

ORGANIZATION FOR POLICY RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

Current Migration Patterns & Policy Challenges in Afghanistan

History of migration patterns

- Afghanistan's migration flows have become more complex in the last 16 years then compared to previous waves of migration.
- In the recent decades, the country has witnessed 3 major waves of out-migration starting with the Soviet Invasion of 1979, followed by the Civil War (1989-1996), and the emergence of the Taliban (1994-2001).
- Post-2001 Afghanistan witnessed a mass wave of repatriation, the largest recorded in UNHCR history. Between 2002-2005, approximately 2.7 million refugees returned from Pakistan and more than 800,000 from Iran.
- Also, many from the 'wider' diaspora returned to Afghanistan to work in various fields contributing to the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Migration Waves 2005-2014

- From 2005-2014, migration waves were smaller but this changed around 2007 when:
 - (a) substantial increase in asylum applications in Europe and else where, an upward trend till seen today;
 - (b) cross-border movements started again with as many 40,000 Afghans crossing the Af-Pak border and 4000 crossing into Iran on a daily basis in search of labor;
 - (c) The number of rural-urban migration has also increased due to growing insecurity in the provinces.
- In 2015, approximately 190,000 Afghans sought asylum in the EU, though many argue this may figure may be bigger as some have not registered.

Characteristics of migrants:

- From 1979-1989:
 - Migrants were generally middle class, highly skilled, politically persecuted, or seeking family-reunification or special immigrant visas, and thus easily acquired refugee status and later citizenship in Europe, U.S., Canada, Australia and other Global North countries.
- 1989-2001:
 - Migrants were generally families living in rural Afghanistan, lower education levels, and livelihoods dependent on agriculture who became refugees in the region.
- Immediately post-2001:
 - Migrants were primarily young men in their 20s and 30s having lower education and skill levels, and entered Global North countries either as a refugee, asylum seeker or were visa overstayers.
- In 2006 there was an increase in unaccompanied minors.
- In 2008, for the first time, Afghanistan witnessed an increase in single women migrating to the Global North.

What happened?

- Insecurity - 400 districts 177 have some sort of insurgent presence.
- Provinces have fallen or are on the verge of falling to the insurgency. Emergence of ISIS and other terrorist groups.
- Increasing civilian casualties.
- The national unity government not meeting its commitments towards political, legal and security reform- two years on and NUG lacks unity/cooperation.
- Withdrawal of NATO-led ISAF forces created a vacuum in the economy, causing massive unemployment.
- The Asia Foundation's annual Survey of the Afghan People's showed that in 2016 only 29.3 percent of Afghan's said they felt the country was moving in the right direction, the lowest optimism recorded since 2004.
- Unemployment jumped from 25 percent in 2015 to 40 percent in 2016. Youth unemployment in particular accounts for 46 percent of the total unemployed population. An estimated 400,000 youth try to enter the labor market annually but face no economic opportunities.

The motivations to leave:

- While conflict-driven migration continues, many Afghan now moving abroad are doing so in search of greater economic opportunity and better living conditions.
- Key push factors driving the recent migration of Afghans to the West have included the lack of domestic employment opportunities, natural disasters, the deteriorating security situation, the fragile composition of the National Unity Government, and a withdrawal of U.S.-led NATO forces that many believe has contributed materially to Afghan's current economic, security and political crises.
- However, this list does not adequately capture the multidimensional localized factors pushing Afghans to migrate, the spectrum of motivations varies considerably.

Push Factors:

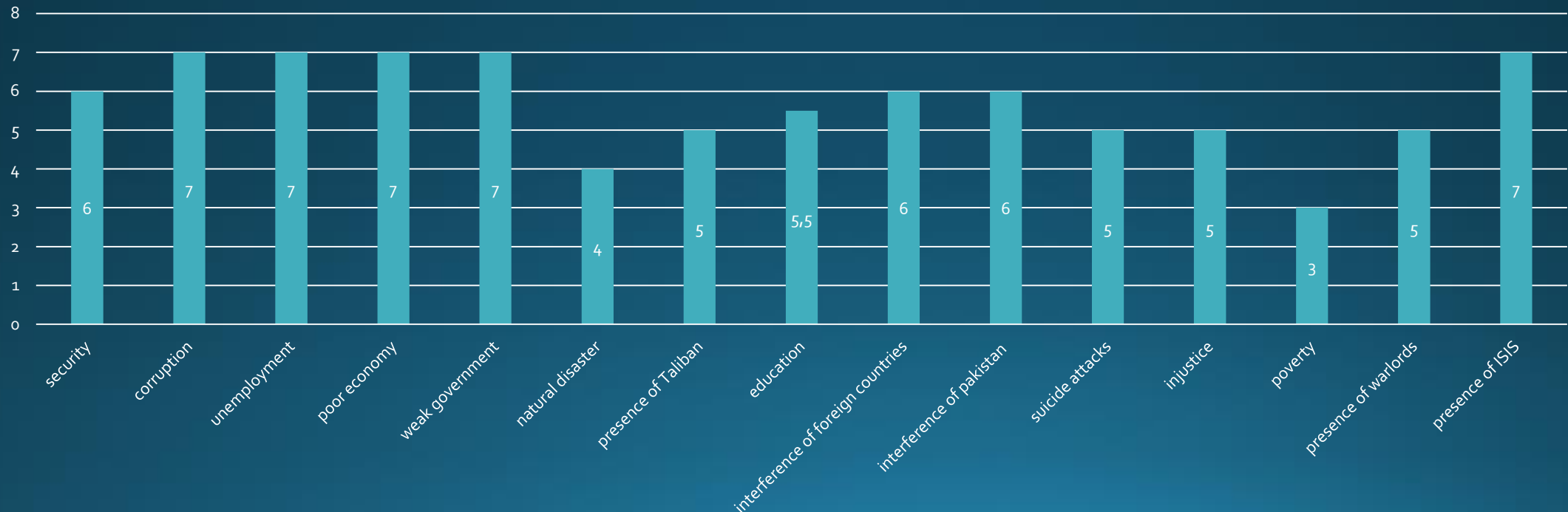
- A more nuanced perspective on push factors was provided by a roundtable expert seminar held in Kabul on 23 May 2016, by the Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies.
- Participants here described current characteristics of migrants as largely “lower-middle-class or middle-class” households, or male members of these households who have both the economic means to effect a move and access to family networks already in the West.
- Members of this category of locals are typically employed when making the decision to leave, but are uncertain regarding the future of their employment, the education of their children, and the general prospects for improving their livelihoods and sustaining their newly won lifestyles.

- Participants of the roundtable suggested that individuals from economically less-privileged households make up a comparatively smaller component of the current migration flows to the West.
- Lower-income households, particularly individuals and families residing in rural areas, does account for the bulk of migration to nearby countries in the region.
- Seminar participants indicated that migrants in this category are typically driven to leave by the level of violence in their communities followed by lack of employment opportunities.

Survey findings:

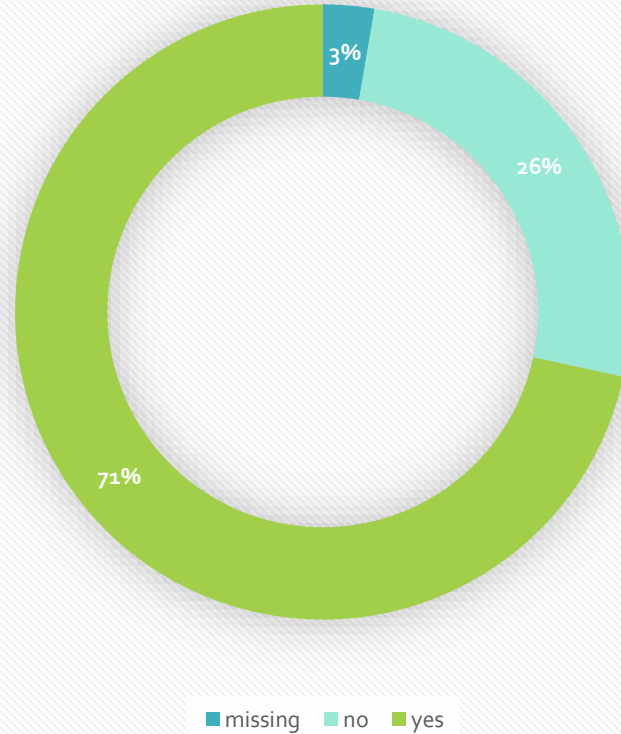
- DROPS conducted a research study between March – August 2016, collecting 74 interviews with residents of Kabul [46 male & 25 female] and within the age bracket of 26-40 yrs.

On a scale of 1 to 10 please rate the following factors you think are the biggest problems facing youth in Afghanistan



Do you know people of who have migrated?

Do you know people who have migrated to Europe?



Are you thinking of migrating?

- The majority of the respondents said YES, they were thinking of migrating and the reasons for this varied from:
 - Will migrate only through legal channels
 - Will migrate only for higher education and return back
 - Will migrate for better security and future of my family
- Those who said NO, provided the following reasons:
 - Are employed and prefer to remain in Afghanistan however they said if the situation worsens then they will 'have' to seek a way out.
 - Have already been to Europe for higher education and have now returned with no intention of leaving.
 - Are employed and earn a good wage and do not need to leave.

Pull Factors:

- In 2016 the number of Afghan arrivals to Europe dropped significantly. Some of the reasons for this included:
 - Different bi-lateral migration agreements that kicked in (like EU-Turkey), countries agreeing to close their borders to third-nation citizens, agreements between the Afghan government and different European countries to take back rejected/unregistered asylum seekers.
 - Media Awareness Campaigns launched in Afghanistan.
 - Stories from returnees shedding light on the difficulties of attaining asylum in Europe, Camp conditions, long-application procedures, and years of waiting.
 - Treatment of asylum seekers in the EU. [video]



Strategies and Policies on Migration

- Migration and refugee matters have 'only' become a frequently discussed topic at international conferences on Afghanistan.
- 2001 Bonn Conference- did not include a specific program on migration and refugees, it did call for the involvement of Afghan refugees living in Pakistan, Iran and elsewhere, as well as Afghans from the diaspora more generally in the 2004 Presidential elections.
- 2006 London Conference saw the Afghan government and the international community agree on an Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy consistent with the goals of the Afghanistan Millennium Development Goals but no specific mention to refugees or migrants.
- In 2008, a successor Afghanistan National Development Strategy was created around the three pillars of security, governance and socioeconomic development, and covered 17 sectors that included issues related to refugees, returnees and IDPs.
- 2011 London Conference (2nd Bonn Agreement) placed labor migration and the return and reintegration of refugees on the agenda of both the afghan and international community for the very first time.

Existing Strategies: Regional Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees

- In 2011, quadripartite consultations between Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and the UNHCR looked specifically at the situation of Afghan refugees in neighboring countries.
- In 2012, this was followed by an international conference discussing the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees to Support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration and Assistance to Host Countries (SSAR). At the conference, the international community endorsed the Regional Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees, the only standing regional framework for joint interventions in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan.
- The new strategy was structured around five priorities, i.e.. voluntary repatriations, access to shelter and essential services, livelihood development and food security, social and environmental protection, and capacity development.
- However, the implementation of the SSAR has been hindered by corruption and regional actors' lack of capacity.

Existing Strategies: National Labor Migration Strategy

- In 2012, Afghanistan's Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled developed a National Labor Migration Strategy.
- The strategy officially recognizes the crucial role of labor migration as a safety valve for local employment shortages, as well as its potential to promote local economic development through remittances and diaspora engagement.
- It has three core pillars, including protection of the rights of migrant workers and the provision of support services, efforts to increase the development benefits of labor migration, and improved administration of expatriate labor.
- As of February 2016, this strategy had not yet been endorsed by the cabinet. However, even if it is ultimately endorsed, the strategy will be difficult to implement if labor-migration corridors are not opened through bilateral agreements with receiving countries.

Existing Strategies: National Labor Migration Strategy

- Afghan Migration Board comprised of high-level representatives of ministries and other government authorities working in the area of migration.
- This board is chaired by the CEO Dr. Abdullah and acts as an advisory body tasked with strengthening interministerial cooperation.
- At the moment, only focuses on issues related to refugees, lacks evidenced based research, does not include CSO's working on refugee and migration issues and lacks capacity and in-depth understanding of the mixed nature of migration patterns.

Policy Challenges:

- Migration trends and the dynamics driving Afghan migrants have changed considerably over the years. In present-day Afghanistan, for example, refugee movements are no longer the primary source of Afghan migration; instead, the country is experiencing what many have termed “mixed migration” patterns.
- The scale of these mixed-migration flows and the multifaceted drivers underlying individuals’ migration decisions make it difficult to slot them into traditional policy categories.
- This will have important consequences for Afghanistan’s future development and governance, and also raises a number of questions crucial for policy design and implementation that the Afghan government has to date failed to address.

- government policy in Afghanistan has shown a lack of clear understanding regarding distinctions between refugees and migrants. This means that policy discussions within these two areas often fail to take into account the range of types of migrants, from IDPs to refugees to returnees.
- Due to the weight given to refugee- specific issues, reintegration programs in Afghanistan have to date primarily addressed the needs of registered and returning refugees.
- In the current climate, the spike in spontaneous returns by unregistered refugees and asylum seekers deported from Western countries has called the effectiveness of these models into question, and highlighted the need for more comprehensive repatriation programs.
- Currently, migrants of all categories are funneled into reintegration programs that are simply unable to meet the varying needs of different kinds of migrants. These programs fail as a result, as they are unable to address the still-extant conditions that pushed Afghan residents to leave in the first place.
- This problem has been further exacerbated by the failure to draw connections between reintegration assistance and development goals; reintegration assistance allows for fast-track integration, but does not work toward longer-term development.

Afghanistan-EU Declaration on the Joint Way Forward (JWF)

- EU signed a declaration with Afghanistan on migration cooperation on the sidelines of the Brussels Conference in October, this reflected commitment by government to facilitate the return of Afghans whose asylum applications were rejected by EU countries.
- EU members pledged 5 Billion Euros in aid to Afghanistan for the next 4 years and though all denied it was not conditioned on migration cooperation a leaked internal European commission document from March 2016 argued that leverage of development aid should be used as a positive incentive for increasing cooperation by the Afghan government on migration control including returnees.
- The JWF provides a basis for EU member states to accelerate both the voluntary and involuntary return of Afghans who have not been granted asylum.
- The JWF also opens up the door to the deportation of women and children.

- While the text stipulates a maximum of 50 non-voluntary deportees per chartered flight in the first six months after the agreement, there is no limit to the number of daily deportation flights European governments can charter to Kabul.
- The JWF operational plan – an unpublicized annex to the umbrella agreement – foresees a maximum of 10,000 returns a year- a n estimated 5,000 deportees and 5,000 voluntary returnees are expected a year. It does not specify whether the total figure refers to voluntary or forced return.
- The number of voluntary returnees from Europe picked up significantly throughout 2016, with additional returns in the first four months of 2017, reaching a total figure of over 8,000.

Future trends?

- A recent crackdown by Pakistani authorities, citing security concerns, has seen a sharp rise in both deportations and voluntary repatriations of Afghan nationals from Pakistan.
- Last year, more than 600,000 Afghan refugees left Pakistan to return to their home countries, data from the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) shows.
- For registered refugees, that number represents a more than six-fold increase from the previous year (UNHCR).
- Another half a million undocumented Afghans are expected to be repatriated from Pakistan by the end of 2017.
- Refugee and Human Rights groups say increased harassment by police and stricter restrictions on crossing and returning from Pakistan's northwestern border with Afghanistan have been responsible for the rising numbers.
- Until last year, Pakistan regularly extended the Afghan refugees' legal status in the country for at least 12 months. In June 2016, however, an extension of only six months was offered until December 31, 2016.
- This has now been extended from March 31 to end of 2017.

- Since 2017, approximately 7,776 refugees have been returned from Iran.
- Analyst project up to 2 ½ million voluntary and involuntary returnees over the next 18 months arriving to Afghanistan- an add 10 percent to the afghan population.
- Moreover, the prospects for absorbing returning refugees are further complicated by the existence of more than one million internally displaced people, a number that has significantly increased in 2016 as the insurgency intensified.
- When a country receives a large influx of refugees over a short period, significant social and economic effects are likely, particularly in a country like Afghanistan in which conflict has already aggravated government potential to ensure the most basic of services, rule of law, and employment.
- This will only lead to instances of remigration.

