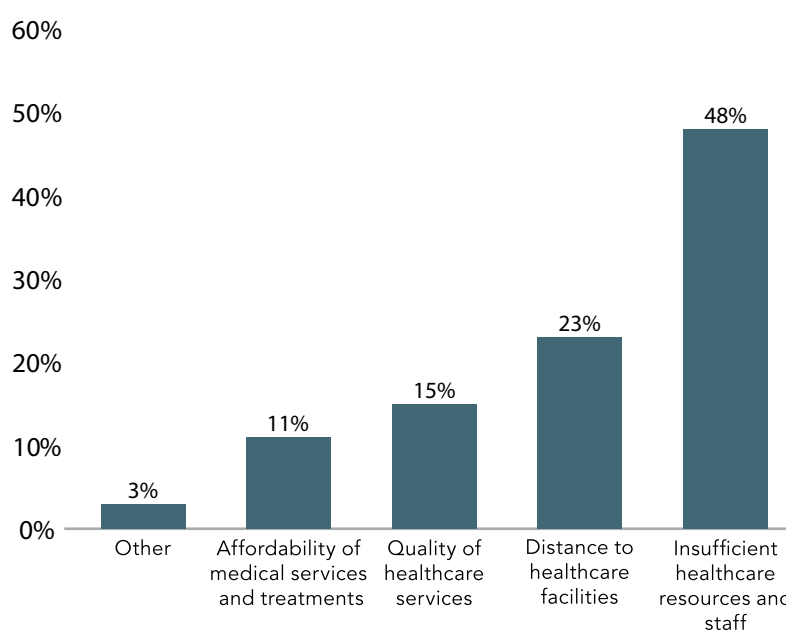
**UN-Habitat data presents a structured healthcare delivery system in Herat, although heavily reliant on Urban Health Clinics (UHC),** which serve nearly three-quarters (73.7%) of the IDP population. The supplementary coverage through Mobile Health Units (18.6%) suggests an adaptive approach to healthcare delivery, particularly useful for reaching displaced populations, while Rural Health Clinics serve a smaller but significant portion (6.6%) of the community. The accessibility data presents a relatively positive picture, with three-quarters (76.7%) of IDPs able to reach health facilities within 30 minutes, including 49.3% within 15-30 minutes and 11.8% within just 15 minutes. In addition, 97.9% of IDPs in Herat report having access to health facilities with female staff or specific health services for women and girls.<sup>51</sup>

A concerning segment (11.5%) of the IDP population has to travel more than an hour to reach health services, indicating gaps in healthcare coverage for certain areas or settlements<sup>52</sup> as well as poor infrastructure. Accordingly, respondents in IDP households were 24% less likely than respondents in host community households to report that they had access to a healthcare centre in the past three months.<sup>53</sup>

Insufficient healthcare resources and staff is the predominant issue, affecting half (48.5%) of respondents. This is followed by geographic accessibility challenges (22.6%), and both quality of healthcare services and affordability of medical treatments affecting 15.1% and 11.1% of respondents. While most IDPs have access to health facilities with female staff, the presence of facilities does not guarantee adequate healthcare delivery, as facilities appear understaffed and under-resourced.<sup>54</sup>

In 2024, Samuel Hall conducted an analysis of healthcare availability in PARR districts of Herat using REACH geo-spatial data. The findings indicated that healthcare capacity was strained according to the overall population level and education facilities were working at maximum capacity. For healthcare to work at an ideal capacity across these two districts – defined as one basic health centre for 10,000 people – 27 new clinics (minimum BHC level) would be required.<sup>55</sup>

Figure 9: Challenges in accessing healthcare for IDPs (Source: UNHABITAT)



<sup>46</sup> NRC, Multi-Sector Needs Assessment, 2024-2025.

<sup>47</sup> FGD with male returnees in Herat, Afghanistan.

<sup>48</sup> Catch-up Classes are short-term transitional education programs for children and youth who had been attending school prior to an educational disruption (e.g., conflict), which provides students with the opportunity to learn content missed due to the disruption.

<sup>49</sup> NRC, Multi-Sector Needs Assessment, 2024-2025.

<sup>50</sup> Key informant interview conducted with a national authority staff member in Herat, Afghanistan.

<sup>51</sup> UN-Habitat, Spatial Profiling Dataset, 2023.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> REACH, Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration Dataset (PARR), 2024.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

Table 2: Healthcare operational capacity in Herat<sup>56</sup>

Location	Population			Healthcare Capacity				Primary Education Capacity			
	Total population	IDP proportion of population	Returnee proportion of population	Current healthcare capacity	Clinics needed to reach ideal capacity	Clinics needed to reach strained capacity	Clinics needed to reach maximum capacity	Primary education capacity	Teachers needed to reach ideal capacity	Teachers needed to reach strained capacity	Teachers needed to reach maximum capacity
Injil	543,515	41%	7%	strained	25	0	0	max.	1546	24	0
Guzara	222,562	18%	6%	strained	2	0	0	max.	898	275	0

## WASH

**Host community members and IDPs have adopted different strategies to cope with water scarcity.** In Herat, the host community invested in solutions such as deep wells, ensuring a consistent water supply by contributing financially to their maintenance. Additionally, they utilised water storage tanks to secure water for basic needs. Conversely, IDPs, facing financial constraints, opted for low-cost solutions.

**Data on water collection point accessibility and functionality reveals significant disparities across displacement groups:** 58.9% report that their water collection points are easily accessible and functional, while 41.1% indicate challenges in accessibility or functionality.<sup>57</sup> When the data is broken down by displacement status, clear differences emerge between the groups. Prolonged IDPs (89.5%) indicate that their water collection points are accessible and functional, compared to only 46.8% among host community households. Protracted IDPs fall in between, with 65.1% having access to functional water points.<sup>58</sup> These figures underscore a marked inequity in water infrastructure, suggesting that host communities continue to face significant challenges with water access and maintenance compared to their displaced counterparts.

### Disparities in Water Source Quality Among IDPs, Returnees, and Host Communities

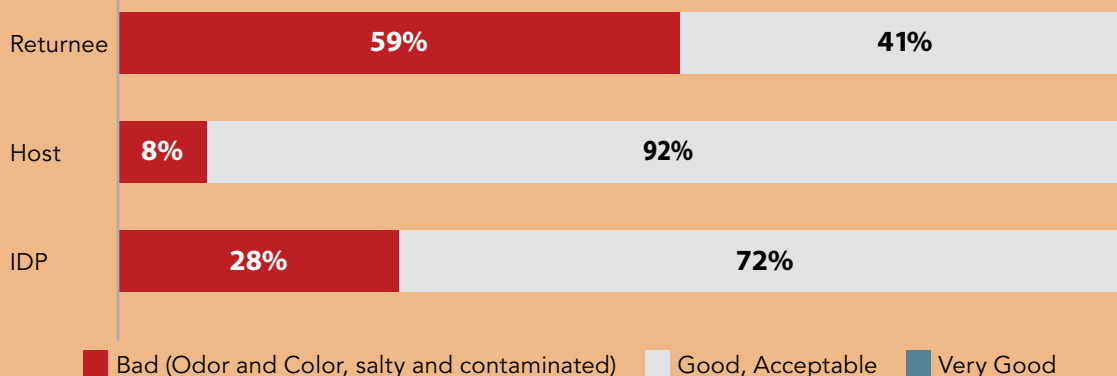


Figure 10: Quality of water source (Source: UNHABITAT)

While potentially explained by its sample locations and focus on informal IDP settlements, UN-Habitat data alternatively suggests that access to acceptable water sources is significantly poorer for IDP and returnee households compared to hosts. Host community households appear much more reliant upon dug wells than IDPs or returnees (at 70% of households compared to 58% and 40%). IDPs only use private water sources in 59% of instances compared to host community households who do so in 90% of households.<sup>59</sup>

In terms of water collection routes, all (99.9%) report that their water collection routes are safe, with only five households reporting unsafe conditions. Women are the primary water collectors, representing 62.7%, while children account for 26.9% (14.1% boys and 12.8% girls).<sup>60</sup> The heavy reliance on women and children for water collection have other implications for time use and educational opportunities.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

For the very few cases where routes were reported as unsafe, the reasons included:<sup>61</sup>

1. Traffic safety concerns for women and children;
2. Crowding around water points leading to harassment;
3. General safety concerns for women living alone;
4. Lack of water availability.

The majority of households (75.6%) have access to family latrines, which represents the most common sanitation solution. However, there are significant gaps in coverage, with 11.3% of households using designated places for latrines and a concerning 10.2% having no latrine facilities available at all. Community latrines are used by 7.7% of households, while a minimal portion (0.2%) reported other types of facilities.<sup>62</sup> According to an interview conducted by Samuel Hall with a host community member, there is also a significant difference in terms of access to toilettes between IDPs and host community members. The interviewee stated:

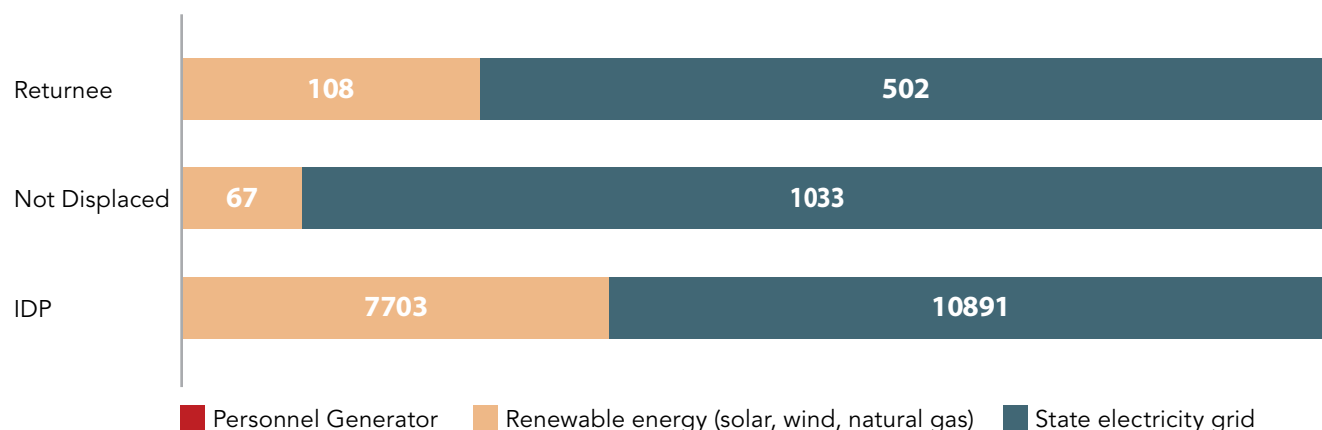
*"We have clean water and toilets in our home, but the IDPs do not have that much access. They do not have homes or live in old homes with water pipes and improper toilets."*<sup>63</sup>

## Energy

The city relies on hydroelectric power from Salma Dam and Iranian imports, but droughts and shifts in snowfall have rendered the dam less viable. **IDPs and host community members have adapted to meet increased energy needs, with host communities accessing more long-term solutions and IDPs relying on makeshift measures.** Host community members can more readily burn firewood, access solar panels, or install heating systems for the harsh winters; many paint their homes white to keep cool in the summers. IDPs, in contrast, burn shrubs and animal dung to keep warm, or use shade from trees to keep cool.<sup>64</sup> The use of firewood can entail environmental costs like deforestation, air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

NRC data suggests that government electricity is the primary energy source (40.9% of households), followed by solar panels (36.1%). A significant portion of households (23.5%) report having no energy source for lighting and daily activities. Host communities appear to rely on solar solutions while IDPs have better access to government electricity. Host communities show more diversified energy sources but also slightly higher rates of having no energy access compared to IDPs.<sup>65</sup> UN-Habitat data confirms that most IDPs in Herat have access to electricity, with 83.3% affirming access through the state grid (58.3%) or renewable energy sources (41.3%). In contrast, when it comes to cooking and heating, the vast majority rely on gas (59.5%), with local materials (27.9%) and wood (12.6%) making up the remainder.<sup>66</sup>

Figure 11: Energy source by displacement status (Source: UNHABITAT)



<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Semi structured interview in Rodat-e Naw Village, Injil District.

<sup>64</sup> IOM, "Herat Earthquake Displacement Assessment," December 2023.

<sup>65</sup> NRC, Multi-Sector Needs Assessment, 2024-2025.

<sup>66</sup> UN-Habitat, Spatial Profiling Dataset, 2023.

## Durable Solutions vs. Humanitarian Programming

Interviews with operational partners and government representatives in Herat underscored a critical distinction – and complementarity – between humanitarian and durable solutions programming. Humanitarian response, led by the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG) members and OCHA, remains vital for newly returned or displaced populations, especially those arriving from Iran with no possessions and no financial buffer, due to the collapse of the Iranian rial. IDPs similarly highlighted the need for urgent assistance when fleeing conflict or disaster.

Beyond meeting humanitarian needs, the Department of Refugees and Repatriation (DoRR) expressed clear interest in transitioning from aid dependence to Afghan-led self-sufficiency, aligning with broader calls for more sustainable approaches. As one DoRR official noted, “we want programmes that help people stand on their own feet.”

Returnees and IDPs echoed this view: durable solutions – access to land, employment, education – are essential to rebuilding lives. While humanitarian programming keeps people afloat, durable solutions programming moves them forward. Achieving both, with coordination and tailored approaches, is essential to meet displaced people’s aspirations for autonomy.

## Access to Livelihoods

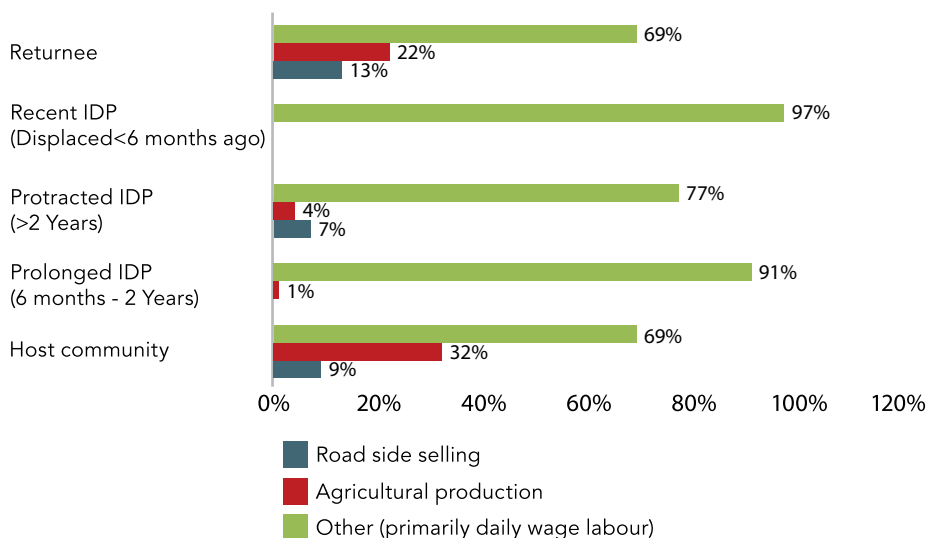
**For Afghan IDPs, the main drivers of movement include economic crises from acute and chronic environmental causes** (e.g., 2023 earthquake), and prolonged drought induced by climate change. Agricultural livelihoods are increasingly under threat, as stated by a host community member:

*“Most of the displaced people were shepherds and farmers and were interested in farming, but after being displaced to urban and semi-urban areas, these jobs were not possible. Therefore, such contexts must also be taken into account when creating programs.”<sup>67</sup>*

In addition, cultivable lands and wells have dried, especially in the past three years. From the 2018 drought alone, Herat hosted 12,000 families in the Shahrak-e Sabz IDP camp.<sup>68</sup> According to an NGO representative, the earthquake pulled few resources from other settlements across Herat.<sup>69</sup>

In terms of livelihoods, displaced people face additional challenges. IDPs and returnees are affected unequally. IDPs from rural areas often lack experience in urban jobs.<sup>70</sup> For example, female IDP focus group participants reported few home-bound work options, such as tailoring, which could only be done on an ad hoc basis due to inconsistent demand.<sup>71</sup> Compounded by restrictions on women’s work, households send young boys to collect trash, polish shoes, or beg in the streets. Across the country, IDPs and returnees are most likely to seek livelihoods that may inflict harm on their well-being, especially female-headed households (FHH).<sup>72</sup> According to UNHCR, IDP and returnee women must work excessively long hours to compensate for routine threats of eviction and denial of services.<sup>73</sup>

Figure 12: Top three income sources by displacement status (Source: NRC MSNA)



<sup>67</sup> FGD conducted with male host community members in Herat, Afghanistan.

<sup>68</sup> Shahrzad Amoli and Evan Jones, “Lessons from Drought Response in Afghanistan,” Forced Migration Review, no. 69 (March 2022): 2.

<sup>69</sup> Key informant interview, NGO representative.

<sup>70</sup> Holloway et al., “Climate Change, Conflict and Internal Displacement,” 25-26, 2022.

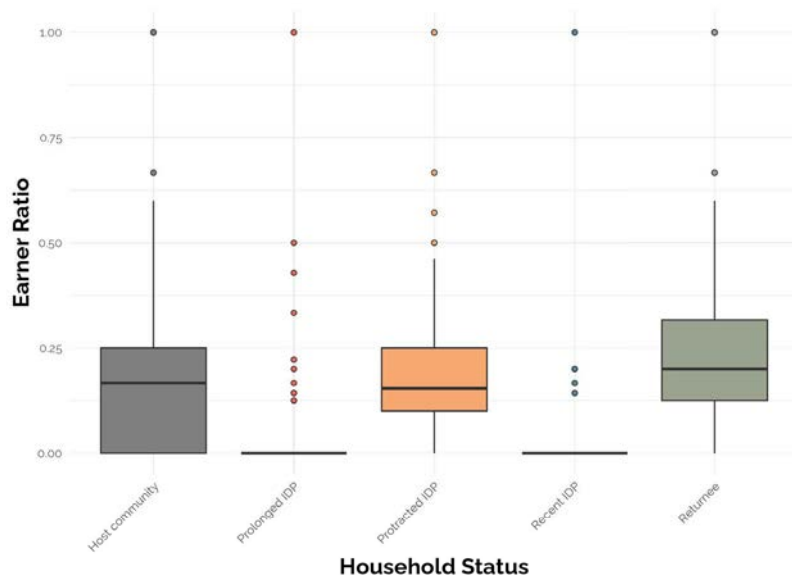
<sup>71</sup> Focus Group Discussion in Rodat-e Naw, Injil District.

<sup>72</sup> UNHCR, “Protection Landscape for Returnee Women and Girls,” Forthcoming, 4.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

According to NRC data, the majority of households (75.7%) report 'other' sources of income as their main source,<sup>73</sup> regardless of displacement status, followed by agriculture production (16.9%) and roadside selling (8%). Handicrafts and related activities (including tailoring, embroidery, and carpet weaving) account for 6.3% of household income sources, while both livestock production and formal employment each represent 2.2% of reported income sources.

**Host community households have a varied set of income sources**, with agriculture production being the most prominent at 32.3%. Prolonged IDPs show lower engagement in most income activities. Protracted IDPs households lean more heavily on handicrafts, with a reported rate of 11.3%, indicating that such skills may be a key source of livelihood. Similarly to the host community, returnees exhibit a more balanced portfolio of income sources, with agriculture production (22.1%) and roadside selling (12.6%) being notable.



Source: NRC MSNA Survey Data

Figure 13: Household earner ratio by displacement status. (Source: NRC MSNA)

Looking at the earner ratio (income earners per household member) across displacement status groups, **returnees show highest labour participation** (24% of household members earning). Protracted IDPs and host communities show similar patterns (~20% of members earning), followed by host communities (~18% of members earning). Alternatively, recent and prolonged IDPs show low ratios – with only 6% (recent IDPs) and 4% (prolonged IDPs) of household members earning respectively – suggesting severe challenges in accessing income opportunities.<sup>75</sup>

**Recent and prolonged IDPs are the most economically vulnerable**, with a median income that is markedly lower than other displacement statuses – around 10,000 AFN<sup>76</sup> – suggesting acute financial stress immediately after displacement. Notably, protracted IDPs exhibit a wider spread in incomes, hinting at considerable inequality within the group.<sup>77</sup>

**Protracted IDPs and returnees show the highest prevalence of working children.** In protracted IDP households, 17% report boys working and 4.7% report girls working, while returnee households show similar rates at 15.6% for boys and 5.2% for girls. There is a consistent gender disparity across all groups, with boys more likely to be engaged in income-generating activities than girls. Host communities show a notable pattern with 11.4% of households reporting working boys.

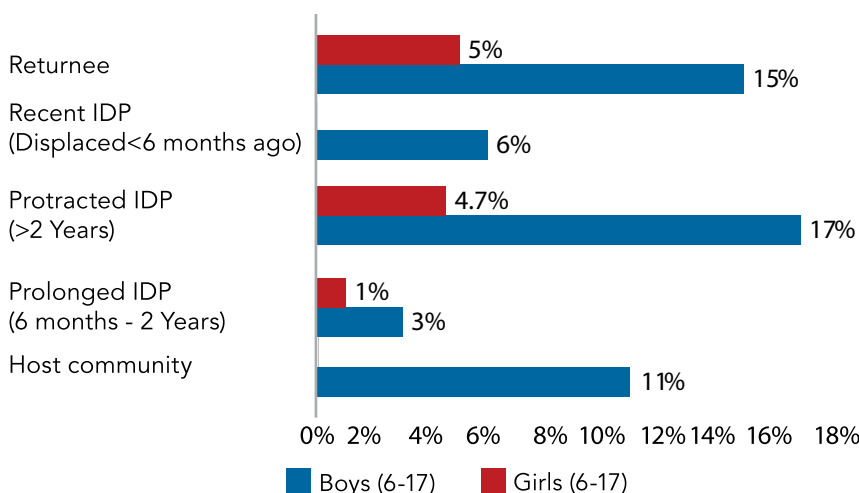


Figure 14: Prevalence of child labour by displacement status (Source: NRC MSNA)

<sup>74</sup> In almost all instances this refers to daily wage labour.

<sup>75</sup> NRC, Multi-Sector Needs Assessment, 2024-2025.

<sup>76</sup> 10,000 AFN is equivalent to USD 137.87 (as per April 14th, 2025).

<sup>77</sup> NRC, Multi-Sector Needs Assessment, 2024-2025.



**Borrowing is the most commonly used coping mechanism across all displacement statuses** – reaching as high as 100% in certain groups such as recent IDPs. Debt is seen as a way to pool risk and manage day-to-day expenses while building trust. Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) researchers found that, in 2019, lower-income residents of Herat used it to navigate financial hardship. Women face compounded vulnerability as they are largely denied access to credit and constrained by their own lack of substantial incomes.<sup>78</sup>

**A higher percentage of protracted IDP households engage in other strategies including harmful practices** such as child marriage, selling children, and migration abroad compared to host communities. Additionally, strategies such as begging, selling aid and assets are present but vary substantially by group.

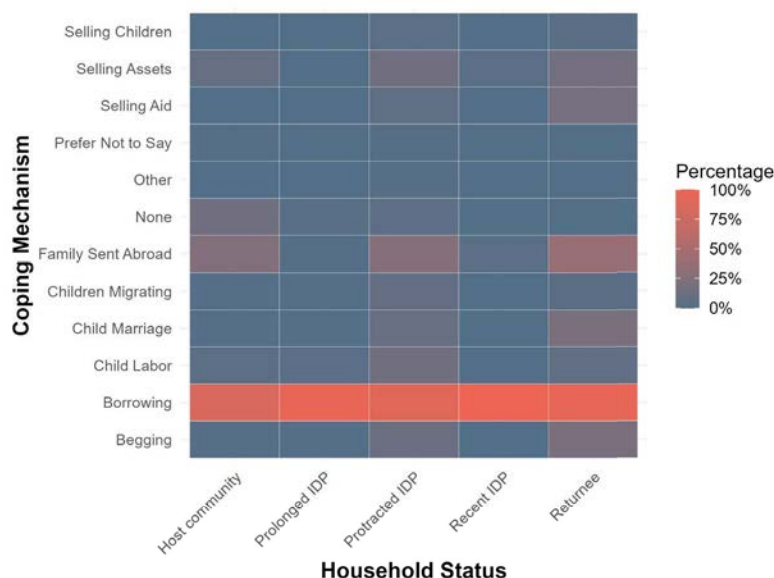


Figure 15: Coping mechanisms by displacement status. (Source: NRC MSNA)

## Housing, Land and Property (HLP)

In Herat, as with other provinces, **agreements between landlords and tenants are not always formalised**.<sup>79</sup> NRC reported that 46% of their respondents, 29% of whom were women, relied on a verbal agreement.<sup>80</sup> For returnees and IDPs living in peri-urban informal settlements, the authorities' threat of forced evictions looms. For example, in Shaidae, a returnee camp in Herat, **protracted returnees fear the authorities may forcefully close the settlement and evict its population**.<sup>81</sup> However, in discussions with DoRR, the Director mentioned there are no plans for forced evictions and that authorities will support voluntary returns.

In addition, many displaced people in Herat live in shared houses with residents and fellow displaced people, leading to mental health challenges caused or exacerbated by overcrowding. Arrangements between families are sometimes free of rent or built on debt, which may bring a sense of instability. Disputes disproportionately impact women, whose access to justice is limited.<sup>82</sup>

**Host community members reflect more positively upon their shelter conditions** than displaced populations, with over 70% of host community households rating their shelter condition as "good" or "adequate," in contrast to only 40-50% of displaced populations.

**Shared residence is most prevalent among protracted IDPs** (35%). Host communities show the lowest rate of shelter sharing (15%), showing more stable and independent living arrangements. Among those who share shelters, the most common arrangement is sharing with one additional household (ranging from 60-70%). However, a notable portion among protracted IDPs and recent IDPs, are represented by 2-3 households sharing the same shelter (25% of sharing cases). More extreme cases of four or more households are relatively rare but exist, particularly among displaced populations, representing about 5-10% of sharing arrangements.<sup>83</sup>

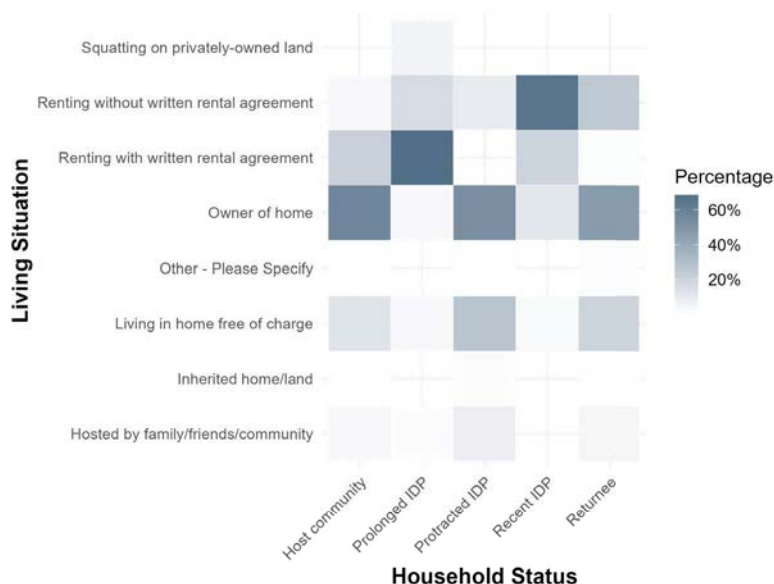


Figure 16: Living situation by displacement status (Source: NRC MSNA)

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> NRC, "Private Renters Facing Risk of Eviction," 2022.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Key informant interview, NGO staff member on 4 March 2025.

<sup>82</sup> UNHCR, "Protection Landscape for Returnee Women and Girls," Forthcoming, 25.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

There is a **strong prevalence of rented accommodation** amongst prolonged and recent IDPs. Host households (65%) reported formal housing agreements (e.g. a standard lease), while 25% operate under informal arrangements. In contrast, displaced populations – particularly protracted IDPs – have less secure housing agreements; only 35–40% report formal leases, with a larger share (perhaps 30–40%) relying on temporary, informal, or ad hoc arrangements.<sup>84</sup> UN-Habitat data complements this finding, with nearly half (46.1%) of IDP residents having no formal tenure documentation, while 29.3% hold customary tenure documents and 18.2% have rental/lease agreements.<sup>85</sup>

**Most families, regardless of displacement status, did not face major housing disputes in the past year.** However, among those who experienced problems, landlord disputes were the most common, particularly affecting about 8-10% of protracted and recent IDPs. Document proof issues were the second most prevalent concern, affecting roughly 5-7% of displaced populations, while eviction threats impacted approximately 4-6% of IDP households. Host communities reported fewer issues across all categories, with less than 3% experiencing any type of dispute.

**Rental support emerged as the dominant need for displaced populations**, with approximately 45-50% of protracted IDPs and recent IDPs identifying this as the most needed support, reflecting their higher reliance upon rented accommodation. Shelter rehabilitation and repair represents the second most pressing need, especially among host communities (around 25-30% of cases) and returnees (20-25%), highlighting issues with shelter condition maintenance.<sup>86</sup>

**Regarding land purchasing rights for IDPs and returnees, authorities have not yet clarified how to interpret the former government's legislation, after suspending the constitution, leaving municipalities unsure of how to proceed.**<sup>87</sup> The Policy and Response for Afghan Returnees grants returnees the option to temporarily resettle in government-designated plots of land or return to their location of origin.<sup>88</sup> While this nominally entitles returnees to land access, its implementation fails to account for undocumented Afghans, IDPs, and returnees with no ownership or recent ties to original land. Most promised plots lack water and electricity, as they are "isolated from urban areas, service access, and socio-economic networks."<sup>89</sup>

**Land allocation schemes continue to be a priority in conversations with authorities.** Discussions with DoRR revealed plans to set up a new land allocation site, called Dashte Taraka in Zendejan, approximately 25 kms from Herat city. This land was chosen as it is close to an industrial park, is government-held land (not privately held) and has water provision ensured through pumps. This land allocation would be planned for approximately 8,000 families. However, plans or maps for the area are lacking as DoRR is waiting for instructions from Kabul on the way forward. There is also a lack of clarity on how the municipality will support this process, and displaced households' capacity to invest in such locations. Despite this, DoRR has requested support to this land allocation site as an opportunity for durable solutions – land, shelter, and jobs – for people to go to.

## Legal Safety

Similarly to material safety, the traffic light system reflects **that significant gaps exist between IDP, returnee and host communities in terms of legal safety.** While rates of possession of documentation between host and displaced communities exhibit similar trends, returnees and IDPs reportedly face greater challenges in obtaining them. On the other hand, **displaced communities show much greater rates of family separation while simultaneously facing less access to reunification services.** Further displaced communities have limited access to judicial mechanisms, particularly IDPs who are 45 percentage points less likely to report access than host community households.

## Access to Effective Remedies and Justice

In Herat, the justice system is largely informal, with elders and community leaders serving as mediators of community councils known as shuras (or jirgas). The authorities have placed restrictions on shuras, such as diminishing the authority of the local members, hand-selecting leaders and banning women from participation.<sup>90</sup> Shuras have historically provided a forum to discuss community needs characterised as a resilient feature of Afghan rural and urban life.<sup>91</sup> However, authorities-appointed leaders are also seen by locals as extensions of the government and not fully trusted.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> UN-Habitat, Spatial Profiling Dataset, 2023.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Norwegian Refugee Council, "Resolving HLP Disputes," 2023; UNHCR, Afghanistan Multi-year Strategy 2025 – 2027, 2025.

<sup>88</sup> ACAPS, "Second Update on Taliban Decrees and Directives Relevant to the Humanitarian Response," 25 July 2024.

<sup>89</sup> Asia Displacement Solutions Platform and Samuel Hall, "Land Allocation Schemes for the Displaced in Afghanistan," June 2024.

<sup>90</sup> NRC, Resolving HLP Disputes, 2023, 1.

<sup>91</sup> AAN, "The Fate of the Village Councils: The Emirate's Effort to Institute Hegemony over Rural Afghanistan," ReliefWeb, August 2022.

## Participation in Public Affairs

Increasingly severe restrictions for women are impacting daily life. These barriers include prohibition of employment rights, freedom of movement, and access to public space without a male guardian (mahram) or hijab.<sup>92</sup> In Herat, women cannot attend Friday prayers at mosques, access parks, or enter cafes without a male guardian.<sup>93</sup>

**UNHCR outlines the compounded mental health challenges of women due to exclusion from public life** and different experiences of displacement. In the present study, female IDP participants in Herat reported a lack of awareness of services available due to the use of community leaders and landlords as intermediaries.<sup>94</sup> When men struggle with unemployment, drug addiction, or unfruitful labour abroad, women navigate institutional barriers alone. As such, restrictions on women impact entire families. Women are often barred from accessing aid due to “physical distance, the absence of a mahram, lack of information, and the lack of identity documentation.”<sup>95</sup>

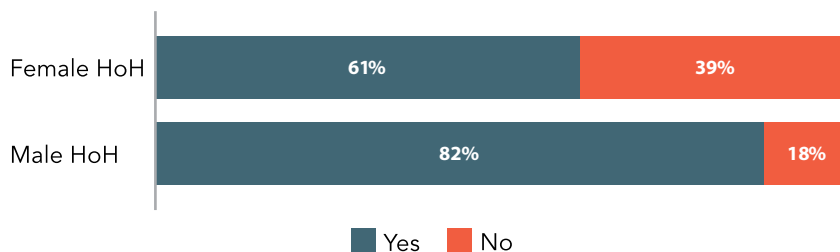


Figure 17: Familial participation in community councils for IDPs  
(Source: NRC MSNA)

Results from the UN-Habitat spatial profiling data indicate that nearly all IDPs in Herat (97%) have access to community centres or gathering places. Both male and female responses report a strong presence of Community Development Councils (CDCs), which have been banned by the authorities in 2024. Family participation in these community forums used to be relatively high, with 72% of respondents stating that their family members participate. However, there is a **substantial gender gap in participation rates**, with male-headed households showing markedly higher engagement (82.3%) compared to female-headed households (61.1%) – a difference of over 21 percentage points, highlighting either cultural or systemic barriers. Geographic origin influences participation, with IDPs from Faryab and Herat provinces showing higher engagement rates (77-78%) compared to those from Badghis (66.1%).<sup>96</sup>

## Access to Documentation

**For IDPs and returnees, access to documentation is challenging.** The Afghan national identity card, the Tazkira, is essential to accessing key services such as healthcare, education, credit, and employment, and humanitarian aid.<sup>97</sup> Undocumented returnees, nomadic communities, stateless persons, women, and children are at a particular disadvantage. Obtaining a Tazkira involves visiting one’s birthplace or family homeland, which few returnees can afford to do. Alternatively, the approval of the community leader of one’s former home may suffice, but it can be withheld if the leader was not present at the time of birth.<sup>98</sup> This challenge was resoundingly echoed by the female FGD participants, who did not receive information communicated exclusively to male community leaders and landlords.

**In Herat, returnees from Iran report that documentation continues to be difficult to obtain.** Barriers include the authorities’ newly enforced requirement of proof of residency and tax payment. The IOM reports that “many people in Herat province specifically have been unable to get an E-Tazkira” due to their inability to present required documents.<sup>99</sup> The implications for the displaced, who lack formal settlements or formal housing documents, are drastic.

According to NRC data, **there are significant variations in ID possession across displacement categories.** Paper Tazkira remains the dominant form of identification, particularly among host communities (68.4%) and returnees, while E-Tazkira shows notably high adoption among prolonged and recent IDPs (81.9% and 80% respectively).<sup>100</sup> These findings match IOM / Samuel Hall data whereby most populations in Herat held Tazkiras but lacked birth certificates, with document ownership exhibiting similar patterns to those seen in other provinces.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>92</sup> UN Women, Gender Country Profile: Afghanistan, June 2024.

<sup>93</sup> Naheed Farid and Rangita de Silva de Alwis, Afghanistan Under the Taliban: A State of “Gender Apartheid”?, January 2023.

<sup>94</sup> FGD conducted in Jebraeli.

<sup>95</sup> Global Protection Cluster, Afghanistan Protection Analysis Update: January - December 2024 (January 2025), 7.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Afghanistan Protection Cluster, Legal Identity and Civil Documentation in Afghanistan, May 2024.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> IOM, Documentation and Legal Identification in Afghanistan, 2023.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> IOM and Samuel Hall, Legal Identity Dataset, 2022.

Looking beyond current ID possession, **all displaced groups wish to obtain additional documentation**, such as passports (85.2%), and marriage certificates (43.5%). This suggests a desire for documentation that enables legal recognition and mobility. Respondents emphasized that these documents are crucial for a range of activities such as accessing employment opportunities, securing better identification in formal settings, and facilitating travel, both within and outside the country.<sup>102</sup>

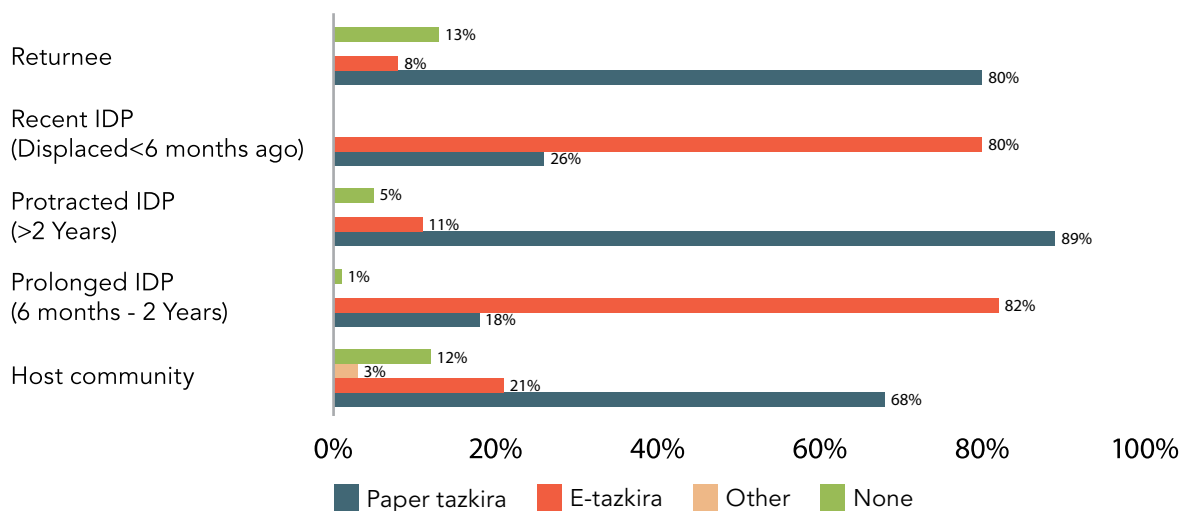


Figure 18: ID documentation by displacement status (Source: NRC MSNA)

## Family Reunification

**A key concern remains, over the last decade, the number of unaccompanied Afghan minors being deported.**<sup>103</sup> According to the Directorate of Labour and Social Affairs (DoLSA), an estimated 18,000 Afghan unaccompanied minors were deported over the last two years, with 3,000 reunited with their families.<sup>104</sup> The DoRR in Herat, similar to that of Nimroz, is focusing on family reunification with reports in November 2024 of 1,600 Afghan children reunited with their families. These efforts are supported by DoLSA.<sup>105</sup>

REACH data points to **over 40% of IDP family separations** – a rate more than five times higher than host communities and returnees (both at 7.7%). The access to reunification services presents an inverse relationship to need. Host communities, despite having the lowest rate of family separation, enjoy the highest access to reunification services (62.5%). In contrast, IDPs, who demonstrate the greatest need, have the most limited access at just 18.2%. Both returnee groups (IDP and returnees) maintain moderate access levels at 25%, suggesting some improvement in service accessibility after return but still falling well below host community levels.<sup>106</sup>

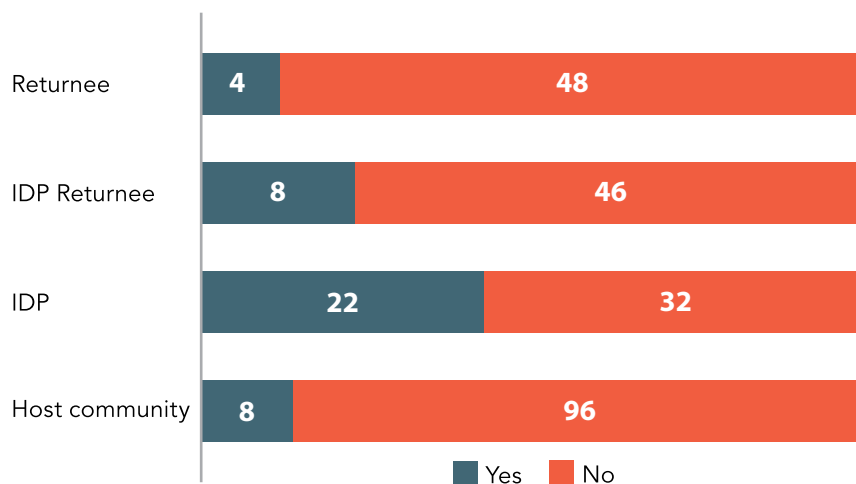


Figure 19: Separated families by displacement status (Source: REACH PARR)

<sup>102</sup> NRC, Multi-Sector Needs Assessment, 2024-2025.

<sup>103</sup> Samuel Hall and Norwegian Refugee Council, *Access to Tazkira and Other Civil Documentation in Afghanistan*, 8 November 2016.

<sup>104</sup> TOLONews, "Around 18,000 Afghan Children Expelled from Iran in Past 2 Years," TOLONews, March 2025.

<sup>105</sup> Iran International Newsroom, "Iran Deported 20,000 Afghan Children Last Year, Taliban Say," Iran International, April 13, 2024.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

Similarly to the 'Research Brief: Durable Solutions Analysis in Jalalabad/ Nangarhar', this brief serves as an example of the use of data from humanitarian and basic needs assessments, coming together to provide a joint outlook on durable solutions' priorities in Herat. **It can be used as a framework to add data and information to prioritise gaps and design programmes.** Such efforts will need to be supported by stronger data sharing between all actors – as referenced in the recommendations – notably by linking with data collected by the authorities, and triangulated with quantitative and qualitative data available from other sources such as protection monitoring and needs assessments.

Overall, the data available reveals that:

In Herat, **physical safety** is ranked highly among host community members and IDPs. There are exceptions related to crime and insecurity faced by female IDPs. Even though many host community members recognise that IDPs have arrived in the area out of necessity, others feel frustrated due to perceived inequities in aid distribution. Women, particularly IDPs, face significant movement restrictions, exposure to GBV, and limited access to education and justice. Psychological distress is widespread, particularly among IDPs, and linked to food insecurity and livelihood challenges.

In terms of **material safety**, while Herat experiences food insecurity at lower rates than the national average, significant challenges remain for both host community members and IDPs; both groups using harsh coping strategies. Education data emphasised a correlation between enrolment rates and displacement status. In addition, displaced households face additional challenges to sustainable livelihoods, with IDPs from rural areas lacking experience in urban jobs, setting them at a disadvantage for the few available opportunities. Overall, recent and prolonged IDPs are the most economically vulnerable.

In terms of **legal safety**, documentation remains a major barrier, with the Tazkira and other IDs difficult to obtain due to bureaucratic and geographic challenges, particularly for IDPs. In relation to family separation, this phenomenon is high among IDPs, yet their access to reunification services is low, highlighting a gap between what is needed and what is offered.

From an official or policy perspective, authorities interviewed for this research consider that humanitarian support has been predominant, over durable solutions activities. Results have been deemed as temporary while most of IDP and returnees' issues relate to durable solutions requirements on employment, land and shelter, and prospects for youth. These findings highlight the need to shift from short-term humanitarian assistance toward durable solutions, addressing the intersecting challenges of physical, material, and legal safety.

## Recommendations

### National and Local Authorities in Afghanistan

- Plan for inclusive urban solutions:
  - Given the numbers of displaced populations living in urban informal settlements and the levels of challenges detailed in this brief, Herat municipality must be supported to prioritise inclusive urban planning, integrating displaced populations to avoid them being pushed out or back to their areas of origin if they do not wish to return or resettle.
  - This requires a conversation to understand their objectives and needs. Such work can be coordinated between the Directorate of Refugees and Repatriation (DoRR) and the Herat Durable Solutions Working Group to ensure coordination of all actors.
- Explore the full range of possible durable solutions for authorities to work closely with humanitarian and development actors, as well as local experts and academia.
  - Displaced populations, whether internally or from abroad, should be able to choose to integrate locally, resettle in another place or move back to their areas of origin. This should include wide consultation on intent, to integrate their choice into planning and ahead of any implementation.
  - Returning to the place of origin is not the only viable option. Places of origin may no longer be suitable for relocation due to flood, drought, conflict or degradation and destruction from conflict or years of absence. Some places of origin lack services and infrastructure that IDPs have gotten used to having in Herat.
  - Relocation can be considered in areas that provide more protection from climatic shocks and access to services, with support to host communities.
- Announce and plan for comprehensive and sectoral policies to support durable solutions:
  - Include the urban development department for a comprehensive plan which helps unlock the rights of displaced Afghans and addresses their short- and long-term needs.
  - Facilitate access to and remove policy barriers to documentation access for returnees and IDPs.
  - Clarify plans and procedures for
    - ◆ Land distribution to refugee returnees.
    - ◆ Land purchasing rights for IDPs and returnees.
    - ◆ The use of taxes for investments in solutions to benefit displacement-affected communities.



- Facilitate data sharing and access to the Afghanistan Returnee Information System (ARIS) to support inclusive urban solutions.
  - Geographic distribution of returns has changed and needs to be tracked through stronger data sharing between authorities and humanitarian and basic needs actors. Such data must be triangulated by other data sources and protection monitoring data.
  - Share data in the areas of return: Partners have data from the border but missing data from the villages that people are returning to, in order to plan for their durable solution programming.
- Facilitate prompt delivery of humanitarian and basic needs assistance to IDPs and returnees through accelerating internal processes such as the signing of MoUs with organisations.
  - This will include expanding the protection space and access to protection services for men and women, particularly for recent and prolonged displaced girls and women (at a higher risk than compared to host community members), in coordination with protection actors and the Afghanistan Protection Cluster (APC).

## Donors

- Funding should reflect the need for multi-year multi-sectoral investment in durable solutions programming in priority areas such as Herat, alongside investment in PARRs.
  - Connect sources of funding for durable solutions from international financial institutions' investments with community-based contributions and diaspora financing for durable solutions activities at the local and community level.
- Provide continued investment in:
  - Area-based interventions – such as Kahdestan – where multiple actors have joined efforts to provide a range of activities.
  - Reintegration consortia to bring together international and local NGOs to provide comprehensive services for communities, women and children.
  - Protection monitoring to triangulate data and address protection gaps notably on the intersection of gender, age and displacement.
- Enable opportunities for more inclusive durable solutions planning.
  - Ensure clear engagement strategies with the authorities, along with formal risk and mitigation frameworks tailored to fragile and complex settings like Afghanistan, to better support humanitarian efforts on the ground.
  - Create linkages with the private sector to bring them into the durable solutions discussion and planning.

## Humanitarian Organisations/Durable Solutions Working Group

- Increase inclusivity in strategic discussions to ensure that the needs of both hosts and displaced are being met holistically, particularly ensuring women, people with disabilities and youth are factored in, and their specific needs are being met. That should include:
  - Engagement with communities in a co-design process, from the start of planning projects.
  - Identify existing community-led strategies (for e.g. on WASH) to inform programmatic support and external interventions; while raising awareness about negative and harmful strategies such as child marriage.
  - Establish community-based monitoring efforts to assess the impact of the support provided to IDPs, returnees and host communities, to monitor social cohesion.
  - Support community-based savings mechanisms building on good practices led by actors such as UNDP to support returnee groups through the creation, and training of saving groups, both male and female.
- Improve coordination between organisations to ensure data harmonisation to better understand the scale of the needs of IDPs and returnees – both for humanitarian and basic human needs assistance – and deliver assistance that is in line with these needs.
- Conduct a mapping of durable solutions initiatives to assess the impact of existing and previous projects with the aim of identifying initiatives that can be scalable and replicable.
  - Ensure protection-oriented activities are not deprioritised as a result of the reduced funding. Joint and mobile interventions should address the needs of displaced Afghans, notably through a strengthening of family reunification activities, legal aid, information and counselling, mine risk education and protection monitoring, and shelter opportunities for women and female-headed households.
  - Pilot and expand mobile community centres to be able to reach populations that are scattered in different parts of Herat. Offering protection and livelihoods in different areas is a priority, alongside finding flexibility to move. Agility and mobility are key dimensions to consider in the response.
- Continue to increase the understanding of and engagement with authorities in Afghanistan on durable solutions:
  - Increase policy dialogue with authorities to ensure mutual understanding and acceptance of priorities and models of intervention, at both national and provincial levels.
  - Use the durable solutions framework as a basis of engagement with authorities and partners to build a common agenda on durable solutions monitoring in the country.



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## About the Asia Displacement Solutions Platform

The Asia Displacement Solutions Platform is a joint initiative of the Danish Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, and the Norwegian Refugee Council, which aims to contribute to the development of solutions for populations affected by displacement in the region.

Drawing upon its members' operational presence throughout Asia, and its extensive advocacy networks, ADSP engages in evidence-based advocacy initiatives to support improved outcomes for displacement-affected communities. As implementing agencies, ADSP members work closely with displaced populations and the communities that host them and are therefore able to contribute a distinctive, field-led, perspective to policy and advocacy processes which can sometimes be removed from on-the-ground realities, and, the concerns of those living with and in displacement.

By coming together under the aegis of ADSP the three member agencies – global leaders in innovative policy and programming – commit to collaboration to achieve improved outcomes for displacement affected communities in the region.

[www.adsp.ngo](http://www.adsp.ngo)  
[info@adsp.ngo](mailto:info@adsp.ngo)  
✕ AsiaDSP

## About Samuel Hall

Samuel Hall is a social enterprise that conducts research, evaluates programmes, and designs policies in contexts of migration and displacement. Our approach is ethical, academically rigorous, and based on first-hand experience of complex and fragile settings.

Our research connects the voices of communities to changemakers for more inclusive societies. With offices in Afghanistan, Germany, Kenya, and Tunisia and a presence in Somalia, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates, we are based in the regions we study.

[www.samuelhall.org](http://www.samuelhall.org)  
[development@samuelhall.org](mailto:development@samuelhall.org)  
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