



Afghanistan. Family portrait of Niyaz, an internally displaced weaver in Afghanistan, with her two children. © UNHCR Sebastian Rich | 2017

Afghanistan

Restoring Livelihoods for IDPs and Displacement-Affected Communities

1. Context

The Support Afghanistan Livelihoods and Mobility (SALAM) project was set up by UNDP, ILO and UNHCR in 2016 following a request from the Government of Afghanistan for international support for an unanticipated return of some 3 million refugees from neighbouring Pakistan over a six-month period.¹

Afghanistan has faced four decades of displacement due to conflict and violence, disasters linked to drought, flooding, avalanches and earthquakes, and

development projects.² During the first half of 2019, 213,000 people from all but three of the country's 34 provinces were displaced by conflict and violence.³ The previous year, more than 371,000 people were forced to leave their homes due to drought, adding to the some 2.6 million persons internally displaced previously by conflict.⁴ In addition, some seven million Afghan refugees returned home from neighbouring countries between 2002 and 2017,⁵ many becoming internally displaced persons (IDPs) themselves as they fled drought, conflict and unviable conditions in their areas of origin.

The Government of Afghanistan has shown a strong political commitment to finding durable solutions to displacement. In 2014, it adopted a comprehensive National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons⁶ and in 2016 it established the Displacement and Returnee Executive Committee to address the needs of the displaced and returnees. Durable solutions for displacement also feature prominently in the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework 2017-2021.⁷ Ongoing conflict has long been a significant and constant impediment to sustainable return, jeopardizing years of development gains made under the 2001 Bonn Agreement.⁸

2. Description of the practice

Recognizing that Afghan returnees would face significant integration challenges, notably in re-establishing sustainable livelihoods,⁹ the three UN agencies joined together to develop an innovative project, led by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MOLSA), that sought to generate new employment and international labour migration opportunities even amidst ongoing crises and protracted conflict. The project included IDPs, host communities, women, youth and other vulnerable groups selected by UNHCR, recognizing the importance of inclusion in protracted conflict environments.

Early on, the project was forced to adapt to changing operational conditions, which in turn resulted in the project's theory of change and planned activities no longer reflecting realistic objectives. The original SALAM Framework project signed with the Government of Afghanistan in 2016 covered Kabul and five selected provinces with a budget of USD 120 million.¹⁰ Ultimately, 370,000 registered refugees returned home from Pakistan in 2016, a 12-year high,¹¹ but less than originally anticipated. Operational constraints also included limited capacity

of staff and staff turnover within the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, including at field level, thereby hindering the provision of quality services to returnees. Amidst this changing operational environment, only EUR 4.5 million in donations from the Government of Finland materialized.

The SALAM project opted to significantly downsize, choosing to focus on one province, Nangahar, with the highest number of returnees according to UNHCR data. Led by UNDP, the project originally sought to focus on local economic development as a means of creating jobs for returnees and supporting sustainable solutions in the province of Nangahar. However, to align with the donor's priorities and build on UNHCR's experience with job placement in the private sector,¹² the project's emphasis shifted to job training and placement. Based on a pre-existing market analysis conducted by Action Aid and UNHCR, UNDP identified the most promising higher-paying jobs and then contracted out employment training and job placement to a private-sector company. After being trained, the SALAM project provided returnees and IDPs with incentives to entice private businesses to participate in the programme. By December 2019, some 1,200 forcibly displaced Afghans were either employed in the private sector or had started their own businesses. This included 216 IDPs who had benefited from skills training, internships or job placement.¹³ Despite the project closing at the end of 2019, the model has inspired similar projects in Afghanistan.¹⁴

Competing and overlapping projects developed with international partners also complicated cooperation between government officials and the SALAM project. Led by ILO, SALAM collaborated with MOLSA to formalize international labour migration pathways for skilled Afghan workers to the Gulf region by negotiating bilateral agreements. Although political challenges precluded the implementation of those agreements, MOLSA did finalize a national labour migration strategy and policy. However, in 2017, the World Bank established

a partnership with MOLSA to develop a similar project, called Placing Labor Abroad, Connecting to Employment Domestically and Addressing the Needs of Youth Project (PLACED), with a USD 50 million grant from the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund¹⁵. Like SALAM, it intended to send labour migrants to the United Arab Emirates based on a bilateral agreement, signed in May 2018 with ILO technical assistance, and to establish test programmes in Kabul to develop a national employment service system. Thus, PLACED resulted in a macroeconomics-centric labour migration strategy¹⁶ that ran in parallel to SALAM's strategy that focused on human rights and on finding solutions for displacement.

3. Why this is a good example to share

The SALAM project, while smaller than first envisioned, tested how diverse actors can work at the nexus between humanitarian and development action. The SALAM project took a risk by tackling the perennial challenge of creating long-term employment opportunities

for IDPs, refugee returnees and host communities amidst continued insecurity.¹⁷ While the operational context changed in ways that ultimately hindered the project's full potential, it showed that humanitarian and development actors can come together in ways that support national leadership by building on each partner's respective areas of technical expertise.

The project also highlights the practice of including assistance for IDPs within area-based programmes designed to assist refugees and host communities with other specific needs. For displaced persons, such programmes need to provide skills training as well as help to establish and build relationships with potential employers, who generally prefer to hire people they already know and trust.¹⁸

Finally, the example underscores the critical importance of investing in collaborative relationships between government and operational partners to avoid the negative consequences of continuous staff turnover and insufficient institutional memory that can significantly delay project implementation and result in duplication.



Afghanistan. "I have developed my embroidery skills a lot. I have proven not only to my relatives but all others that displacement and disability do not have to be barriers for a person to be successful in life. Now I can stand as a symbol for other women living with a disability."
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Endnotes

- 1 M Ilyas Khan, 'The Reverse Exodus of Pakistan's Afghan Refugees' BBC News (28 August 2016) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37163857>> accessed 15 January 2020.
- 2 Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, 'National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons' 14 <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/national_idp_policy_-_final_-_english_0.pdf> accessed 7 January 2020.
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- 4 IDMC, 'Global Report on Internal Displacement 2019' 36–37 <<http://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/2019-IDMC-GRID.pdf>> accessed 15 January 2020.
- 5 Thea Yde-Jensen and others, *Afghanistan's Displaced People: A Socio-Economic Profile, 2013-2014* (World Bank 2018) 5 <<http://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/book/10.1596/30267>> accessed 15 January 2020.
- 6 Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (n 2).
- 7 Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 'Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF) 2017 to 2021' 7 <<http://extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/afg148215.pdf>> accessed 7 January 2020.
- 8 UN Security Council and UN General Assembly, 'Special Report on the Strategic Review of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan - Report of the Secretary General' (United Nations 2017) A/72/312–S/2017/696 para 9 <<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1723365.pdf>> accessed 15 January 2020.
- 9 Ariane Rummery, 'Tough Choices for Afghan Refugees Returning Home after Years in Exile' (UNHCR 2017) <<https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2017/2/589453557/tough-choices-afghan-refugees-returning-home-years-exile.html>> accessed 15 January 2020.
- 10 IOM was originally going to participate in the SALAM project, but it later developed a separate return and reintegration project when it received a grant from the European Union.
- 11 Rummery (n 9).
- 12 The UNHCR job placement model through apprenticeship in the private sector pays incentives (not salaries) to beneficiaries to which private businesses incrementally contribute, with a one-year contract following the apprenticeship.
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- 14 P Madhava Rao, 'Final External Evaluation Report: Support Afghanistan Livelihoods and Mobility (SALAM)' (Government of Afghanistan and UNDP Afghanistan 2020) 8.
- 15 World Bank, 'Afghanistan Placing Labor Abroad, Connecting to Employment Domestically and Addressing the Needs of Youth Project (P161728)' (World Bank 2018) Project Information Document/ Integrated Safeguards Data Sheet (PID/ISDS) PID/ISDSC21800 <<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/108071537469029255/pdf/Concept-Project-Information-Documents-Integrated-Safeguards-Data-Sheet-Afghanistan-Placing-Labor-Abroad-Connecting-to-Employment-Domestically-and-Addressing.pdf>> accessed 16 January 2020.
- 16 Robert Holzmann, 'Managed Labor Migration: Exploring Employment and Growth Opportunities for Afghanistan'.
- 17 Sue Emmott, 'Support Afghanistan Livelihoods and Mobility (SALAM) Mid-Term Evaluation Report' 14.
- 18 *ibid* 10.