



What Next for Afghanistan?

Beyond 2014: Afghan voices and vision

International Rescue Committee | APRIL 2014





In memory of humanitarian workers killed in Afghanistan

As we seek to ensure a brighter future for the Afghan people, we wish to pay tribute to the 294 men and women of the humanitarian aid community who have lost their lives in Afghanistan since 2002. A total of 257 of them were Afghans; the remainder were expatriates. Ten were staff members of the International Rescue Committee. They all died while striving to make life better for the people of Afghanistan. By continuing their work, we honor their memory.

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FRONT AND BACK COVERS: Car and truck traffic backs up near an intersection in Kabul, May 2013.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Boys peer through broken windows in Logar province, 2002.

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Executive summary

Transitions are not new to Afghanistan, but 2014 is a crucial year for the country, which could move toward a more peaceful, self-sufficient future—or experience enormous setbacks.

In Afghanistan, 2014 is a year of major transitions. Following the presidential elections, a new government will chart the course for the Afghan people. For the first time in 12 years, Afghanistan's national security forces will take full responsibility for providing protection and security for the country. Afghanistan's economic growth is declining, as international funding, a substantial source of the country's income, is dropping sharply. In this time of uncertainty, violent conflict is rising.

This pivotal year is also a transition for the international community in Afghanistan. International forces, which once numbered more than 132,000, plan to complete their withdrawal by December 2014. Donors are wavering about their long-term commitments; aid funding has already been cut, and deeply. Insecurity makes aid work difficult and dangerous. Poor coordination and a focus on security objectives have hindered past approaches to aid. International donors and the Afghan people are frustrated that the heavy investment in the country has not yielded greater improvements in the quality of life.

Despite challenges, there have been positive changes in Afghanistan. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) and other organizations have worked alongside Afghans throughout 30 years of conflicts and disasters. The IRC works in partnership with Afghans in over 4,000 villages across nine provinces on programs that meet urgent and longer-term needs. Over the decades, we have come to know the Afghan people as resilient, capable, and deeply committed to the future of their country.

To better gauge Afghans' hopes and fears regarding the future of the country, IRC researchers consulted 136 of the 650 Afghans who serve on our staff across the country. This report highlights their observations and outlines recommendations for international engagement in Afghanistan beyond 2014.

IRC staff members told us that in their communities, substantial gains have been made using a community-based, grassroots approach to aid. With this approach, humanitarian and development agencies and organizations work with Afghan communities, building trust, identifying needs, and, where appropriate and feasible, strengthening the ability of local people and the government of Afghanistan¹ to meet their goals. Working with local community leaders in districts and villages across the country, international organizations are able to deliver emergency assistance, provide education and health services, improve infrastructure, and help the Afghan people create livelihood and income generating opportunities.

IRC staff members also talked about the serious security risks facing Afghans and humanitarian workers in the country. They said that the only way to reach communities in need is to be impartial and independent, building trust with Afghan people. When communities accept aid agencies, it is easier to negotiate access and mitigate risks to aid workers. In fact, as international security forces draw down, access for aid agencies in some areas of Afghanistan may very well increase. The military withdrawal, coupled with local acceptance efforts, may create an opening for a new kind of long-term engagement with the Afghan people.

Millions of Afghans are in need of support. This landlocked country with unforgiving terrain and recurrent natural disasters was already one of the poorest countries in the world. Now, as armed conflict and insecurity have escalated, even more Afghans need assistance. More than 650,000 Afghans are displaced within the country because of conflict, and millions of refugees live in neighboring countries. A total of 9 million Afghans need humanitarian assistance; of these 5 million need lifesaving support such as food, housing, and emergency medical care. For example, large numbers of Afghans need

From David Miliband, IRC PRESIDENT & CEO

“The IRC has a long history of supporting the Afghan people. The trust and relationships we have built over 30 years—now stretching to more than 4,000 villages across the country—represent hard-won gains. The end of international military operations in Afghanistan is the time to redouble humanitarian efforts, not scale them back. History has clear lessons about the importance of non-military engagement and support for Afghanistan and its people. There are proven models of local, community-led intervention that deliver economic and social gains to the Afghan people. The IRC's commitment is to work for the good of the Afghan people at this critical moment in their country's history. We hope the international community will do the same.”

treatment for war wounds and millions do not have access to enough food. Finally, 4 million out of the 9 million Afghans in need have more chronic, long-term needs that include safety from conflict, steady work, and access to health care.

With humanitarian needs so enormous, the question now is whether the international military drawdown signals the end of investment and partnership with the Afghan people. We cannot allow this to happen. Afghans need our partnership to protect and build on the fragile gains we have made together. Donors and aid organizations must make better use of limited resources by helping communities at the local level to address urgent needs in health, shelter, food security, and protection of the vulnerable, as well as to go on building for the future. It would be a shocking and unacceptable waste of all that has been achieved not to seize the opportunity to stand by the Afghan people now. That is what the IRC will do, and we call on others to do the same. ■

THE IRC QUESTIONNAIRE

Key findings of the IRC questionnaire

To learn about Afghans' hopes and fears related to the transitions of 2014, IRC researchers contacted Afghan colleagues from nine provinces in the country.

Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with a dozen staff. Additionally, 124 Afghan staff members shared their opinions through a questionnaire. The IRC's staff members have deep experience in the country: over 99 percent are Afghan.

Our staff members shared their vast knowledge with IRC researchers about their approach to aid work. The IRC also asked members of our staff to reflect on the hopes and fears of Afghans in communities where we work. Our staff members said that Afghans are fearful of insecurity and anxious about the effects of the political and economic transitions on their communities, especially on income generation and education. Despite their concerns, they explained that there have been gains at the community level thanks to the IRC and others and they believe that this work can continue—with the support of the international community.

Key ideas and quotes from the interviews can be found throughout this report.

The IRC recommends:

- › **Make a long-term commitment to the people of Afghanistan:** The international community must help the Afghan people build on successes. This will require donors to provide continued aid funding, and humanitarian and development organizations to continue to provide lifesaving and longer-term assistance to those in need.
- › **Support millions in need by making high-return investments at the local level:** With less financial assistance available for Afghanistan, donors and the Afghan government must provide targeted, strategic investments in effective community-based programs.
- › **Break the cycle of displacement:** Donors, humanitarian organizations and the government must invest in areas where people return in large numbers so that people displaced within Afghanistan, and refugees in Pakistan and Iran, can come home and stay home. Countries must offer refuge, resettlement, and asylum to vulnerable Afghans who cannot yet safely return home.
- › **Respond quickly to lifesaving and life-building needs:** The international community must fully fund the humanitarian appeal for Afghanistan and also provide longer-term funding to meet the increasing needs of millions of Afghans.
- › **Use limited resources effectively:** Far more needs to be accomplished with less funding. Aid agencies must coordinate and share information so that aid reaches all in need. While program monitoring is essential, donors should be flexible about what is required. They should ensure that aid is impartial, and they should eliminate partner-vetting requirements that could compromise staff safety and security.
- › **Create a plan to align humanitarian and development response:** The international community and the newly elected Afghan government must listen to the needs of the people and draw on existing frameworks to create a comprehensive plan that aligns humanitarian and development assistance.



2014: A year of major transitions

Afghanistan faces three transitions in 2014, making this a pivotal year for the future of the country.

First, Afghans are hoping for their country's first-ever peaceful, democratic transfer of power.

Second, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which has carried out operations in Afghanistan since 2001, will draw down. ISAF plans to withdraw most of its forces by the end of 2014, handing over security to Afghanistan's national forces. Uncertainty looms over the drawdown.

Third, Afghanistan is experiencing a significant economic transition. Afghanistan's economy is heavily dependent on foreign aid, which amounted to 71 percent of Gross Domestic Product in 2010.² But as international forces leave, aid funding is rapidly falling.³ The United States, by far Afghanistan's biggest donor, reduced its assistance budget from \$4 billion to \$2 billion in the 2011 fiscal year.⁴ Congress cut the budget nearly in half again this year, to \$1.1 billion.⁵ The World Bank reports that economic growth is predicted to shrink to 3.5 percent this year, down from 14.4 percent in 2012.⁶ If international financial support continues, Afghanistan can weather this economic transition, moving toward a future as

a self-sufficient country—but steep drops in assistance now would not only threaten the fragile gains made but could also seriously damage the country.⁷

The challenges faced today by Afghanistan follow decades of insecurity, upheaval, and uncertainty—starting with the Soviet invasion in 1979 through the war between the western-backed Mujahedeen and the Communists in the 1980s to the rule of the Taliban. This year could prove to be a turning point economically, politically, and for the country's security. Afghanistan could move toward a brighter future or endure serious setbacks.

30 years of IRC assistance and partnership

The IRC has worked with Afghans for three decades, throughout many transitions in the country. Our staff members have seen firsthand the challenges facing Afghanistan. They also have seen the gains made at the community level. These gains must be protected. At the same time, 9 million Afghans still need assistance.

THE IRC QUESTIONNAIRE

Recent gains

Afghan staff members in nine provinces said that they see major improvements in education, health services, and livelihood support.

“In the last three years, education opportunities for children have increased—young boys and girls are eager to study. [In addition] community members prioritize their needs.”

“Ten or 12 years ago, we didn't have electricity even in Kabul, and now we have it. Even districts and valleys have water because of the help of the international community and international organizations.”

“Community-driven reconstruction, education, and humanitarian programs all bring improvements to the community.”

Gains achieved

Throughout periods of uncertainty and insecurity, Afghans have made substantial gains in education, health services, and livelihood support. These gains have been made through partnerships between aid agencies, the Afghan government, and Afghan communities.

National Solidarity Program:

The World Bank-funded National Solidarity Program (NSP) is one example of this approach. The government, NGOs, and donors work together through the NSP to establish Community Development Councils (CDCs) in rural Afghanistan. These CDCs are based on Afghan traditions of grassroots governance. CDCs identify needs in the community and work with partners—mostly international or national NGOs—to carry out development projects.⁸ CDCs are held accountable by communities.⁹

This community-focused initiative has yielded impressive results. By late 2013, the NSP had established 32,000 CDCs across 361 districts in all of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. The program has increased access by Afghans in villages to basic utilities and increased male acceptance of female participation in public life.¹⁰ Small infrastructure projects, such as building

OPPOSITE PAGE: A National Solidarity Program Community Development Council meeting.

2014: A year of major transitions (continued)

floodwalls to protect farms or drilling boreholes for water supply, have created jobs and improved communities' access to agriculture.¹¹

The IRC is one of 34 organizations involved in the NSP, which has assisted more than 4 million Afghans in 33 districts since 2003.¹² A staff member in Herat explains how this program has made a difference. He said, "Job opportunities for women have increased. Community members are eager to participate in Community Development Councils, and communities [now have] the ability to prioritize their needs."

Basic Package for Health Services:

Another successful partnership involving the Afghan government, donors, NGOs, and communities is the Basic Package for Health Services (BPHS). The BPHS empowers Afghans to design their own health programs. Local clinics are staffed with local workers, and health workers are held accountable by members of their communities.¹³ Although there are still enormous health needs in the country, this effort has resulted in dramatic improvements in health care. Locally trained midwives, for example, have played a key role in reducing infant mortality rates.¹⁴

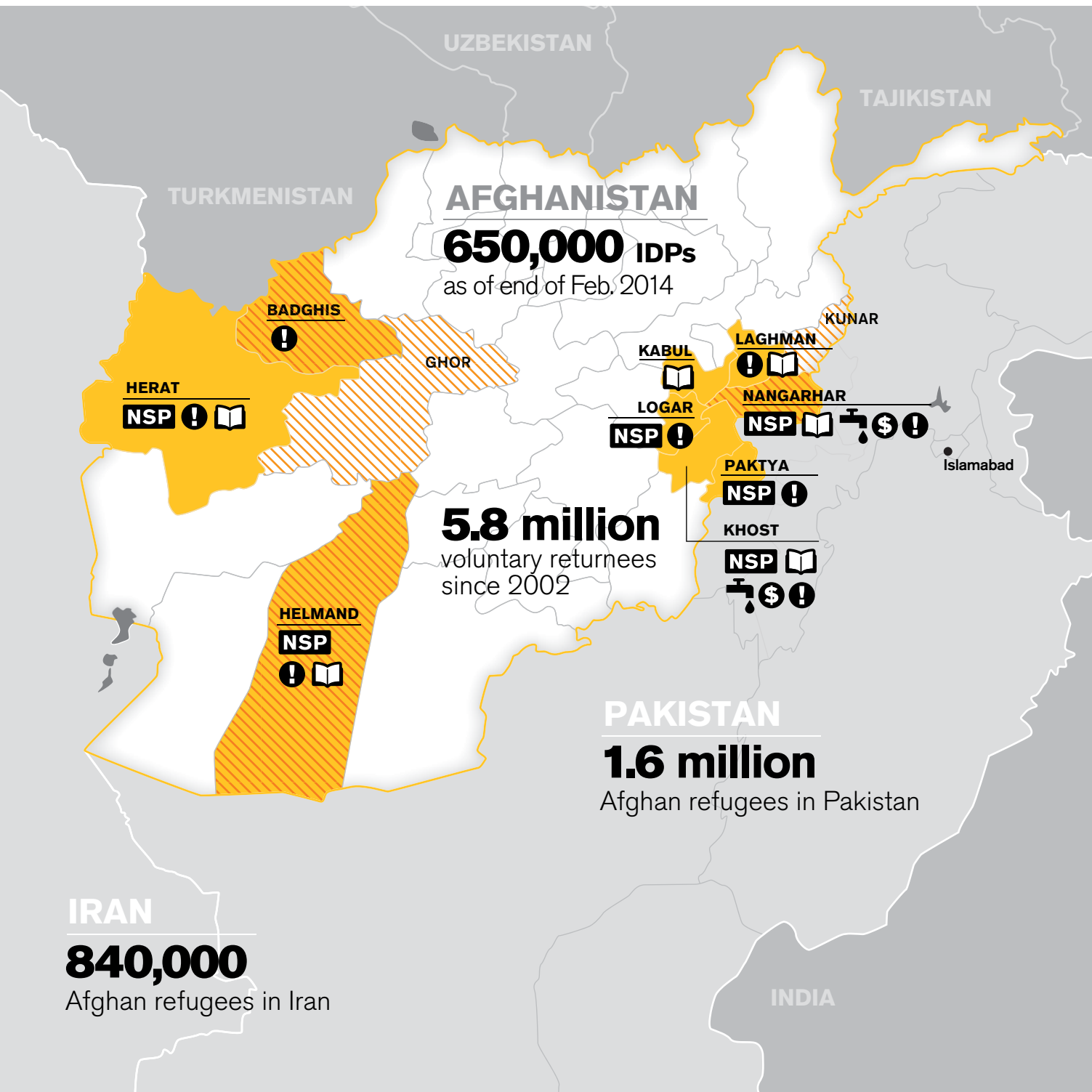
Community-based education:

Community-based education is another example of grassroots solutions to local needs. Community-based education (CBE) uses community centers and other existing spaces within the community "to provide safe learning spaces for children, youth, and adults in rural areas."¹⁵ According to the United Kingdom's Department for International Development, CBE "delivers better learning outcomes at lower costs, and is more effective in reaching young girls" than conventional education.¹⁶ CBE provides children who might not otherwise have access to schools, not only an education, but also more opportunities to enroll in the formal school system in the future. In a program funded by the Canadian government, the IRC partners with Catholic Relief Services, CARE International, and the Aga Khan Foundation to provide community-based education in 12 provinces, accessing rural and remote areas.¹⁷

An IRC staff member explains, "The education program matters because we're providing that service in areas where previously there was no education service. We build the foundation for education, for that village, for that community. And now perception of people has changed. Now there is possibility that more parents will let their children get education." ■

TOP LEFT: A first grade student at an IRC-supported community-based school in Kabul. BOTTOM LEFT: An Afghan mother shows off her baby. Locally-trained midwives have played a key role in reducing infant mortality rates. RIGHT: Children cross a bridge built as a National Solidarity Program project.






All figures: UNHCR

 **Provinces with highest humanitarian needs**
according to the Common Humanitarian Action Plan

What the IRC is doing:

-  **National Solidarity Program**
-  **Emergency Response**
-  **Education**
-  **Environmental Health**
-  **Economic Recovery & Development**



Challenges remaining

Afghans have worked hard to make real gains at the community level. These gains are under threat from increasing conflict, rising displacement, and chronic underdevelopment. Nine million Afghans are in need of assistance.

Escalating conflict

Members of the IRC's Afghan staff stated that insecurity is the biggest concern of their communities. More than 14,000 Afghans have died since 2009 because of armed conflict. Despite the incredible strength and resilience of the Afghan people, the protracted nature of the conflict is taking a toll, and Afghans are becoming increasingly vulnerable and in urgent need of support.

In 2012, armed conflict between pro- and anti-government forces rose sharply, with deadly consequences for civilians. There was a 14 percent increase in civilian casualties compared to 2011, according to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).¹⁸ Furthermore, last year saw the highest recorded death and injury rate for women and children since 2009.¹⁹

Moreover, Afghanistan is the most dangerous country in the world for aid workers.²⁰ A total of 41 aid workers were killed in 2013, including five IRC staff members.²¹ An attack in early 2014 at a popular restaurant in Kabul killed 21 people, including eight Afghans and 13 foreigners. Armed conflict puts both civilians and humanitarian aid workers at risk. Although there is no evidence that humanitarian workers are specific targets in the vast majority of incidents, armed opposition groups do not often discriminate between military, civilian, or humanitarian targets, putting everyone in danger.

Displacement

Displacement within Afghanistan:

IRC researchers repeatedly heard concerns from Afghans about the challenges of finding stability and safety. By the end of February 2014, more than 650,000 Afghans were displaced within their country due to conflict.²² (Natural disasters displace thousands more each year.²³) In this time of continued violence, these numbers are rising: 124,000 Afghans were internally displaced due to conflict in 2013 alone, a 25 percent increase from the previous year. Displacement will likely continue to rise in 2014.

Once displaced, Afghans struggle to find housing, land, and livelihoods, so they often have to move again. Many displaced

OPPOSITE PAGE: A girl washes her hands before heading to an IRC-supported community-based class in Kabul.

Afghans seek shelter and work in urban areas. The population of Kabul, for example, has at least doubled since 2001 to around 4.5 million people,²⁴ and displaced people in Kabul face immense challenges. Many are in slums where they have limited access to education and health care, lack clean water, and far too often live in makeshift tents or mud homes.²⁵ More than 30,000 Afghans live in 51 informal settlements in and around Kabul.²⁶ These displaced people suffer from chronic malnutrition and poor health. The Afghan government should be commended for adopting a robust National Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Policy, which is intended to help them find a long-term solution to chronic displacement.²⁷ Unfortunately, however, the National IDP Policy has not yet been implemented, and needs to be resourced.

Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran:

IRC researchers also discussed hopes and fears with Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Decades of conflict and disaster have forced millions of Afghans to flee to neighboring Pakistan and Iran, creating one of the world's largest and most protracted displacement crises. Pakistan and Iran have generously hosted Afghans for more than three decades. Over 1.6 million Afghans who are registered as refugees remain in Pakistan and an estimated 1 million more are unregistered.²⁸ In Iran, more than 840,000 Afghan refugees are registered, and another 1 million or more live there unregistered.²⁹ IRC researchers were told that Pakistan expects up to 100,000 more Afghan refugees to arrive this year.

In 2013, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) agreed on a strategy that aims to help ensure that Afghan refugees voluntarily return to Afghanistan only when it is safe to do so.³⁰ To implement this policy, Pakistan has generously extended Proof of Registration cards to registered Afghan refugees until 2015.³¹ Iran renews these registration cards yearly. Extending the status of these cards enables Afghans to continue to seek refuge legally.

Afghan refugees in Peshawar told the IRC that they longed to return home permanently, but they expressed great anxiety. An elder representative of an Afghan refugee camp in Peshawar explained why refugees intend to stay in Pakistan for now: "We love our home country, we miss our own soil—we were born there. But our country is in the same situation it was—security is as bad as when we left it." They are also worried about the

Challenges remaining (continued)

scarcity of jobs, lack of housing, and lack of basic services like health and education in Afghanistan. One Afghan refugee worries about what his family would face upon returning to Afghanistan: “Our family houses in Afghanistan were demolished in the Soviet war. We can’t take the risk of going back without shelter.” The IRC’s findings are consistent with those of other NGOs working in the region.³² Afghanistan lacks infrastructure and resources to provide targeted support for many more returnees.

Afghan refugees returning home:

IRC staff in Afghanistan have seen firsthand the challenges faced by the 5.8 million Afghans who have voluntarily returned home since 2002.³³ In fact, many IRC staff members were once refugees themselves in Pakistan. At least 40 percent of Afghans who returned to their country are unable to move back to the villages and cities they fled.³⁴ They often move to urban areas where they face significant challenges in finding community support and the means to provide for their families. In a recent survey, 84 percent of Afghans returning from Pakistan and 94 percent of Afghans returning from Iran stated that they have concerns about returning.³⁵

Voluntary return to Afghanistan has slowed significantly. Fewer than 39,000 Afghans returned from Pakistan and Iran in 2013, a 59 percent decrease from 2012.³⁶ A refugee who fled the Soviet invasion told the IRC his thoughts about return, saying, “The main problem with returning is the lack of peace. We don’t feel safe there. We don’t have trust that we will have safety and security in our own country.”

Afghan refugees resettling in new countries:

Afghan refugees continue to express interest in resettlement in another country. Of the 12,000 Afghan refugees who have resettled in the United States over the last 14 years, the IRC has helped 3,000 of them to integrate into their new communities. Resettlement provides an opportunity for Afghans who cannot safely go back home to restart their lives in another country, and each year a small number of vulnerable Afghans are resettled to countries like the U.S. In addition, tens of thousands are seeking asylum in countries around the world.³⁷ The IRC spoke with an Afghan who resettled in the U.S. in 2002 when she was 15. She stated: “I feel privileged that we had a chance to get out of the uncertainty we were facing, along with lack of security and so many other issues that came with it.” For this young Afghan and her family, along with many other Afghans, resettlement may be the only safe solution. But global commitments for resettlement are low, which leaves many Afghans who may qualify unable to leave.

THE IRC QUESTIONNAIRE

Top concern: Insecurity

IRC staff members were asked to describe the concerns of communities in the nine provinces where they work.

102 of 124

staff members cited insecurity as one of the top three concerns.

“The people are displaced from one province to another province, from one district to another district. . . .

In Helmand I saw that some people moved from a northern district of Helmand province to another area because there is fighting.”

“Food is not making it into the province, and people are too afraid to travel to get food. They are afraid of being kidnapped or hurt by criminals.”

“Unfortunately, some tribes have altercations and it creates security problems.”

In addition to resettlement, the U.S. offers Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) for Afghans whose work with the U.S. military in Afghanistan put their lives at risk. But applicants have faced long delays, and not enough visas are available.³⁸ The IRC spoke with an Afghan who worked as an interpreter for the U.S. military. He explained that after he applied for SIV status in 2009, it took four years for him to get the visa. He was finally admitted to the U.S. in December 2013. “It’s a very important program. If this program was not there I would probably not be alive right now,” he told the IRC. He described the four-year interval as “the longest wait.” He could not go out. He lived in fear. Outside of his village, life was treacherous for him, he said. A U.S. soldier who had worked with him wanted to help, and he contacted members of Congress. The soldier said he did this for a very simple reason: “You hear him talk about where he’s been and what he’s seen, waking up with nightmares. You think about the risks he has taken for himself. . . . This is one of many stories. . . . We owe it to him and his comrades. That’s the promise we’ve made.”



LEFT: An Afghan man outside his hut in a temporary camp for returnees on the outskirts of Kabul in 2012. RIGHT: A woman and her daughter outside of a house she shares with three other families in Herat in 2011. Her family fled violence in Kunduz the previous year.

Chronic underdevelopment

Afghanistan is one of the least developed countries in the world, ranking 175 out of 186 countries on the United Nations Human Development Index. More than a third of Afghans live below the poverty line.³⁹ The labor market is not big enough to absorb Afghanistan's fast-growing population: half of all Afghans are under 16 years of age.⁴⁰

Most Afghans live in rural areas, and agriculture is the base of Afghanistan's economy. But arable land is scarce, and frequent floods and drought plague what little farmable land is available, causing intense competition for land. With poor transportation and irrigation services, farmers struggle to make a living.⁴¹

Afghanistan's underdevelopment means that many Afghans are extremely vulnerable to shocks and conflict. In some parts of the country, people do not have access to services that can help them during a crisis. People rely on their families and communities, but may not have enough resources to restart their livelihoods after a natural disaster or once it is safe to go home after conflict.

Rising unemployment threatens to push more Afghans into poverty. Competition for jobs will dramatically increase in the coming years, as the rapidly growing young population tries to join the labor market. The drawdown of international forces compounds the problem. International coalition forces and associated private contractors employ tens of thousands of Afghans—each of whom, in turn, supports up to five families.⁴² Afghans now stand to lose those jobs as international forces leave the country.⁴³

THE IRC QUESTIONNAIRE

Top concern: Livelihoods

IRC staff members were asked to describe the concerns of communities in the nine provinces where they work.

76 of 124

staff members stated that people are worried about jobs and livelihoods.

“A huge number of people who are 15-30 years old are jobless, and 80 percent of the Afghan people live in the rural areas. For them, the unemployment rate is very high. So security is the first need, and a job, money to make a life, is second.”

“Since the United States informed us that ‘We are leaving Afghanistan in 2014,’ some organizations have closed, and a lot of people have become jobless. Others are afraid that they will lose their jobs. A lot of people were employed with international organizations and military-related activities. They were working as translators, as engineers. . . . Now they will be losing their jobs. Most of these people are living inside the city and all people don't own their own houses. They are living in rental houses. It will create a lot of economic problems for them if they become jobless.”

Challenges remaining (continued)

Millions of Afghans need assistance

As a result of escalating conflict, rising displacement, and chronic underdevelopment, a total of 9 million people—one-third of the total population—need assistance. IRC researchers were repeatedly told that international funding is currently too low to respond to these immense needs, and Afghans fear international assistance will shrink even further. An IRC staff member said, “My job is contacting the people, the community. These are the words of the community, people’s opinion: People are afraid of the future. Regardless of military withdrawal, at least the international community, the NGOs and the help, should stay. . . . We hope that the international community will not leave us.”

Urgent, lifesaving needs

This year, because of insufficient levels of funding from donors to meet increasing needs in Afghanistan, the UN-led Humanitarian Country Team in Afghanistan has chosen to prioritize the most vulnerable 5 million people out of the 9 million in need. Its modest request for humanitarian funding is only \$406 million, as outlined in the Common Humanitarian Action Plan (CHAP) for 2014.

The five provinces with the highest humanitarian needs are Helmand, Kunar, Badghis, Nangarhar, and Ghor, according to United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Conflict is causing displacement in most of the provinces as people flee their homes to escape conflict, harassment, extortion, and forced recruitment by anti-government groups.⁴⁴ In its 2014 Humanitarian Needs Overview, OCHA said priority services needed for the 5 million Afghans with acute, urgent needs include:

Health: Conflict is causing widespread disruption to health services. As a result, health needs have increased from 3.3 million in need of health services in 2013 to 5.4 million people this year. According to OCHA, “2013 saw a 60 percent increase in the numbers of people treated for weapon

THE IRC QUESTIONNAIRE

Top concern: Education

IRC staff members were asked to describe the concerns of communities in the nine provinces where they work.

69 of 124

staff members report that children and adults need more opportunities for education and training.

“Children under 18 are doing hard jobs in Afghanistan. There are no facilities for them to go to school.”

“First of all, Afghans need education. Yesterday, I went to an internally displaced persons camp; we have two classes there. When they saw me, they made several requests for establishing new classes.”

wounds, stretching trauma care needs beyond the existing capacity.” Afghanistan’s public health system is poor, but it has been made worse by the closure of hundreds of clinics and hospitals over the last year due to conflict, lack of personnel, and the shutdown of international-run facilities during the military drawdown. Indeed, recent research by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) paints a grim picture. MSF reported that “one in five people [19 percent] had a family member or close friend who had died as a result of their lack of access to health care within the preceding 12 months.”⁴⁵

Food: 8 million Afghans are food insecure, meaning there is either not enough food available where they live or they cannot get access to enough food, such as when conflict prevents travel to markets. Two provinces, Badakhshan and Ghor, are

Urgent needs of Afghans



5.4 million Afghans are in need of **health care** this year, up from **3.3 million in 2013**.



8 million Afghans are **food insecure**.



LEFT: A woman trained and given supplies by the IRC spins silk, which she sells for income to support her family. TOP RIGHT: A school-age boy sells sweets on the streets of Herat. Many children work to support their families instead of going to school. BOTTOM RIGHT An IRC staff member packs non-food items in kits destined for displaced families in western Afghanistan.

classified as emergencies because people lack access to enough food.⁴⁶ In an overview of Afghanistan, the UN's World Food Program says that "more than half of children under the age of five are malnourished, and micronutrient deficiencies (particularly iodine and iron) are widespread."⁴⁷

Protection: 1.5 million Afghans are particularly vulnerable to violence or other forms of abuse. Displaced people need help to safely and voluntarily return home, for example, and children need protection from attacks, sexual violence, and abduction.

Shelter: More than half a million people need shelter and basic household items such as blankets, as many people across Afghanistan are repeatedly displaced by ongoing conflict and natural disaster.

Millions more in chronic need:

Another 4 million Afghans have less acute, but still serious needs. Besides personal security, they need assistance creating sources of income, providing an education for their children, accessing health care, and finding safe and stable homes. This was a constant theme of the IRC's research.

Yet, there is no comprehensive plan that enables donors, the aid community, and the government to guide response for both acute and longer-term needs in Afghanistan. Such a plan would help ensure that humanitarian and development efforts are mutually reinforcing—and that while the aid community is responding in the short term, it is not losing sight of longer-term aims like helping communities better prepare for conflict and disaster.⁴⁸



1.5 million Afghans are particularly **vulnerable to violence** or other forms of abuse.



half a million people **need shelter** and basic household items.

Challenges remaining (continued)

Successes and challenges with aid approaches

The price of involvement in Afghanistan has been high, not only for the Afghan people but also for the international community. There have been many challenges with past approaches to delivering aid. At this critical juncture, the International Rescue Committee believes the international community should commit to supporting Afghans to maintain and build on the gains of the last 12 years by using a community-led approach to delivering assistance.

Afghans consulted by IRC researchers spoke about the significant impact of efforts by the international community to invest in Afghanistan over the last decade. From 2002-2009 donors provided \$26 billion to the government for development assistance,⁴⁹ and that assistance has produced important gains: life expectancy has increased from 42 years to 49 years.⁵⁰ More children are surviving past five years of age. School enrollment increased from 1 million in 2002 to more than 8 million as of 2013, according to UNICEF.⁵¹ Irrigation systems or floodwalls have been built in villages to protect crops from drought and floods.⁵²

Yet a number of factors limit the impact of aid. Studies have shown that a substantial portion of aid did not reach the people it was intended to help. The government has acknowledged the problem, has pledged to be accountable to local needs, and has made progress in achieving these goals. To ensure that all Afghans see the benefits of aid, the government will have to continue tackling corruption and increase its funding to local communities.

Historically, poor coordination between donors, aid organizations, and the government of Afghanistan has also hampered development progress. Large amounts of donor funding have not been adequately recorded, making it difficult to track global amounts of funding and the types of programs being supported.⁵³ Moreover, the many players involved in delivering aid to Afghanistan have not worked together enough to prioritize the people with the most needs.⁵⁴ Donors, the government, and aid organizations do not always coordinate to assess and map the needs of Afghan people, leading to gaps or duplications in programs.

Coordination between aid providers in Afghanistan is improving. A number of coordination mechanisms⁵⁵ have helped donors, aid agencies, and the government work more effectively. Furthermore, local NGOs and the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief & Development (ACBAR),

an umbrella organization of national and international NGOs, have worked to promote aid effectiveness. The government and international community have agreed on a number of distinct plans for development, like the Afghanistan National Development Strategy, as well as plans for humanitarian assistance, such as the Common Humanitarian Action Plan. However, without a comprehensive plan to coordinate humanitarian and development programming, aid providers still cannot ensure that local people are getting the lifesaving and life-building assistance they need.

Donors must require that aid agencies monitor programs to ensure that assistance is well spent and reaches the people it is intended to reach. But some monitoring requirements can unintentionally limit the impact of aid and put lives at risk. For example, a requirement that international staff conduct on-site project checks could not only put staff—foreign and national—at an increased risk but could also endanger local populations. Monitoring is essential, but donor requirements must be flexible and recognize, for example, that Afghan staff members are able to monitor effectively.

Finally, IRC researchers were told that the international forces pursued their security objectives in ways that hampered development in Afghanistan. Previously, “hearts and minds” projects, such as using military resources to build hospitals and schools, were designed to foster local support for military objectives. This blurred the lines between military aims and humanitarian or development aims by creating confusion among communities about the roles of different actors, making it riskier for humanitarian and development agencies to implement programs.⁵⁶ Although these projects by the international forces have ended, the problem of blurred security and humanitarian objectives persists: the U.S. government now asks NGOs to provide personal, confidential information about their Afghan partners in a way that may create a perception that NGOs may be gathering intelligence for the U.S. government. These vetting requirements can create additional and significant security risks for staff and have led a number of U.S. NGOs to decide not to apply for U.S. government funding in Afghanistan or to significantly reduce their work in the country.⁵⁷ ■

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: The IRC is providing education in 10 of Kabul's approximately 40 makeshift camps for the displaced. For many of the students, this is the first education they've ever received, and conditions are sometimes rudimentary. BOTTOM LEFT: Business is growing in many urban areas of Afghanistan, such as Herat. BOTTOM RIGHT: Afghanistan remains one of the least developed countries in the world.



The promise of community engagement

Afghanistan has not been short of money labeled “aid” over the last 12 years. But the results have been mixed; some approaches worked far better than others. It is vital that aid money in the future is spent in the most effective way possible, learning the lessons of the past. IRC researchers were told that the following principles for community-based aid are paramount.

First, programs need to be “community-led.” This means that the aid community should support the vital work of Afghans to identify their own needs, take decisions over how aid resources are allocated and, where possible and appropriate, manage the implementation of the assistance. The opposite approach, of well-meaning but untrusted (and time limited) external intervention, does not deliver the best results. This is because these interventions may not be aligned with community priorities, so they can lack the community buy-in necessary for sustainable work. They may not build the capacity of communities to sustain delivery after the “outsider” leaves. And if interventions are perceived as “foreign,” aid activities may endanger the community by association.

Second, programs need to be flexible enough to combine urgent, lifesaving assistance with longer-term economic and

social programs. Sometimes the only way to get access to communities to provide lifesaving assistance is when aid workers have relationships that were built at the local level through longer-term programming. Furthermore, Afghanistan’s chronic poverty is a daily and biting reality, and it cannot be ignored.

Third, all development and humanitarian aid providers need to work with whatever authorities and structures are in place and appropriate, both state and non-state. While, in the long run, the Afghan government is responsible for providing basic services for its people, it does not yet have the ability to do so in all areas because of lack of access or capacity limitations. Throughout history, Afghan communities have worked through deeply-rooted community-level governance structures. Therefore, aid agencies have a responsibility to work through

The IRC in Afghanistan: Over 30 years of assistance

1980

The IRC launches relief programs for Afghan refugees fleeing to Pakistan following the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan. These health, education and job-training programs continue for well over 20 years.



1989

The Soviet Union withdraws from Afghanistan. The IRC launches extensive rural assistance programs, building on cross-border aid projects begun a year earlier.

1996

The IRC is one of the few aid agencies that continue to operate under the Taliban government.

2001

After U.S. military forces oust the Taliban, the IRC broadens its programs, sending teams to repair roads, rebuild irrigation systems, and establish public health and sanitation facilities.

the authorities that are in place, recognized, and respected by the communities we serve.

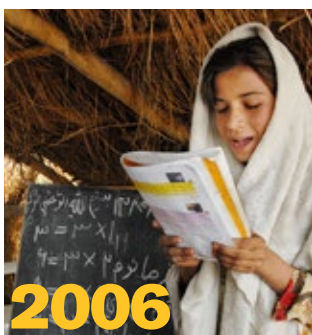
When these principles are implemented, the result is that levels of trust between communities and aid agencies can endure changing political and military situations. Ongoing conflict makes it highly challenging to access Afghans in insecure areas. But when aid organizations gain the trust of communities, aid workers can more easily negotiate access and mitigate risks. In fact, as international security forces draw down, access for aid agencies in some areas of Afghanistan may very well increase. With the end of “hearts and minds” projects by international military forces, aid agencies may find it easier to explain to communities that they are acting independently of any political or military agenda. In an extremely complicated environment, the international community should embrace an impartial, community-based approach to help meet the enormous needs of the Afghan people.

IRC Afghan staff members explained the community-based approach: “The services we are implementing through community participation make positive differences in communities, bringing people together. They play a role in bringing peace to the country.” ■

THE IRC QUESTIONNAIRE

Hope for the future

- “I am ready in all situations to serve in communities.”
- “The transition will bring positive changes. I am sure the government of Afghanistan will be able to increase its public expenditure. . . and provide enough services in the communities. After a three-decade war where people of Afghanistan have suffered a lot, in order to be recovered and rehabilitated, it will just take some time to be a self-sufficient country.”
- “If we have support of the international community, we will step by step be. . . a country to be developed. We have gas, oil, fuel, mines which will pave the ground for our development. Definitely, we will be a self-sufficient country in the future.”



2006

Despite intensified conflict, the IRC helps to expand locally elected community development councils and community-based education initiatives that enroll thousands of students throughout the country.

2008

Four IRC aid workers are killed in an ambush in Logar province one year after an IRC staff member was killed in the same province. The IRC temporarily suspends its programs.



2012

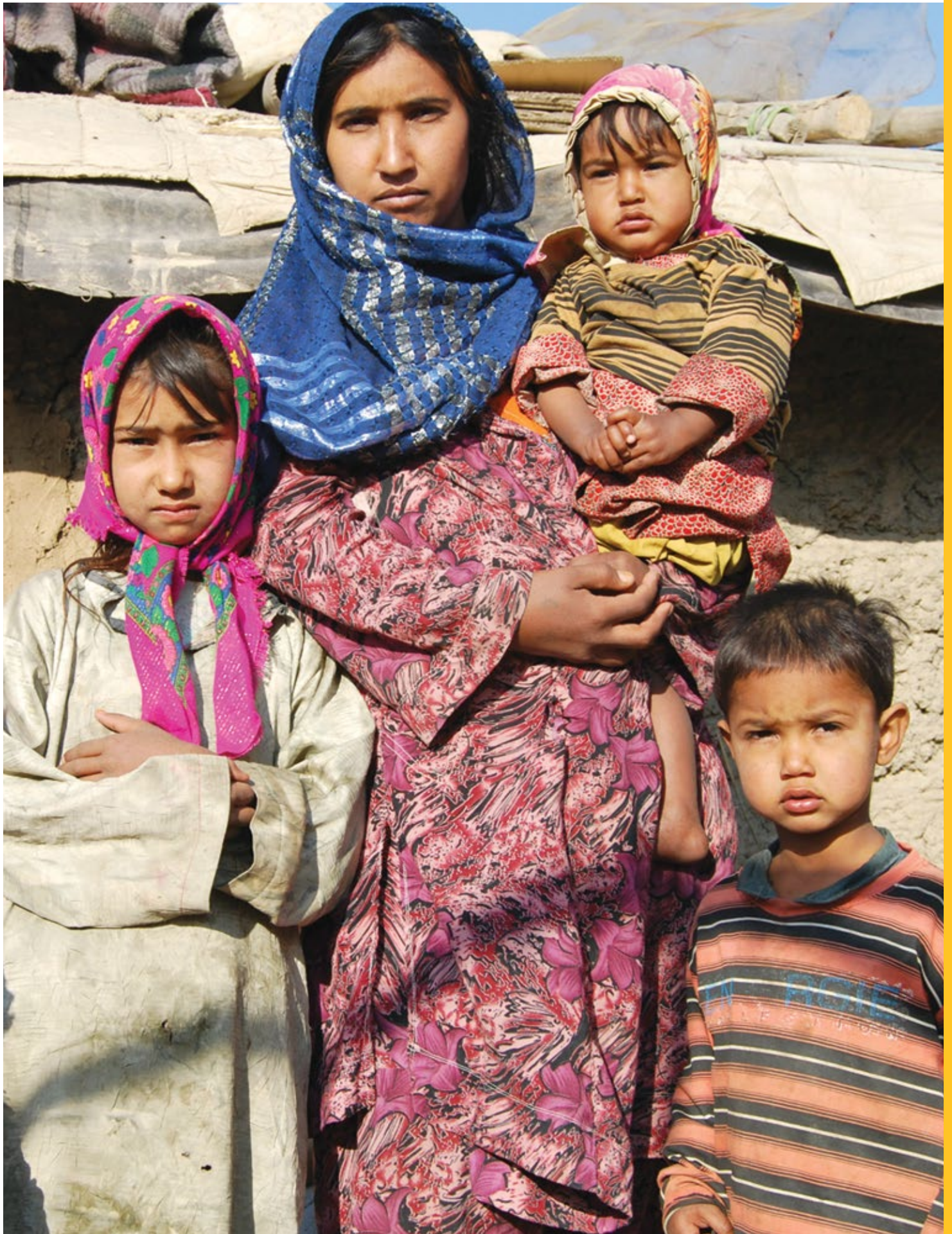
The IRC expands its programs to include conflict-and-natural-disaster-affected communities in Helmand and Badghis provinces.

2013

Five IRC staff members are killed by gunmen in Herat province. After briefly suspending operations, the IRC renews its commitment to the country.

2014

Today, the IRC's aid workers in the country, 99 percent of whom are Afghan, work in more than 4,000 villages across nine provinces. These efforts in Afghanistan are the IRC's most longstanding.



Recommendations

Make a long-term commitment to the people of Afghanistan

As international military forces draw down, it is vital to redouble the humanitarian effort. Regardless of the outcome of the 2014 election, our collective goal must be to help the Afghan people build on successes and apply the lessons learned over the last 12 years. This will require donor governments to continue to provide assistance to the Afghan people. It will also require humanitarian and development organizations to continue to provide lifesaving and longer-term assistance to those in need.

Support millions in need by making high-return investments at the local level

Humanitarian and development needs will continue to rise, but less financial assistance will be available to Afghanistan. Aid to Afghanistan needs to be invested in local programs that have been proven to work. In this environment, it is critical that donors and the Afghan government make targeted, strategic investments in community-based programs, which can often continue even in times of high insecurity and have greater impact with fewer resources.

The international community should work closely, first and foremost, with communities. It should also work with provincial authorities to help design and implement development plans, and the government should ensure that funding flows reach provincial, district, and village levels where service delivery to people happens.⁵⁸ In areas where government ministries do not yet offer services, donors should support organizations with longstanding relationships in communities. Furthermore, local NGOs and coalitions should be strengthened so that they can increasingly take leadership roles in the country's development. Successful grassroots-focused work such as community-based education, the World Bank-supported Afghan National Solidarity Program, and the Basic Package for Health Services provide a strong foundation on which the international community can build.

Break the cycle of displacement

Donors, humanitarian organizations, the government, and refugee host countries must work together to break the cycle of displacement. Targeted investments in areas where people return in large numbers mean increasing the chance that displaced people within Afghanistan, and refugees in Pakistan and Iran, can go home and stay home.

For internally displaced people inside Afghanistan

With the support of the international community, the government should promote sustainable solutions for returnees, increasing economic opportunity and providing land and shelter. An essential first step is for the new government to implement its National Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Policy across the country. This policy is intended to help them find a long-term solution to chronic displacement. The government, with support from the international community, should rapidly implement this policy by drafting comprehensive national and provincial action plans, training provincial and district officials in the policy, and dedicating adequate resources to the oversight body tasked with the independent monitoring of implementation of the policy.⁵⁹ The international community should also assist the Afghan government in developing tools to gather and analyze information on displacement so it can implement this policy and facilitate voluntary returns.⁶⁰

For refugees living outside Afghanistan

Donors should fund refugee work in Pakistan and Iran to support host governments with any influx of Afghan refugees that may result from increasing insecurity in Afghanistan, and Pakistan and Iran in turn should continue to provide refuge for Afghans. Likewise, countries outside the region should show solidarity with Pakistan and Iran, opening their doors to vulnerable Afghans for resettlement and asylum. The U.S. should increase resettlement of Afghans beyond 500 yearly and streamline its Special Immigrant Visa program to reduce the application backlog. Afghans whose lives are at risk because of their work with American forces must be granted visas and the necessary support to gain admission to the U.S. immediately.

OPPOSITE PAGE: This woman asked to be photographed with her family to convey how difficult and uncertain life is in this temporary camp for returning refugees in Kabul. Many worry they could be evicted from the private land on which they've built their homes.

Recommendations (continued)

Respond quickly to lifesaving and life-building needs

The international community must make meeting urgent humanitarian needs a top priority. There has been a huge increase in some needs due to the changing nature of the conflict and increasingly limited access to services. Recognizing limited international funding available for Afghanistan, the humanitarian community is seeking \$406 million in the 2014 Common Humanitarian Action Plan (CHAP) to meet the needs of 5 million of the most vulnerable Afghans, including people newly displaced by conflict and natural disaster and refugees who have returned to Afghanistan. Failure to provide these resources would be disastrous.

Beyond lifesaving aid, a robust investment now that helps Afghans prepare for difficult times reduces the need for urgent relief year after year. Donors should provide additional longer-term funding to meet the needs of Afghans who will not be assisted by the funding for the humanitarian needs outlined in the CHAP.

Use limited resources effectively

Given the scale of the humanitarian needs in Afghanistan, aid agencies must ensure that limited resources are used most effectively. Far more will have to be accomplished with fewer resources. Coordination of needs assessments, high quality mapping, and information sharing about access to various communities will be more important than ever. And while monitoring programs is essential to ensure that aid reaches those in need, there must be flexibility in monitoring requirements in challenging environments. Donors should ensure that programs are properly monitored, yet be flexible about the approach in order to allow organizations to mitigate risks to staff safety. All partners should coordinate to ensure that there are no gaps or duplications in locally focused services.

An effective response is one that is impartial—it seeks only to meet the needs of the people. Donor governments should support efforts to ensure that lifesaving aid reaches those most in need and has no link to political or security objectives. Furthermore, donors should eliminate partner-vetting requirements that could compromise the independence of humanitarian and development organizations.

Create a plan to align humanitarian and development response

The international community and the newly elected government must listen to the needs of the people and draw on existing frameworks to create a comprehensive plan that aligns humanitarian and development assistance. This means that the government, donors, and humanitarian agencies should connect short-term and long-term aims, in order to address emergencies and enhance the ability of Afghan communities to lead and respond in the future. Vulnerable Afghans must receive both lifesaving and life-building assistance.

The international community and the Afghan government have a major opportunity to develop such a framework at this year's international development conference (to be co-chaired by the U.K. and the Afghan government). At the conference, participants should commit to drafting and implementing a plan that aligns humanitarian and development priorities. Through this framework, the Afghan people will be able to build on gains and build a stronger future.

Conclusion

The IRC has been inspired by the vision, passion, and expertise of the Afghan staff we have worked alongside for three decades. They are deeply committed to protecting lives, meeting basic needs, and building a better future. We hope this report provides a useful analysis of the challenges and a constructive vision for future partnership with the Afghan people. We also hope the international community will embrace our recommendations and stand by the Afghan people during and after this year of transitions. ■

Key Facts

Escalating conflict:

- › More than **14,000 Afghans have died since 2009** because of armed conflict, which forces people to flee their homes and blocks their access to basic lifesaving services.
- › There was a 14 percent increase in civilian casualties in 2013 compared to 2012. Last year saw the highest recorded death and injury rate for women and children since 2009.
- › Afghanistan is the most dangerous country in the world for aid workers; 41 aid workers were killed in 2013, including five IRC staff members.

Forced displacement:

- › More than 650,000 Afghans are currently displaced within the country because of conflict, and more than 9,000 were displaced by natural disasters. In 2013 alone, 124,000 Afghans were internally displaced by conflict, a 25 percent increase from the previous year.
- › More than **2 million Afghans are refugees** in Pakistan and Iran.
- › 40 percent of Afghans who returned to their country are unable to move back to the villages and cities they fled.
- › 84 percent of Afghans returning from Pakistan and 94 percent of Afghans returning from Iran have concerns about returning to Afghanistan, including lack of job opportunities and land.

Urgent, lifesaving needs:

- › 5.4 million Afghans are in urgent need of access to health services.
- › 2.2 million people are severely food insecure, while a further 8 million people are food insecure.
- › 1.5 million Afghans, including displaced people and children, need protection from violence and other forms of abuse.
- › A half million Afghans, especially the recently displaced, need emergency shelter or household items.

Chronic underdevelopment and worsening economy:

- › After decades of turmoil, Afghanistan is one of the least developed countries in the world, ranking 175 out of 186 countries on the United Nations Human Development Index.
- › **More than a third** of Afghans live below the poverty line.
- › Half of all Afghans are under 16 years of age.
- › Afghanistan is a landlocked country with limited arable land and frequent natural disasters.
- › The economy of Afghanistan is heavily dependent on foreign aid, which amounted to **71 percent of Gross Domestic Product** in 2010.
- › Foreign aid is shrinking and economic growth is predicted to shrink to 3.5 percent this year, down from 14.4 percent in 2012.

APPENDIX

Afghanistan Task Force of the International Rescue Committee

We are grateful to the IRC Afghanistan Task Force for their time and contributions to the development of this report and for their policy insight and advice.

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- ⁵⁵ Such as the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Body, the Humanitarian Cluster Team, the Afghanistan Development Forum, the Afghanistan Humanitarian Forum, and cluster meetings.
- ⁵⁶ Ashley Jackson and Simone Haysom, "The search for common ground, Civil–military relations in Afghanistan, 2002–13," HPG Policy Brief 51 (April 2013), 4, <http://www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8395.pdf>. See also "HPG and BAAG dialogue: Civil–military relations in Afghanistan, 2001 to transition" (read out from a roundtable held on May 29, 2013 at the Overseas Development Institute, London), <http://www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/events-documents/5033.pdf>.
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