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Afghan experiment shows how to prevent refugee displacement

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As early as 1999, scholars questioned the "end of the refugee" cycle. History has only supported their scepticism. From 14.4 million refugees in 1990, the number increased to 21.3 million by last year.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (1990s), Burundi (early 2000s), Somalia and Afghanistan today – the "broken promises" of returns have become all too common, negative outcomes of "solutions" for refugees.

With more displacement in the world than ever before and countries embroiled in conflict grappling with chronic migration outflows, the discussion around solutions is taking a new turn.

On the occasion of World Refugee Day, the question of returns and reintegration deserves pragmatic scrutiny. How much do we know about the collective and cumulative impacts of returns?

The problem is not the "burden" – a notion used to gain political capital – that refugees impose on economies. Research has proven otherwise. Investment made towards refugees results in multiplied income for local economies, as Professor Edward Taylor illustrated in the case of Rwanda where "an additional adult refugee receiving cash aid increases annual real income in

the local economy by \$205 (Dh752) to \$253". Empowering refugees in their new homes brings economic benefits to the hosts.

We sorely lack such data on the impact of returns. Yet there have been promising changes in approach in the humanitarian sector and among governments. At Samuel Hall, we delved into this issue by addressing the "returns crisis" for Afghan refugees.

In 2016, when Pakistan – the world's second largest host country for refugees – began sending back hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees, Samuel Hall conducted two research studies for the Norwegian Refugee Council. The objective was to gauge the returnees' integration.

Our studies showed that after experiencing discrimination in Pakistan, returnees were heartened upon returning to Jalalabad in Afghanistan. But their future remained on hold with many intending to move again because of a dearth of services and support.

In the absence of reintegration, the cycle of displacement and returns continues.

The most pressing reason for further migration among returnees was poverty, coupled with barriers to jobs. These in turn lead to food insecurity and lack of health care and education.

On average, returnees are 15 per cent more food insecure than the local host populations. With one in four households lacking civil registration, employers we met identified lack of documentation as an obstacle to hiring returnees. In Jalalabad, businesses mainly hire employees with national IDs, called Tazkera. While most male adults have it, close to 60 per cent of women don't. Hence their access to education, employment and the justice system is limited.

Lack of access to education is another post-return reality that prompts re-migration of children and youth. Many refugee households cannot afford school-related expenses upon return. Child labour remains one of the most common ways for families to cope with the debt trap. School-age boys we spoke to did not attend classes as they had to earn money and because education is viewed as secondary to jobs.

Finally, the lack of a dignified space where families can restart their lives put them in limbo. Overcrowded shelters and evictions are common experiences. Amid rising prices, returnee households are thrown further into debt.

Our research provides a way forward. To begin with, post-return recovery among refugees will require better prognoses, realistic assessments of absorption capacities, and a shift in aid mechanisms. We must seek solutions through the development lens and galvanise government support and sustained funding. Focusing solely on the immediate needs of refugee returnees through "emergency humanitarian aid" entraps them in dependency.

Creating a dignified returns process with reintegration as a core tenet will require a cross-border approach that links pre-return and post-return realities. Despite the obvious need, such planning does not happen. This is because returns are not a "solution" on their own.

Fulfilling the needs of re-integration by facilitating the self-reliance of returnees is the only viable means of preventing recurring displacement. For reintegration to become a reality, we must first ask refugees what they need and work in tandem with developmental and governmental actors to fulfil them.

At Samuel Hall, we partnered with UNHCR to create a multidimensional integration index for the Reintegration Working Group in Afghanistan, the first effort of its kind to measure post-return outcomes.

Our driving query has been whether returnees fare better, worse or the same as the rest of the population in the country. Based on the responses, we look at how aid should be re-prioritised and the impact of re-channelled aid on the futures of returnees. This initiative, supported by the government of Afghanistan, can be emulated in other contexts of refugee returns, such as Somalia.

Such efforts will make us collectively more accountable and ensure that communities, organisations and governments are equipped to stop crises before they happen and to absorb shocks when they do.

In cases where displacement cannot be prevented, it will empower us to more effectively link returns with comprehensive reintegration.