

SSAR SUPPORT PLATFORM

Global Core Group Pillar 1 - 3: Summary Recommendations



PILLAR 1:

Creating conditions conducive to voluntary repatriation through community-based investments in areas of return

Three dedicated technical consultations on the three SSAR Pillars took place in 2024 between the SSAR Support Platform Global Core Group Members. The recommendations contained herein are for guidance purposes only and do not constitute formal approval, agreement, or endorsement by all parties involved.

- 1. Monitoring and Responding to Protection Risks:** Monitoring and responding to ongoing protection risks: including limitations on the access of women and girls to essential rights, including education and freedom of movement; those of vulnerable groups, including female-headed households, persons with disabilities and persons articulated under the non-return instruction; evictions; and attempted interference with activities undertaken by operational partners, are crucial to safeguard the rights and security of Afghan returnees and ensure timely support. This includes activities and predictable financing to prioritize their safety, rights, and participation in decision making, which upholds international human rights norms and standards essential for sustainable and dignified returns to Afghanistan. This necessarily entails protection mainstreaming and monitoring throughout the returnee support process.
- 2. Facilitating Access to Documentation and Legal Support for Returnees:** Provision of legal aid and support to help returnees obtain or recover civil documentation is essential for their integration and empowerment as it ensures legal identity and helps reduce barriers to accessing services. This includes guiding individuals through legal processes and advocating for their rights, ensuring they can access services such as healthcare, education, and employment.
- 3. Investing in Comprehensive Basic Human Needs Support Including Livelihoods:** Crucial for stability in vulnerable communities, key investments in areas of return include food security, housing and land, health, education, and economic opportunities for returnees and host communities. This involves supporting entrepreneurship, improving market access, and offering Sharia-compliant microfinance. Addressing the challenges faced by vulnerable groups, such as female-headed households and persons with disabilities, requires a holistic approach which engenders the centrality of protection. This includes access to healthcare, including mental health and psychosocial support, child protection and prevention of and response to gender-based-violence, including economic support and access to safe spaces and women's empowerment programs. Additionally, harnessing digital payments and services can enable to integration of returnees into local economies beyond traditional sectors, creating scalable and efficient economic opportunities, contributing to long-term economic stability and integration.

- 4. Promoting Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment:** Women in Afghanistan face systemic barriers that risks erasing their participation in economic and social spheres. Prioritizing initiatives that empower women and girls through education, access to financial resources, and supporting women-led businesses is essential for sustainable socio-economic development and successful reintegration in Afghanistan. This involves advocating for the removal of the bans which target women and girls, promoting women's rights, and prioritizing their meaningful participation in socio-economic and community development to enhance their agency and harnessing their potential as agents of change within their families and communities, including through Community Outreach Volunteer (COV) programmes)
- 5. Enable Flexible and Evidence-Based Programming for Disaster Resilience, Climate Adaptation, and Sustainable Development:** Critical to the humanitarian response, this approach allows for swift responses to emergencies, ensuring projects quickly adapt to provide life-saving assistance. Enhancing disaster resilience, climate adaptation, and sustainable development is also essential. This involves integrating disaster risk reduction and climate resilience into basic human needs' programming, implementing digital solutions for financial transactions, and supporting key sectors like agriculture and textiles. Investing in infrastructure, including housing, to enhance resilience to natural disasters is vital given Afghanistan's vulnerability to climate change. Equally, improving data collection and monitoring enables accurate identification of needs, and evidence-base for resource allocation, ensuring sustainable, resilient development, protecting vulnerable populations, and promoting long-term economic and environmental stability. and promoting long-term economic and environmental stability.
- 6. Understanding the Impact of Forced Displacement and Enhancing Social Cohesion:** To design effective interventions for displaced persons, host communities, and returnee populations, it is essential to conduct comprehensive assessments that evaluate the impact of forced displacement on social cohesion. This necessitates gathering data on how displacement affects social ties, economic conditions, and community dynamics. Understanding these impacts enables all stakeholders to tailor their approaches to reinforce social cohesion and mitigate adverse effects. Ensuring all stakeholders have a mutual understanding of social cohesion—which includes shared purpose, trust, and cooperation within and between groups, and between people and the state—is crucial.
- 7. Promoting Inclusive and Community-Driven Basic Human Needs Assistance:** To foster sustainable and effective basic human needs' assistance in Afghanistan, advocating for and implementing community-driven approaches in collaboration with civil society that involve participatory decision-making and multi-sectoral investments are crucial – emphasizing local ownership, accountability, and inclusion of returnees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and host communities in planning and implementation processes. Strengthening the representation of returnees in community decision-making bodies ensures their voices are heard, contributing to successful reintegration. Engaging in inclusive outreach, community dialogues, and partnerships with local organizations builds trust, strengthens community ties, and ensures interventions are culturally sensitive and responsive to local needs.
- 8. Promote a Supportive Policy Environment and Engagement for Sustainable Reintegration:** Ensuring a principled, ethical, and human rights focused and principled approach to engagement with the de facto authorities in Afghanistan, together with Iran and Pakistan, is another valuable tool to help facilitate successful reintegration of returnees. This necessitates high-level coordination to address critical issues like access to or recovery of civil documentation, legal aid, housing and property rights, and eviction prevention and response, and imparting an understanding of their responsibilities as duty bearers in supporting returnees, to create an enabling environment for their reintegration. Furthermore, conditioning support for long-term investment on concrete policy changes promotes accountability and sustainability, encouraging governance reforms that align with international norms.

PILLAR 2:

Building Afghan refugee capital based on livelihood opportunities in Afghanistan in order to facilitate sustainable return and reintegration

- 1. Expanding Comprehensive Vocational and Digital Skills Training for Sustainable Employment:** Expand and enhance vocational and digital skills training for refugees should align with labor market demands. This should include a focus on advanced skills in trades such as mechanical skills, mobile repair, and modern agriculture, and integrate digital literacy to enable sustainable employment or entrepreneurship. An emphasis on digital skills training for youth and women serves to enable their inclusion in the digital economy. This should include engaging families to support women's participation and incorporate confidence-building to overcome psychological and cultural barriers. Successful models from Iran and Pakistan should be replicated in Afghanistan to support reintegration and economic stability.
- 2. Linking Training to Employment Opportunities:** To maximize the impact of vocational training programs, it is essential to establish clear and practical pathways from training to employment. This involves creating partnerships with businesses, industry leaders, and local employment agencies to facilitate job placements and internships for trainees. Developing a centralized job portal specifically tailored to Afghan returnees can further bridge the gap between training and employment. This platform should include features such as job matching, resume building, and options for remote or freelance work. Additionally, incorporating job readiness training, such as interview preparation and workplace etiquette, into vocational programs can enhance participants' employability.
- 3. Enhancing Economic Inclusion and Financial Access:** Economic inclusion is vital for the sustainable development of refugee, returnee communities and the host countries. Ensuring access to financial services such as bank accounts, microfinance, and business loans is fundamental. Support for entrepreneurship through training, mentoring, business incubators, as well as targeted grants, loans and microfinance, can foster self-employment and business creation. Collaborating with financial institutions to offer affordable credit and tailored financial products will empower refugees and returnees to invest in their futures and secure sustainable incomes. Additionally, microfinance initiatives should focus on a gender-positive approach, offering tailored financial products for women and ensuring robust regulation to protect borrowers.
- 4. Promoting Synergy in Microfinance Initiatives:** To optimize the impact of microfinance initiatives, it is essential to focus on creating synergies among existing models, rather than launching new stand-alone projects, the sector needs consolidation. This involves focusing on successful microfinance projects and encouraging collaboration among providers to share best practices, resources, and expertise. By building on proven models and scaling up successful initiatives, the microfinance sector can offer more effective and cohesive services to borrowers. Strengthening regulatory oversight and ensuring that institutions adhere to ethical lending practices will also enhance the sustainability of microfinance programs. This unified approach will improve financial inclusion, reduce duplication of efforts between partners, and ensure that resources are used efficiently.
- 5. Advocacy for Certificate Recognition, Policy Reforms, and Legal Rights:** Engage in comprehensive advocacy efforts to ensure that vocational training certificates and educational qualifications obtained by refugees in Iran and Pakistan are recognized in both host countries and in Afghanistan, facilitating the reintegration of returnees into the job market and ensuring their skills are appropriately valued. This advocacy should also focus on securing policy reforms that grant refugees the legal right to work and inclusion in national social protection schemes, such as health insurance and unemployment benefits. Promoting gender equality through policies that offer equal opportunities for women and girls is crucial, to enhance the integration and economic stability of refugees and returnees.

- 6. Promotion of Cross-Border Coordination and Integration:** Develop and strengthen cross-border coordination mechanisms between Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan to ensure that skills learned by Afghan refugees can be effectively utilized upon their return to Afghanistan. This should include shared platforms for job matching, recognition of skills, and reintegration programs that bridge the gap between the respective countries.
- 7. Supporting Returnees and Host Communities for Long-Term Sustainability:** To support returnees and ease the burden on host communities, expanding vocational training in agricultural techniques, masonry, and construction is essential. This training will aid in reintegration and boost participation in local projects, fostering economic development. Targeted investments in key returnee areas should address local needs and create sustainable livelihoods for both returnees and hosts. Long-term self-reliance can be achieved by investing in crop diversification, livestock development, and small business creation. Supporting farmers who have abandoned poppy cultivation promoting alternative livelihoods through seeds, financial incentives, and market development is crucial for improving food security and income. These efforts will reduce the strain on host communities and promote a more resilient, self-reliant economy.
- 8. Enhancing Agricultural Resilience and Value Chains in Afghanistan:** Investing in agricultural programs that promote sustainable livelihoods and climate resilience is vital for Afghanistan's economic stability and food security. These programs should enhance agricultural value chains and address supply chain disruptions by improving infrastructure such as irrigation systems, storage facilities, and transportation networks. Emphasizing climate-smart practices like drought-resistant crops and flood defenses will boost resilience against extreme weather. Strengthening farmer-market linkages through greenhouse farming and agro-processing will increase productivity and create jobs. Improving market access by enhancing transportation, establishing cooperatives, and simplifying trade processes will facilitate efficient distribution of agricultural products.
- 9. Assess and Address the Drop in Demand:** Assessing the current drop in demand is crucial to understand the economic stagnation in Afghanistan. The decline in consumer spending, rising unemployment, and reduced investment have created a cycle that impedes recovery. Targeted interventions are needed to stimulate demand, such as fiscal measures like subsidies or cash transfers to boost consumer spending and incentives for businesses to invest in new products. Restoring economic confidence through stabilizing financial markets and ensuring credit availability is also essential. Addressing these issues can help revive economic activity, leading to gradual recovery and stabilization of the Afghan economy to facilitate return.
- 10. Ensuring Strengthening Monitoring, Evaluation, and Collaborative Approaches:** Implementing strong monitoring and evaluation frameworks is crucial for assessing and improving programs for refugees and returnees. This includes setting clear objectives, establishing tracking systems, and reporting on outcomes like employment rates and business success. Regular accountability mechanisms ensure transparency and efficient resource use. Concurrently, enhancing inter-agency collaboration and knowledge sharing is vital. Creating platforms for information exchange and joint planning will optimize resource allocation and improve intervention targeting. Better data collection on returnee locations, agricultural productivity, and climate impacts will support informed decision-making and investment prioritization.

PILLAR 3:

Enhanced support for refugee hosting communities, preserving the protection space in host countries and resettlement in third countries

- 1. Strengthen Protection and Advocacy for Afghan Refugees:** Prioritize protection and advocacy to ensure Afghan refugees and asylum seekers, and other persons with international protection needs, can access basic services, including education, healthcare, and legal documentation. Strengthening protection spaces requires concerted advocacy with host governments and key stakeholders, facilitating access to reliable information, registration/asylum, and legal aid services to secure essential civil documentation, such as identification cards or birth certificates. This documentation not only upholds their legal rights but also eases their access to critical resources, contributing to more stable and dignified lives in host countries. These efforts would be supported by enhanced data availability and accuracy as well as the implementation of data-driven projects.
- 2. Combat Anti-Refugee Sentiment:** Addressing the stigma and discrimination faced by Afghan refugees requires dedicated public awareness campaigns to reshape community perceptions and foster inclusivity. These campaigns should highlight the positive contributions Afghan refugees make to society, from cultural enrichment to labour and service. By highlighting these contributions, host communities can recognize the value refugees bring, fostering a sense of solidarity and mutual respect. Working with local media, community leaders, and civil society organizations can amplify these messages, cultivating a more supportive environment for Afghan refugees' inclusion and reducing tensions between refugees and their hosts.
- 3. Promote Health Access and Social Cohesion:** Investing in healthcare infrastructure in host countries will help address the health needs of both Afghan refugees and local populations, reducing strain on existing facilities. Quality healthcare access, particularly for vulnerable groups such as children and the elderly, is essential for maintaining public health standards. Additionally, fostering social cohesion through shared resources, such as healthcare centres and schools, can reduce community tensions. Social cohesion initiatives that involve both refugees and host community members build understanding and empathy, fostering more harmonious and supportive environments.
- 4. Support Mental Health Services for Refugees:** The mental health needs of Afghan refugees, many of whom have faced trauma, displacement, and loss, are significant. Expanding accessible mental health and psychosocial support services through community-based clinics and mobile units is essential for helping refugees process their experiences and build resilience. Providing culturally sensitive services that recognize the specific needs and experiences of Afghan refugees will increase utilization and effectiveness. Access to trauma counselling, stress management, and community support programmes are vital components of a holistic approach to their mental well-being.
- 5. Ensure Inclusive and Accessible Education:** Ensuring that Afghan children and youth have access to quality education, regardless of their legal status, is crucial for their development and future contributions to society. Advocating for policies that promote inclusive education, particularly tuition-free options, will remove significant barriers and encourage Afghan families to prioritize schooling for their children. An emphasis on gender equity in education will help bridge gaps and ensure Afghan girls receive equal learning opportunities. Expanding the integration of psychosocial support, through the provision of basic training for teachers can improve educational outcomes from displaced Afghan children. Additional funding support for schools with high concentrations of Afghan students is necessary to ease strains on local education systems, benefiting both refugee and host community students.

- 6. Expand Vocational and Skills Development Programs:** Investing in skill-building programmes tailored to refugees' needs is vital for long-term stability and potential reintegration. Expanding vocational training for Afghan refugees, with a particular focus on women and girls, provides them with essential skills for job markets within host countries and for reintegration in Afghanistan in the case of return. These programmes should align with local labour market demands, enabling refugees to fill in-demand roles and supporting host economies. Focused skill-building not only equips refugees for self-reliance but also empowers them with valuable expertise for diverse employment opportunities.
- 7. Debt Relief and Financial Assistance:** Afghan refugees often face significant financial hardship, particularly due to restrictions on legal employment and limited income sources. Debt relief initiatives, microfinance programmes, and financial aid can alleviate these burdens by providing accessible credit options and financial support. Targeted subsidies for essential goods like food, housing, and healthcare can further mitigate economic stress, benefiting both refugees and local populations facing economic challenges. These measures are integral to reducing the financial vulnerability of Afghan refugees and empowering them to make choices that support their well-being and independence.
- 8. Foster Regional Coordination and Collaborative Efforts:** Enhanced regional cooperation between Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan is key to managing the refugee situation effectively. Cross-border partnerships can facilitate resource and information sharing, streamline health and protection services, and address shared challenges. Support regional dialogue to ensure a phased and voluntary approach to returns that facilitate reintegration in Afghanistan. This regional approach can also improve coordination of health monitoring, registration, and provision of assistance. Furthermore, strengthening multi-agency collaboration among UN agencies, international and national non-governmental organizations, and local authorities can lead to more efficient resource allocation and response efforts, creating a cohesive support structure that maximizes impact and ensures rapid service delivery.
- 9. Advance Durable Solutions and Pathways for Integration:** Promoting durable solutions, such as increased resettlement quotas and complementary pathways (e.g., family reunification, educational scholarships, and labour migration programmes), offers Afghan refugees stable, long-term options for building new lives. Encouraging host countries to consider long-term residency or integration pathways for refugees with significant social or economic ties is another essential component of this approach. Meanwhile, for those who choose to voluntarily return to Afghanistan, programmes that prepare returnees with skills and support networks contribute to sustainable reintegration and stability within their communities.
- 10. Maintain Flexibility with Ongoing Monitoring and Contingency Planning:** Adapting refugee response programmes based on regular assessments is vital to meeting refugees' evolving needs. Flexible, responsive planning enables rapid adjustments to services as new refugee arrivals, returns, or health crises arise. Emergency preparedness plans should include provisions for sudden surges in refugee and returnee populations, ensuring systems are in place to address health and safety needs efficiently. Transparent information sharing on refugee rights, available services, and potential integration pathways empowers refugees with the knowledge they need to navigate these complex situations, fostering stability and informed decision-making.