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Exodus from Afghanistan: How Germany can support the agency of Afghans in protracted displacement

Recommendations for the German government

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Recommendations

\ Take the initiative for Afghanistan in the Global Compact for Migration: For labour market policy measures and simplified money transfers

Since February this year, the intergovernmental negotiation process on developing the Global Compact for Migration has been taking place in New York. The German government should (1) advocate for the National Labour Migration Strategy and the National Labour Policy of the Government of Afghanistan to be taken into account. It should (2) support a reduction in transfer fees for remittances sent by Afghan migrants, as suggested by the KfW.

\ Enshrine the rights of internally displaced people and refugees in regional host countries in the Global Compact on Refugees

The government should work towards ensuring that internally displaced people in Afghanistan and refugees in the regional host countries, Iran and Pakistan, receive the right to education, land and housing, medical care and effective legal protection as a matter of principle.

\ No deportations or repatriation programmes from Germany, the EU, Iran and Pakistan without a guarantee of sustainably secure living conditions

Administrative authorities in the German states should only carry out deportations of Afghans if they can guarantee the safety of the deportees in the long term and enable sustainably humane living conditions.

Germany needs an immigration law that is also beneficial to people from Afghanistan.

An immigration law would regulate legal access to the German jobs and educational/training markets for qualified people and skilled workers from abroad, including from Afghanistan, and rule out the immigration of ineligible people.

Extend vocational training and employment schemes to areas which are not under full control of the Afghan government

Training and employment schemes should be implemented in areas that are under the control of the government as well as outside of these areas through collaboration with locally elected community development councils, guilds and professional associations.

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The German government bears responsibility for the sustainable livelihood security of Afghan men and women

Germany's participation in the military and civil intervention in Afghanistan following 2001 played a major role in the reconstruction and improved access to basic social services for the population in comparison to the 1990s. However, it became clear that the economically, socially and politically destructive effects of a decade-long war could not be repaired in just a few years. One important internal challenge for the increasingly divided government continues to be stemming corruption.¹ In addition, due to the poor economic environment and the inability of the Afghan government to distribute the country's meagre wealth equitably, even now the option of joining armed groups still appeals to many Afghans. This is prolonging the violent conflict. The withdrawal of more than 100,000 NATO soldiers between 2012 and 2014 has further exacerbated the precarious situation of the Afghan government. Since then, not only have unemployment and underemployment increased, so too have attacks by militants and the loss of control of the Afghan government. While the Afghan government still controlled 72 per cent of the districts in 2015, this figure had fallen to 56 per cent in 2017. In January 2018, Taliban groups were active in 70 per cent of Afghan districts.²

The reasons for the deterioration of the security situation are not all of a domestic political nature. It is also caused by tensions in the region surrounding Afghanistan. Due to the interaction of internal and external factors, the government was unable to consolidate initial welfare gains.³ As a result, Afghanistan is still a long way away from developing its

economy and implementing peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms. The German government is, therefore, continuing its participation in the advisory and training mission of NATO's Operation Resolute Support and is supporting the Afghan government in its efforts to regain control. Additionally, offers through German and international aid and development organizations of alternative civil opportunities for Afghans to earn money can make a promising contribution to reducing violence.

The deteriorating living conditions and insecurity in Afghanistan have led to a renewed increase in the number of refugees. The German government, and many Germans, do not view the acceptance of a higher number of people from Afghanistan to Germany as being desirable. Around five million Afghans have taken refuge in Afghanistan's neighbouring states, Iran and Pakistan, since the end of the 1970s. Today, both countries are rightly demanding that the burden be shared. The German government should, therefore, consider new possibilities for supporting Iran and Pakistan so that they can integrate Afghans instead of deporting them to the insecure environment in Afghanistan. It should aim to prevent further displacement and put the regional host countries in a position to allow Afghan people to sustainably secure their livelihood there. This is in Germany's interests, as a mass deportation from the neighbouring countries under the current conditions would encourage violence and further extend the necessity for an international presence.

The transnational Afghan networks

Over the past few decades, Afghans have established social networks which encompass villages and towns in Afghanistan as well as other places around the world. The splitting up of households and a high level of mobility are a way for them to secure their livelihood in the long run despite the ongoing violence in their home country. To spread the risk, they often move within the country, or emigrate, return and then emigrate again as part of a circular migration movement or flight. Over time, Afghan families have

1 \ In 2017, Afghanistan was once again classified as one of the five most corrupt countries in the world (cf. Trading Economics, 2018, <https://tradingeconomics.com/afghanistan/corruption-rank>).

2 \ Cf. results of recent investigative research by the BBC, published on 31 January 2018: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42863116>

3 \ The annual gross domestic product per capita decreased from US \$680 to US \$580 between 2012 and 2016 (cf. World Bank, 2018, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/afghanistan>). For an overview of the regional situation see Harpviken and Tadjbakhsh, 2016.

thus formed transnational networks based on kinship, within which the distinction between migrants and refugees becomes blurred (Schetter, 2012).

The research we carried out from 2015 to 2017 (Grawert & Mielke, 2018) confirms the importance of transnational networks as a “safety valve” and a component of social resilience for a large number of Afghan families. The transnational networks use remittances to secure the living conditions of their families, to finance rebuilding efforts and to enable threatened and displaced relatives to flee. The formation of Afghan networks is partially strategic. In Iran, it is more about getting access to better-paid jobs. In Pakistan, besides gaining access to employment, until recently it was also about receiving humanitarian aid. The “nodes” in transnational networks are the Afghans who live in Iran, in Pakistan, in Afghanistan and other countries, who take in new arrivals, integrate them into the host community or enable them to move on.

The infrastructure of the transnational networks consists of, among other things, financial flows (*hawala* transfers)⁴, assistance in finding educational and employment opportunities, connections to traffickers and the exchange of information and experiences (Monsutti, 2008). In transnational spaces, Afghans integrate as groups made up of changing individuals. They adapt flexibly to situations according to context and repeatedly change their position following new displacements that push them in different directions. Thus, Afghan living conditions are characterized by multidimensional embeddedness (Houte, Siegel, & Davids, 2014). For decades, they have been filling special niches in the labour markets of neighbouring countries as well as in the Gulf States and some European countries. Iran’s experiences in the wake of its “open door policy” between 1979 and 1989 suggest that legal recognition and the granting of residence permits opens up employment opportunities for the immigrants in niche job markets as well as opening up sources of taxation for the state.

4 \ Trust-based, undocumented, mechanisms for transferring money, which have a global reach.

The refusal of some states to assign the residence of Afghans a legal status will not prevent the latter from immigrating and attempting to make a living, in any circumstances, including through irregular work.

Transnational networks as a “durable solution”

For almost twenty years, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has concentrated on three durable solutions to protracted displacement situations⁵: repatriation (voluntary return), local integration in neighbouring countries or resettlement in a third country. These approaches ignore largely the agency of Afghans towards securing their livelihood in a range of different environments and in particular, through the active forging of transnational networks.⁶ The three durable solutions also ignore the fact that protracted displacement situations create conditions in which, following the first generation of displaced people, several subsequent generations of the family will anchor their lives abroad and are de facto integrated in a “host context”. This is the case, for example, for many Afghan people in Pakistan and in Iran.

The complex conflict-related causes for constrained livelihood options in Afghanistan lead to “mixed migration”. This means that not every Afghan emigrant applies for asylum; some live as undocumented migrants in Iran and Pakistan while others use legal possibilities to take on work and educational opportunities abroad. The complexity of protracted displacement situations requires that the individual decision to leave his or her country must be accepted as long as violent conflict continues. That is precisely why policies are required that go beyond only protecting those Afghans who have had direct experiences of violence, persecution and threats to their lives.

5 \ The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) defines situations in which more than 25,000 people have been forced to flee to a neighbouring country for a period of at least five years, without any prospects of a solution, as protracted refugee situations. These situations are characterized by a high degree of uncertainty; basic rights and needs are not fulfilled for years. Often, these situations imply a protracted dependency on external support.

6 \ The term livelihood is used here in the broad sense of sustaining a way of life according to the measure of certain groups; it includes all activities carried out to safeguard and sustainably secure the living conditions, based on the interpretation of the group itself, which is pursuing these activities in the specific case. Cf. Grawert & Mielke, 2018.

The typical strategy of humanitarian organizations, however, separates people in need into different categories and target groups depending on the context—internally displaced persons, returnees, deportees, local host communities, refugees in the regional neighbourhood, host communities in the region, refugees in Europe, and so on, without this increasing the chances to generate sustainable livelihood. The sharp distinctions conceal the interactions of displaced persons spread across and beyond these groups, and obscure the transnational agency of displaced Afghans.

The conventional approaches of the United Nations, and of international refugee policies, are not flexible enough to account for the livelihood realities of Afghans. We, therefore, call for the political and practical support offered by their transnational networks to be recognized as a further durable solution. Governments, for their part, should recognize transnational networks as relevant redistribution mechanisms that serve the needs of family members left behind at home and support existing self-help efforts. Government, humanitarian, and development actors could then employ these self-initiated social infrastructures to facilitate education, medical care, employment and the integration of those who move between the different network nodes. As refugees and migrants are very committed to supporting family members who have remained in their home countries, the simplification of international transfers of money and goods can usefully complement humanitarian and development aid within Afghanistan.

Consequences for German development cooperation: New approaches to supporting transnational Afghan networks

If transnational networks are recognized as an important element where Afghans' agency manifests, i.e. for galvanizing self-generated initiatives and self-help among Afghans, a series of policy recommendations for the amendment of migration and refugee policies emerge:

- \ A ground-breaking step towards a migration and refugee policy for Afghans which encourages networks would be the support of the Afghan government in the initiation and conclusion of regional labour migration agreements. Afghanistan's National Labour Migration Strategy and the Afghan government's Labour Market Policy framework should become part of the Global Compact for Migration. Due to structural limitations, the Afghan government is, in the medium term, not in a position to offer its citizens employment and education to the extent required. There are both natural geographic and political economic reasons for this, such as small agricultural areas, very little industrialization, a small services sector, an economy which is in deficit and a state budget that is dependent on external financing and remittances from migrants. To help the Afghan government to benefit from the potential of remittances, the legal and coordinated export of labour to countries in the region—for example the Arab Gulf States, Russia and neighbouring Pakistan, Iran as well as central Asian countries—must be facilitated. This would also reduce the socio-economic pressure on the Afghan job market and create an effective exit valve for underemployment and unemployment. In addition to international contracts and framework agreements, it would require the education and training of Afghans to acquire skills that would allow them to compete with workers from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan in the labour markets of the Gulf States.

- \ At the same time, in the Global Compact for Migration discussions, the German government should insist on enshrining legal access to education, training/apprenticeships or employment for refugees and migrants. Those who are successful will thus be put in a position to support their families in Afghanistan or abroad through remittances. The control of remittances should also be fostered by means of the KfW giving its pilot project in collaboration with the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank a more permanent status and expanding support of low transfer charges for Afghan migrants' cash remittances. The German government should support this by pushing for a reduction in transfer charges in the negotiations for the Global Compact for Migration.
- \ In the consultations on the Global Compact on Refugees, the German government should aim to achieve, as a matter of principle, non-discriminate access to education, effective legal protection, the right to land and housing and medical care for displaced Afghans in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. In the interest of protection, the administrative authorities in the German federal states may then only carry out deportations if they guarantee the deportees long-term security and sustainable livelihood options. This includes not only the self-sufficiency of repatriated Afghans but also that of their families in Afghanistan. GIZ (Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit) should promote the reintegration of the returnees from Germany, Iran and Pakistan by creating effective medium-term income opportunities.
- \ The analysis of transnational networks shows that due to mixed migration, it is rare for entire families to emigrate abroad for good but that Afghans also do not want to leave their host country behind entirely. The German government should pass a national immigration law which defines under which conditions and with which qualifications potential migrants can obtain legal access to education, training and the German jobs market. By doing so, legal access to the German labour and education/training markets for qualified and skilled people from abroad, including from Afghanistan, will be regulated, and the immigration of unauthorized people will be excluded. Afghan men and women could then provide financial support to their families in Afghanistan, removing the need for these family members to emigrate.
- \ In line with the logic of supporting transnational networks, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) could expand its mandate to promote sustainable development to include support of Afghans in Germany by offering scholarships, language courses and limited-time social assistance during a temporary residence in Germany for skills-training and professional development. A legally regulated and coordinated admission of applicants from abroad—including Afghans—to training, further education and university programmes could have the aim of promoting qualified employment in under-staffed areas on the German and European labour markets. As a side effect, this type of policy could contribute to creating a “Germanophile” elite. Young Afghans with this type of background could help to constructively shape future relationships between Afghanistan and Germany from within Afghan society.
- \ Protracted displacement situations are empirically closely linked to phenomena of exclusion. Marginalization is reinforced by inferiority such as is attributed to internally displaced people and refugees externally as well as by those affected themselves. Besides working towards non-discriminate access to land, public services, political representation and participation which is independent of status, contributors such as the BMZ and the Federal Foreign Office should avoid categorizations such as internally displaced people, refugees,

undocumented migrants, deportees, etc. in their funding lines, and instead strive to achieve an integrated support for communities. Those affected by conflict will benefit more from this. Programmes supporting host communities could respond more flexibly to the challenges in the context of hosting than special aid programmes for narrowly defined target groups that automatically exclude others.

- \ Given that the control and influence of the Afghan government at a local level is decreasing, German implementing organizations such as GIZ should involve local guilds, professional associations and commercial representatives in their programmes. These organizations can provide access to communities located in the areas which are beyond the control of the state security bodies, and they can help provide local employment. Training, further education and employment programmes should not exclude the people living there but should create vocational training and sector-specific employment in accordance with the needs of the local Afghan labour market. The BMZ should encourage local implementing organizations to work closely with locally elected community development councils in areas under the control of the government as well as outside of these areas.

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