



موسسه حمایت پایدار در افغانستان
Organization for Sustainable Aid in Afghanistan



Harnessing Potential: A Research on the Skills, Market Integration, and Livelihood Needs of Afghan Returnees in Herat Province

November 2025



Research and Funding Organizations

Organization for Sustainable Aid in Afghanistan (OSAA)

Organization for Sustainable Aid in Afghanistan – OSAA is a non-governmental, non-profit, and women-led organization. It is a development organization with no dependence on any political group or party. This organization was established in 2015 and is registered as an Afghan non-governmental organization in the Ministry of Economy with the registration number 3728. The mission of this organization is to empower and develop the economic and social status of society especially women. OSAA is committed to a development approach with a long-term impact on society. From the very beginning, OSAA has provided TVET and livelihood programs and facilitated job services for local returnees and the poor in partnership with CSOs, I/NGOs, UN Agencies, and Govt. Departments. In recent years, in addition to implementing livelihood programs, OSAA has conducted researches on marketable skills in the western provinces of Afghanistan.

Search for Common Ground Afghanistan (SFCG)

Search for Common Ground is an international non-profit organization that promotes the peaceful resolution of conflicts. With headquarters in Washington, DC, and Brussels, Belgium, Search's mission is to transform how individuals, organizations, and governments deal with conflict away from destructive approaches toward cooperative solutions. With more than 900 staff worldwide, Search implements projects in more than 37 countries across the world. Search designs and implements multifaceted, culturally appropriate, and conflict-sensitive programs using a diverse range of tools, including media and training, to promote dialogue, increase knowledge and determine a positive shift in behaviors. In mid-2019, Search opened its office in Afghanistan and was registered as an International NGO with the Afghan government.

Preface

The mass return of Afghans from Iran in 2025 has created an undeniable humanitarian challenge, placing immense strain on the resources and social fabric of communities, particularly in border provinces like Herat. However, to view this influx solely as a crisis is to miss its inherent potential. This research, made possible through the financial support of Search for Common Ground Afghanistan, repositions the narrative.

The purpose of this research report is to provide evidence-based insights into the complex challenges and significant opportunities facing Afghan nationals returning from Iran. By examining the market-relevant vocational skills they possess, the systemic barriers that impede their economic and social integration, and the support mechanisms that prove most effective, this research aims to inform the design and implementation of more impactful reintegration programs and policies.

By working in close collaboration with government partners, community leaders, and the returnees themselves, OSAA has sought to illuminate a practical path forward, one that transforms a humanitarian challenge into a strategic development opportunity.

It is our hope that the findings and recommendations contained herein will serve as a vital resource for donors, government stakeholders, and implementing partners working to transform a humanitarian challenge into a sustainable development opportunity for the people of Afghanistan.

Fareshteh Yaqoubi

OSAA Director

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	Error! Bookmark not defined.
List of Acronyms and Abbreviations	7
Executive Summary	8
1.0 Introduction: A Crisis of Return, An Opportunity for Development	9
1.1 The 2025 Influx: Context and Scale	9
1.2 The Human Capital Paradigm.....	9
1.3 Research Objectives and Key Questions	10
2.0 Research Methodology	11
2.1 Research Design.....	11
2.2 Qualitative Phase: Understanding the Lived Experience.....	11
2.3 Quantitative Phase: Measuring the Trends	11
3.0 Profile of Returnee Households in Herat	13
3.1 Demographics and Household Composition.....	13
3.2 Migration History and Education.....	13
3.3 Current Economic and Employment Status	13
4.0 The Human Capital Dividend: Returnee Skills and Market Demand	15
4.1 An Inventory of Returnee Vocational Skills.....	15
4.2 Labor Market Demand in Herat	16
4.3 Analysis of Skill Alignment.....	17
5. Barriers to Economic and Social Reintegration	17
5.1 Economic Barriers: The Capital and Tools Deficit.....	18
5.2 Social and Cultural Barriers: Stigma and Distrust	18
5.3 Institutional and Gender-Specific Hurdles.....	18
5.4 The Psychosocial Toll of Displacement.....	19
6. Pathways to Prosperity: Effective Support Mechanisms	19
6.1 The Current Support Landscape: A Critical Assessment.....	20
6.2 A Consensus on What Works: High-Impact Interventions.....	20
6.3 Addressing Systemic Gaps in Coordination	22
7. Conclusion and Strategic Recommendations	24
7.1 Summary of Key Findings	24
7.2 Strategic Recommendations.....	24
Recommendation A: Invest in Productive Assets and Entrepreneurship.....	24

Recommendation B: Foster Direct Market Linkages.....	25
Recommendation C: Build Social Cohesion and Foundational Support	25
Recommendation D: Strengthen Coordination and System-Level Response	25
Appendices.....	25
Appendix A: Research Instruments	25
Appendix B: Quantitative Survey Data	26
References.....	27

Acknowledgements

The successful completion of this research would not have been possible without the invaluable contributions of numerous individuals and partners. First and foremost, we extend our deepest gratitude to the Afghan returnees who participated in our focus group discussions and surveys. Their willingness to share their experiences, challenges, and aspirations with honesty and courage forms the bedrock of this report.

We are equally grateful to the key informants, representatives from local and international NGOs, government authorities, employers, and community leaders—who provided critical context and expert insights into the complexities of reintegration in Herat.

This study was led by the dedicated OSAA research team, under the guidance of Abdul Basir Hamidi, Program Officer, whose commitment to rigorous, community-focused research was instrumental. The research team also extends sincere appreciation to Mohammad Ali Soroosh for his valuable contribution as a volunteer Senior Advisor, whose support throughout the research process—including providing guidance, proofreading the final report text and contents, and offering advice—greatly strengthened this work.

Finally, we offer our sincere appreciation to Search for Common Ground Afghanistan for their vital financial support, which enabled this important work to be undertaken. Their partnership has been essential in bringing these findings to light.

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

Acronym	Definition
DoLSA	Department of Labor and Social Affairs
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
KII	Key Informant Interview
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OSAA	Organization for Sustainable Aid in Afghanistan
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Executive Summary

Introduction: The year 2025 witnessed one of the largest waves of return migration in Afghanistan's recent history, as over a million Afghans returned from Iran following the expiry of the "Headcount slip" residency permit. This mass influx has placed extraordinary pressure on border provinces, particularly Herat, which serves as a primary reintegration hub. This research was commissioned to move beyond a purely humanitarian lens and investigate a critical development opportunity: how the vocational skills and human capital of these returnees can be effectively harnessed to foster economic growth and strengthen social cohesion. By examining the skills returnees possess, the barriers they face, and the support mechanisms that truly work, this report provides an evidence-based roadmap for Govt., donors, and implementing partners.

Key Findings: The study confirms that the returnee population represents a significant, yet largely untapped, reservoir of human capital. Returnees possess a diverse range of marketable vocational skills, with men predominantly skilled in construction trades (masonry, welding, carpentry) and mechanics, and women in tailoring, hairdressing, and food processing. These skills show strong alignment with the demands of Herat's local labor market. However, a formidable set of barriers prevents their productive use. The most critical and universally cited obstacle is a **lack of productive assets**—namely, start-up capital and essential work tools. This economic barrier is compounded by significant social challenges, including **stigma and distrust** from host communities, which lead to hiring discrimination and exclusion. The experience of displacement has also taken a severe psychosocial toll, with widespread reports of **depression and hopelessness** further impeding economic initiative.

Effective Interventions: Across focus groups with returnees and interviews with expert stakeholders, a clear and powerful consensus emerged on the most effective forms of support. Short-term humanitarian aid provided at the border, while necessary, is insufficient for sustainable reintegration. Instead, there is overwhelming demand for interventions that build long-term self-sufficiency. The most effective strategies identified include: **1) Productive Asset Transfers**, such as “cash plus tools” programs that provide skilled individuals with the specific equipment (e.g., sewing machines, mechanic's toolkits) needed to start a business; **2) Market Linkage Programs**, including employer referrals and apprenticeships to build trust and connect returnees directly to jobs; and **3) Targeted Support for Women's Entrepreneurship**, focusing on home-based enterprise models that overcome mobility restrictions.

Strategic Recommendations: To transform this crisis of return into a development opportunity, this report calls for a strategic shift from temporary relief to long-term investment in livelihoods. We recommend a coordinated effort among government, UN agencies, and NGOs focused on four key pillars. First, **invest directly in productive assets** through toolkit and micro-grant programs, particularly for home-based female entrepreneurs. Second, **foster direct market linkages** by scaling up apprenticeship programs and demand-driven vocational "upskilling" courses with guaranteed job placements. Third, **build social cohesion and foundational support** by integrating psychosocial services into all livelihood programs and funding joint community projects. Finally, **strengthen systemic coordination** by establishing a unified reintegration task force in Herat to de-conflict activities and create a seamless referral pathway for returnees.

1.0 Introduction: A Crisis of Return, An Opportunity for Development

The mass return of over a million Afghans from Iran in 2025 presents a profound humanitarian challenge for Afghanistan, particularly for border provinces like Herat that are at the forefront of this influx. The sheer scale of this movement is placing immense pressure on already strained public services, local economies, and social systems. However, to frame this event solely as a crisis is to overlook a significant, concurrent development opportunity. This report shows that these returnees, far from being mere dependents, represent a vital infusion of human capital. They bring with them a wealth of vocational skills, diverse work experiences, and an entrepreneurial drive acquired abroad—assets that, if properly harnessed, can become a powerful engine for local economic recovery and social renewal.

1.1 The 2025 Influx: Context and Scale

The recent shift in migration dynamics stems from policy changes in Iran, long a primary host country for Afghans. Following the expiry of the "Headcount slip" residency permit in March 2025, the Iranian government launched a regularization and return scheme, compelling a large-scale return of Afghans. This resulted in an unprecedented wave of return migration, with official data indicating that **over 1.28 million Afghans returned from Iran by the end of July 2025**. The peak occurred in July alone, with over 745,400 individuals crossing the border in that single month.

The demographic profile of this returnee population underscores the scale of the challenge for social and economic integration. According to OCHA (2025), the returning population consists of:

- **50%** adult males
- **17%** adult females
- **33%** children under 18

A majority of these individuals are undocumented and have often spent long periods in Iran, where they had limited access to formal employment and legal protection. Their arrival in provinces like Herat, which already face significant economic and social vulnerabilities, creates an urgent need for effective reintegration strategies.

1.2 The Human Capital Paradigm

The core argument of this research is that returnees should be viewed not as a burden, but as bearers of valuable human capital. As established in the literature, migrants who spend extended periods abroad acquire practical skills, work experience, and social capital that are vital for development upon their return (Cassarino, 2004; Loschmann & Marchand, 2021). The competencies acquired in Iran—ranging from construction and manufacturing trades to service-sector skills like automotive mechanics and tailoring—constitute an important resource that can strengthen Afghanistan's fragile labor market.

When effectively reintegrated, this human capital can drive economic growth from the ground up. Returnees with entrepreneurial experience can initiate small businesses, which are key drivers of local income generation and job creation. Their technical and vocational knowledge can also

facilitate innovation and improve service delivery, particularly when linked to local market demands and supported by well-designed reintegration programs. By shifting the paradigm from humanitarian relief to strategic investment in human capital, this migration crisis can be transformed into a powerful opportunity for fostering entrepreneurship, increasing productivity, and building more resilient communities.

1.3 Research Objectives and Key Questions

The primary aim of this research is to examine how the vocational skills acquired by Afghan returnees can be effectively harnessed to support social cohesion and local development in Herat province. The study seeks to address a critical knowledge gap by exploring the specific skills returnees possess, the barriers that prevent them from utilizing these skills, and the support mechanisms that can facilitate their successful economic and social integration.

To achieve this, the research was guided by three core questions:

1. What specific vocational skills do returnees possess that are in demand in Afghanistan?
2. What barriers do returnees face in terms of economic integration, social acceptance, and community involvement?
3. What support mechanisms (NGOs and community-based) are most effective in facilitating the economic integration of returnees?

To answer these critical questions, a rigorous mixed-methods approach was employed to capture both the lived experiences of returnees and the quantitative scale of the challenges and opportunities.

2.0 Research Methodology

To develop a comprehensive understanding of the complex issue of returnee reintegration, this study adopted an exploratory sequential mixed-methods research design. This approach was chosen for its ability to integrate the depth of qualitative inquiry with the breadth of quantitative measurement. By first exploring the nuanced lived experiences of returnees and then measuring the prevalence of key themes across a larger population, this methodology provides a robust and credible evidence base for developing effective policies and programs.

2.1 Research Design

The study followed an exploratory sequential model. The research began with a qualitative phase designed to uncover the key themes, challenges, and opportunities related to returnee skills and integration. The rich insights generated from this initial phase directly informed the development of a structured survey questionnaire for the subsequent quantitative phase. This two-step process ensures that the quantitative survey is grounded in the actual experiences of the returnee community, thereby enhancing the validity and relevance of the findings.

2.2 Qualitative Phase: Understanding the Lived Experience

The initial qualitative phase aimed to explore the skill profiles, employability perceptions, and the social, economic, and institutional barriers hindering returnee reintegration.

- **Sampling:** A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants for **8 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)** and **10 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)**. This method ensured the inclusion of a diverse range of perspectives relevant to the research questions.
- **Participants:** FGDs were conducted with distinct groups of male and female returnees to capture gender-specific experiences. KIIs were conducted with a range of stakeholders, including staff from local and international NGOs, local government authorities, private sector employers, and community leaders.
- **Data Collection:** Semi-structured interview guides, aligned with the core research questions, were used to facilitate in-depth conversations in both the FGDs and KIIs. This flexible format allowed for the exploration of emergent themes while ensuring key topics were consistently covered.
- **Data Analysis:** All interviews were transcribed and translated. The data was then systematically analyzed using thematic analysis to identify, code, and interpret recurring patterns and themes across the dataset.

2.3 Quantitative Phase: Measuring the Trends

Building on the findings from the qualitative phase, a structured survey questionnaire was developed and administered to **267 returnees** in Herat. The survey included closed-ended and scaled questions to capture measurable data on demographics, skill types, employment status, income, access to capital, and barriers to reintegration. The collected data was analyzed using

descriptive statistics to summarize key variables and quantify the prevalence of the trends identified in the qualitative phase.

The application of this methodology yielded a rich dataset, beginning with a clear demographic and socio-economic profile of the returnee population.

3.0 Profile of Returnee Households in Herat

Understanding the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the returnee population is essential for effective program design and policy-making. This data provides the foundational context for interpreting their skills, barriers, and needs, ensuring that subsequent analysis and recommendations are tailored to the reality on the ground in Herat. The following profile is based on a survey of 267 returnee individuals.

3.1 Demographics and Household Composition

The survey data reveals a population balanced in gender, with **135 women** and **132 men** participating. The returnees are predominantly young adults, with the largest age cohort (**163 participants**) being between **20 and 35 years old**. This indicates a population in its prime working years, representing significant potential for the labor force. The vast majority of respondents (**241 participants**) are married, suggesting that most are part of family units with dependents, which elevates the urgency of securing stable livelihoods.

3.2 Migration History and Education

The migration history of the returnees' points to a population with deep, albeit often informal, connections to Iran. A significant portion of the population spent considerable time abroad, with **111 individuals having lived in Iran for 1 to 5 years** and another **92 for 6 to 10 years**. This extended duration abroad is often correlated with the acquisition of practical vocational skills and work experience. However, educational attainment is modest, with **125 participants having completed only elementary school** and **90 reporting as illiterate**. This highlights a critical distinction: while formal education levels may be low, the population possesses significant vocational, rather than academic, human capital.

3.3 Current Economic and Employment Status

The economic reality facing returnees upon their arrival in Herat is stark and precarious.

Employment: A large segment of the population is struggling to find stable work. Survey data shows that **87 participants are jobless**, while **94 are engaged in precarious daily wage labor**. Only 58 individuals have managed to become small business owners. This underemployment is not due to a lack of effort, as an overwhelming **243 participants report they are actively seeking work**.

Income: The financial situation is extremely challenging. The vast majority of returnees (**237 participants**) earn **less than 5,000 AFS per month**, an income level that places them in a state of severe economic vulnerability and makes it nearly impossible to meet basic household needs, let alone invest in the future.

Access to Capital: The single greatest barrier to economic self-sufficiency is a near-total lack of access to finance. A staggering **237 participants (89%) report having no access to any financial facilities** to start a business. This lack of capital effectively prevents skilled individuals from

leveraging their expertise to become entrepreneurs or even acquire the basic tools needed for wage labor.

Despite these challenging economic circumstances, this population possesses a wealth of vocational skills that represent a significant, yet untapped, resource for Herat's economy.

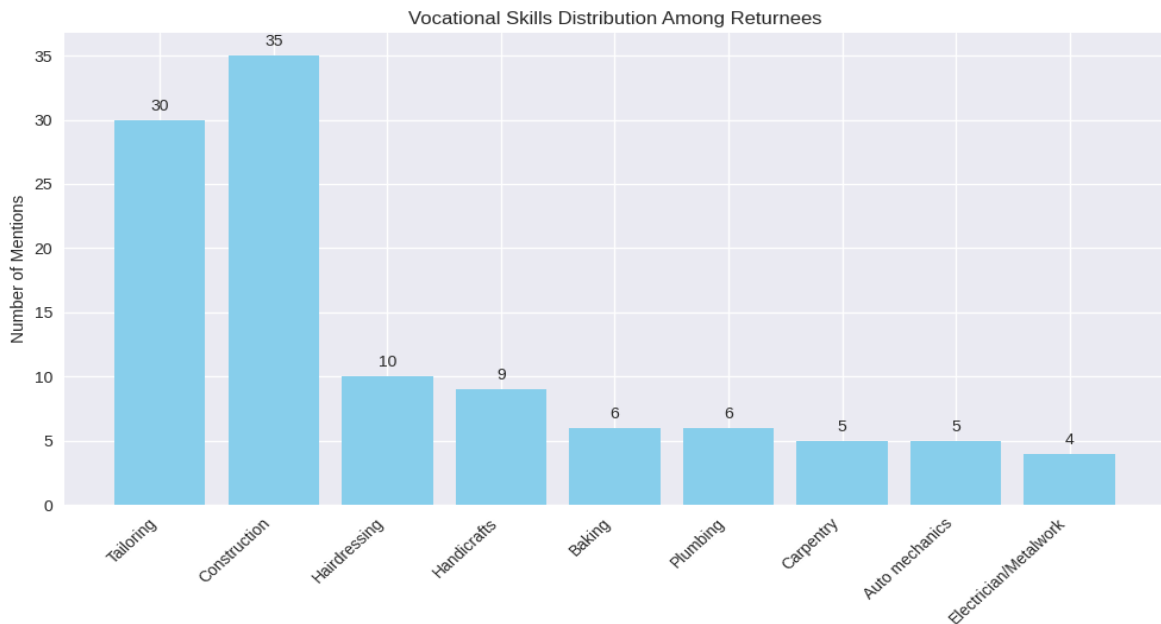
4.0 The Human Capital Dividend: Returnee Skills and Market Demand

The central finding of this research is the significant reservoir of marketable vocational skills present within the returnee population. These competencies, acquired through years of work in Iran's informal and formal economies, represent a "human capital dividend" that could fuel local economic growth if effectively integrated. This chapter first provides a detailed inventory of these skills, distinguished by gender, and then assesses their alignment with the current demands of Herat's local labor market, revealing a powerful opportunity for targeted development interventions.

4.1 An Inventory of Returnee Vocational Skills

Analysis of focus group discussions and key informant interviews revealed a diverse and practical skill set among returnees. These skills are often gender-specific, reflecting the labor market segmentation experienced in Iran and the cultural context in Afghanistan.

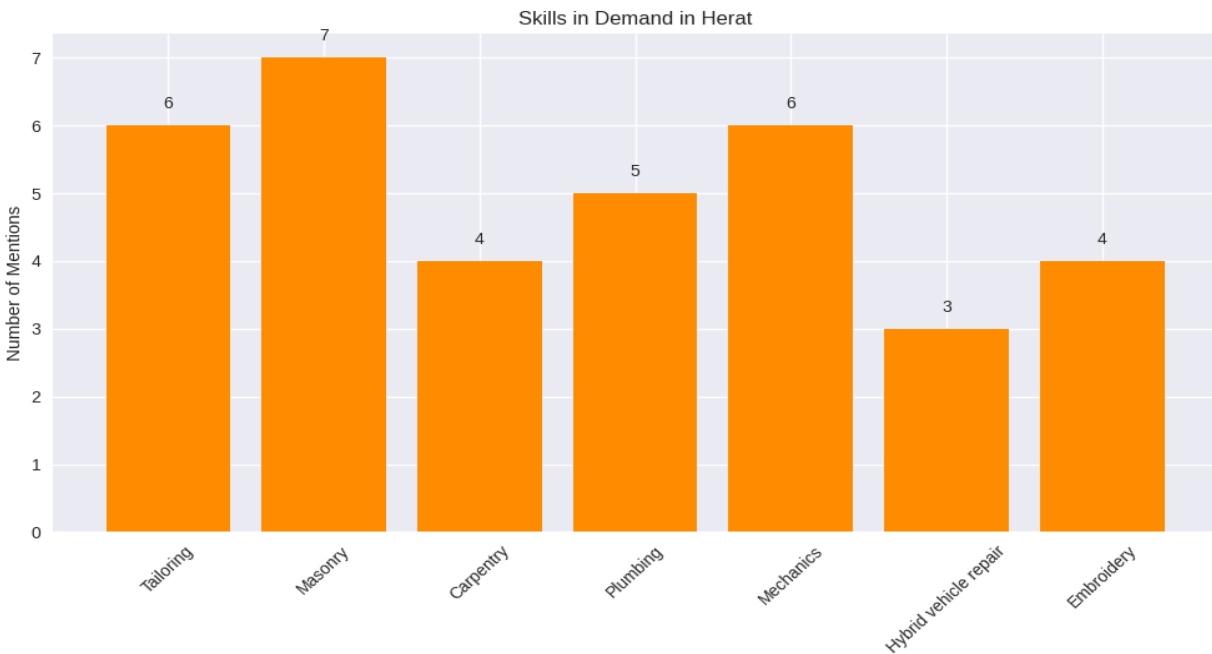
Skills Primarily Held by Men	Skills Primarily Held by Women
Construction Trades: Masonry, tiling, welding, formwork, plumbing	Textiles and Crafts: Tailoring, beadwork, embroidery, handicrafts, carpet weaving
Mechanical Trades: Automotive mechanics, electricians	Cosmetology: Hairdressing
Carpentry and Metalwork: General carpentry, MDF furniture making, metalwork	Food Production: Baking, food processing (jam and pickle making)
Emerging Skills: Hybrid vehicle repair, machine engineering	Service Skills: Home-based businesses, online work



4.2 Labor Market Demand in Herat

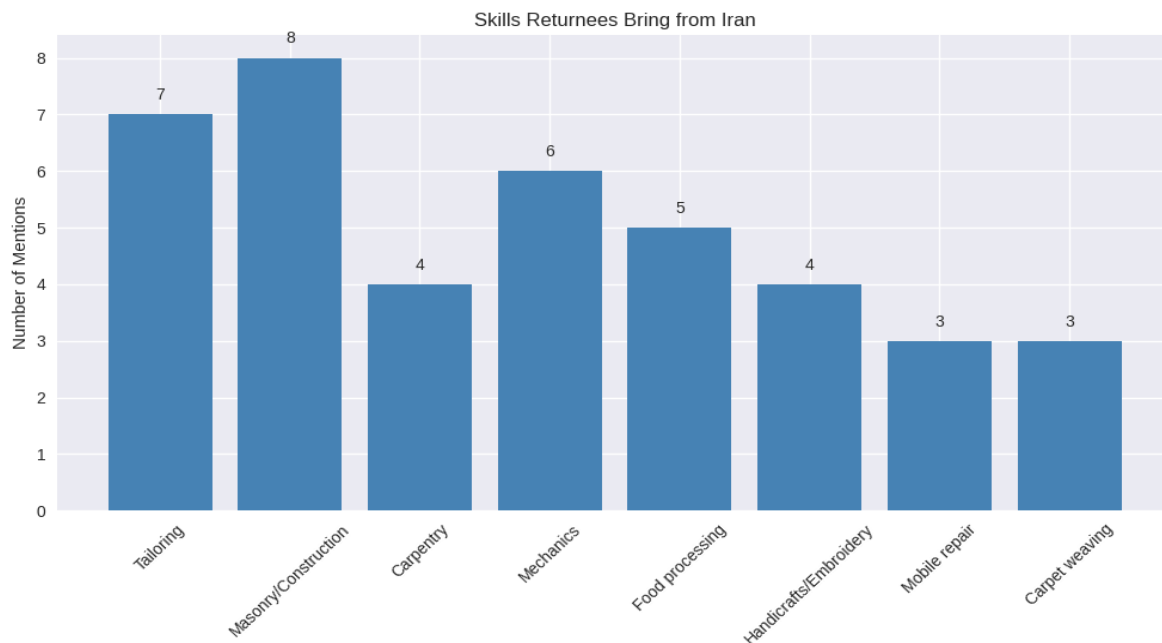
Interviews with local employers, NGO staff, and returnees themselves provided a clear picture of the labor market needs in Herat. The findings show a strong alignment between many returnee skills and areas of high demand, although some mismatches and saturation exist.

- **High-Demand Vocations:**
 - **Construction Trades (men):** Skilled masons, tilers, welders, and plumbers are consistently sought after for Herat's construction sector.
 - **Mechanics (men):** There is a strong demand for automotive mechanics, with a particular emerging need for technicians skilled in repairing **hybrid vehicles**.
 - **Tailoring and Hairdressing (women):** These services are highly marketable, especially for women, and represent a major opportunity for home-based and small-scale entrepreneurship.
 - **Handicrafts (women):** Skills like embroidery and beadwork are in demand, offering viable income streams for women.
- **Saturated or Mismatched Skills:**
 - **Oversupply:** Some informants noted that certain construction trades can be seasonally saturated, leading to increased competition and suppressed wages.
 - **Skill Mismatch:** Some skills acquired in Iran's industrial sector, such as specific types of factory line work or electric gate repair, have limited direct applicability in the Herat market, which has a different economic structure.



4.3 Analysis of Skill Alignment

There is a strong and promising alignment between the vocational skills possessed by returnees and the explicit needs of the Herat labor market. The overlap is particularly significant in the construction, mechanics, and tailoring sectors, which are key drivers of local employment. This alignment validates the core premise of the research: returnees are not an unskilled population but a valuable source of human capital.



However, targeted support is required to bridge specific gaps, such as upskilling mechanics for hybrid vehicles or connecting skilled tradespeople with reputable employers to overcome market saturation. However, the existence of these valuable and in-demand skills is not sufficient for successful integration, as returnees face a formidable array of barriers preventing them from deploying their human capital.

5. Barriers to Economic and Social Reintegration

Despite possessing a rich inventory of in-demand vocational skills, the vast majority of returnees are unable to achieve economic self-sufficiency or stable livelihoods. Their potential is constrained by a complex web of interconnected barriers that span the economic, social, institutional, and psychosocial domains. This section systematically analyzes these obstacles, which collectively prevent skilled individuals from translating their human capital into sustainable income.

5.1 Economic Barriers: The Capital and Tools Deficit

The **lack of financial capital** and **work tools** is the most significant and frequently cited barrier to economic reintegration. This single factor was identified in nearly every focus group and key informant interview as the primary obstacle preventing skilled individuals from becoming economically active. Without access to start-up capital, a tailor cannot buy a sewing machine, a carpenter cannot acquire tools, and a mechanic cannot rent a small workshop. This deficit effectively traps them in a cycle of unemployment or precarious daily wage labor, where even being hired can depend on owning one's own tools.

"We have the skills; we have the knowledge from Iran. But our hands are empty. A mason without his trowel is just another man looking for work. Give us the tools, and we will build our own futures." – Male Returnee, Focus Group Discussion

Secondary economic barriers exacerbate this core problem. The need for a **financial guarantor** to rent a shop or even secure housing is a major hurdle for newly arrived families with limited social networks. Furthermore, the lack of **affordable and safe workspaces**, particularly for women, restricts opportunities for entrepreneurship.

5.2 Social and Cultural Barriers: Stigma and Distrust

Returnees face significant social challenges that isolate them from the host community and the local economy. Many participants reported experiencing stigma, mockery, and social distrust. They are often labeled as "Iranians," and their accents or style of dress are sometimes ridiculed, leading to social exclusion, particularly for children in schools.

This social friction translates directly into economic barriers. Employers and landlords express a reluctance to hire or rent to returnees without a local guarantor, citing a lack of trust. This distrust can also manifest in the exploitation of returnee labor, with some participants reporting delayed or non-payment of wages. The perception among some host community members that returnees are competing for scarce resources and receiving preferential treatment from aid agencies further fuels social tensions.

5.3 Institutional and Gender-Specific Hurdles

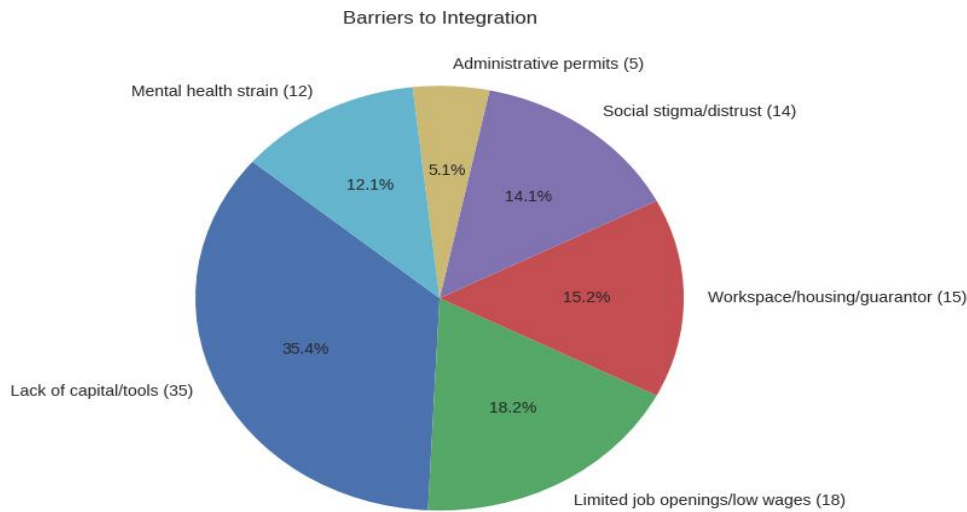
Institutional and administrative obstacles create another layer of difficulty. **Returnees** report significant delays in obtaining essential civil documentation, such as the **national ID** card (Tazkira), which is often a prerequisite for formal employment, opening a bank account, or obtaining a business license.

These barriers are particularly **severe for women**. The enforcement of the **Mahram (chaperon)** policy, which requires a male guardian for mobility, severely restricts women's ability to travel to workplaces, markets, or training centers. This is compounded by a lack of affordable childcare, family restrictions on working outside the home, and outright exclusion from certain workplaces. These gender-specific hurdles systematically limit women's economic participation, forcing them into home-based work even when they possess skills marketable in the wider economy.

5.4 The Psychosocial Toll of Displacement

The cumulative effect of displacement, unemployment, and social exclusion has a significant impact on the mental health of returnees. Both focus groups and key informant interviews highlighted prevalent feelings of **depression, hopelessness, and decreased motivation**. This psychological strain is exacerbated by constant anxiety over housing insecurity and the inability to provide for one's family. This mental health burden is not a secondary issue; it is a primary barrier to reintegration, as it saps the confidence and proactive energy required to seek employment, start a business, or engage with the community.

Understanding these multifaceted barriers is the first step; the next is to identify the precise support mechanisms that can effectively dismantle them and unlock returnee potential.



6. Pathways to Prosperity: Effective Support Mechanisms

This research not only cataloged the barriers to reintegration but also generated a clear consensus—among returnees, employers, and expert stakeholders alike—on the most effective strategies for fostering sustainable livelihoods. This chapter moves from problem analysis to solution-oriented recommendations. It begins by critically assessing the current aid landscape and then presents a roadmap of high-impact interventions that reflect a shared understanding of what truly works to help returnees achieve economic self-sufficiency.

6.1 The Current Support Landscape: A Critical Assessment

The support currently received by most returnees is concentrated at the border crossing point and is primarily humanitarian in nature. This aid typically consists of:

- A small cash grant (often 2,000–10,000 AFN)
- A SIM card, and
- Occasional food or hygiene kits

While essential for addressing immediate needs upon arrival, returnees universally describe this support as **short-lived and insufficient** for facilitating long-term economic integration.

A common and frustrating experience reported by many participants is engagement with numerous organizations for surveys and needs assessments, with little or no tangible follow-up assistance. This has created a sense of "survey fatigue" and skepticism toward aid efforts. The current landscape is dominated by short-term relief, with a notable scarcity of sustainable livelihood programs that can bridge the gap from dependency to self-reliance.



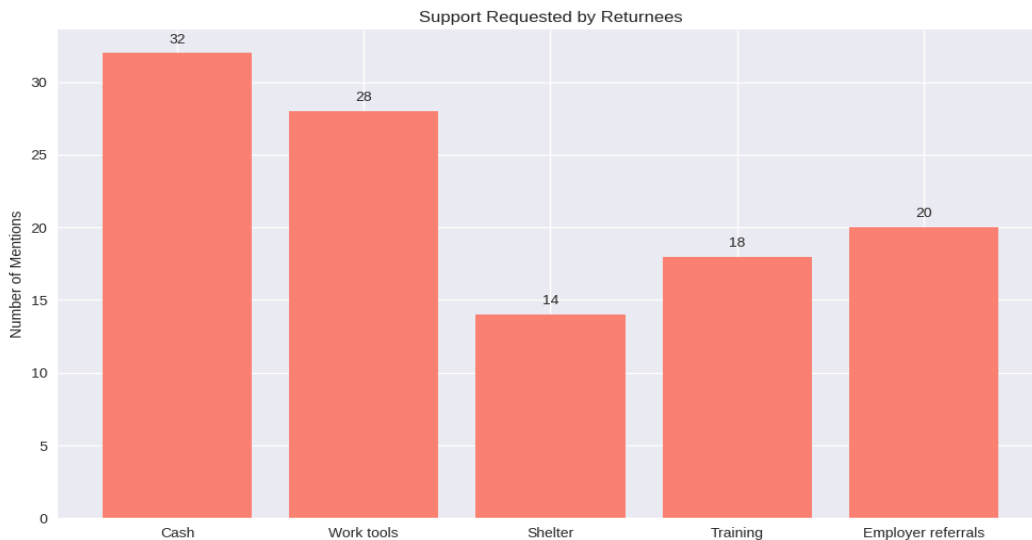
6.2 A Consensus on What Works: High-Impact Interventions

A powerful finding of this study is the remarkable degree of agreement between returnees and key informants on the types of support that are most effective. This consensus points toward a clear set of priorities for future programming.

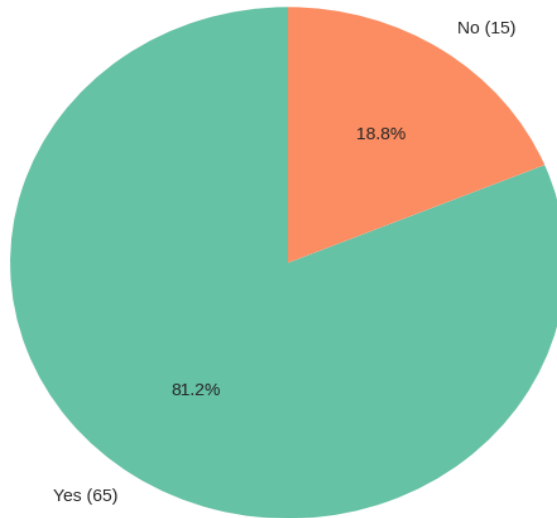
- **Productive Asset Transfers:** This was the most frequently and passionately demanded form of support. The "Cash plus Tools" model, which provides in-kind toolkits (e.g., a

sewing machine for a tailor, a comprehensive toolset for a mechanic) or direct grants for purchasing such assets, is seen as the most direct way to unlock a skilled individual's potential. It directly addresses the primary barrier of a lack of capital.

- **Market Linkage Programs:** To overcome social distrust and connect skilled workers with opportunities, structured market linkage programs are essential. This includes formal **employer referral systems** and **apprenticeship programs**, which allow returnees to demonstrate their skills and build trust with local businesses.
- **Targeted Vocational Training:** Returnees do not need long, basic training courses. Instead, they expressed a clear preference for short-term, practical "upskilling" courses that are directly aligned with specific, high-demand employer needs (e.g., a course on repairing hybrid vehicle engines) and are directly linked to a guaranteed job placement.
- **Support for Women's Entrepreneurship:** To address the unique barriers faced by women, support must be tailored to home-based enterprise models. This includes providing equipment for individual businesses or establishing **multi-machine micro-workshops or production clusters**. These clusters allow women to work collectively, aggregate orders, and access markets they could not reach individually.
- **Integrated Support:** Livelihood programs are most effective when they are part of a holistic support package. Stakeholders emphasized the need to bundle economic interventions with **Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)** to build confidence and resilience, as well as **legal aid** to help returnees navigate the process of obtaining essential documentation.



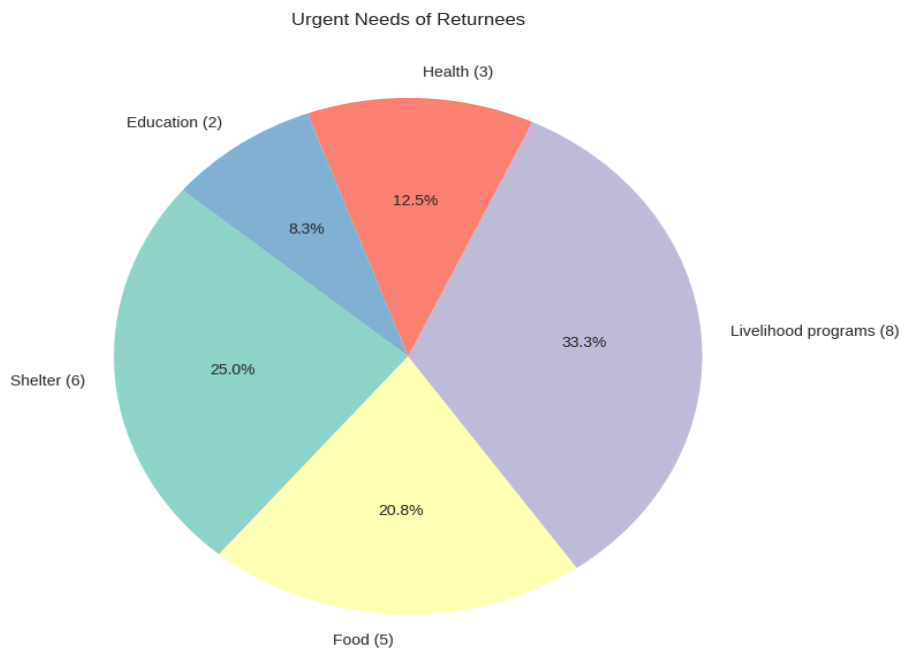
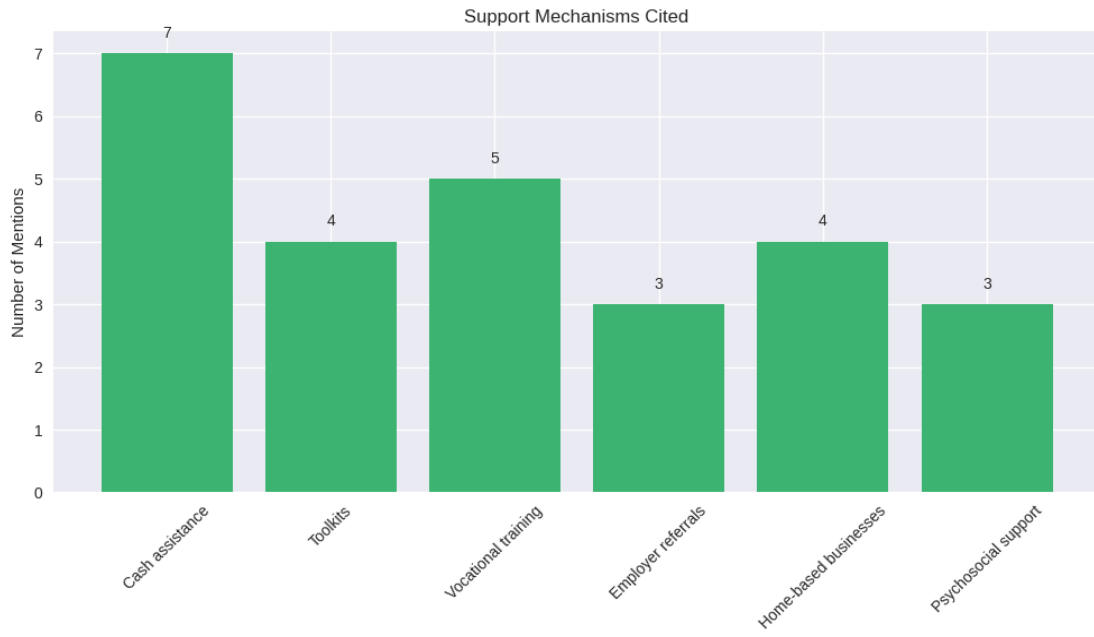
Willingness to Participate in Training Workshops



6.3 Addressing Systemic Gaps in Coordination

Key informants from NGOs and government bodies identified significant institutional challenges that hamper the effectiveness of the overall response. There is reportedly weak trust and poor coordination between NGOs and government authorities, leading to a duplication of efforts and inefficient use of resources. The absence of a unified database or referral system means that returnees must navigate a fragmented and confusing landscape of aid providers. This lack of a coherent, system-level strategy prevents the scaling of effective interventions and leaves many returnees without access to the support they need.

This clear evidence on what works, combined with an understanding of the systemic gaps, provides the foundation for a set of strategic, actionable recommendations for all stakeholders.



7. Conclusion and Strategic Recommendations

Herat province, and Afghanistan as a whole, is facing a moment of choice. The massive influx of returnees from Iran can be viewed as a crisis that will strain limited resources and exacerbate social tensions. Alternatively, it can be recognized as a historic opportunity to harness an unprecedented wave of human capital to drive local economic recovery and strengthen the social fabric. This report has concluded that the latter is not only possible but imperative. The evidence is clear: returnees possess the skills, the will, and the potential to contribute significantly to their communities. The following recommendations provide a clear, evidence-based path for donors, policymakers, and civil society to make strategic investments that will unlock this potential and turn a challenge into a shared success.

7.1 Summary of Key Findings

- **Untapped Human Capital:** Returnees possess a diverse and gender-specific set of vocational skills—particularly in construction, mechanics, and tailoring—that are highly relevant and in demand within Herat's labor market.
- **Primary Barrier to Entry:** The overwhelming obstacle to economic integration is not a lack of skills, but a lack of productive assets. The inability to afford start-up capital and essential work tools is the single greatest factor preventing skilled individuals from earning a livelihood.
- **Compounding Challenges:** Economic hardship is exacerbated by a web of secondary barriers, including social distrust and stigma from host communities, institutional hurdles in obtaining documentation, and the significant psychosocial stress of displacement and unemployment.
- **A Clear Path Forward:** There is a strong consensus among returnees and expert stakeholders that the aid response must shift from short-term humanitarian relief to long-term livelihood interventions focused on providing toolkits, fostering direct market linkages, and supporting entrepreneurship.

7.2 Strategic Recommendations

The following recommendations are designed to be actionable, evidence-based, and targeted at the most critical leverage points identified in the research.

Recommendation A: Invest in Productive Assets and Entrepreneurship

1. **Launch a "Toolkit and Micro-Grant" Program:** Directly address the primary barrier to self-sufficiency by providing in-kind toolkits (for mechanics, carpenters, tailors) and small, unrestricted capital grants. This will enable skilled returnees to immediately start home-based businesses and engage in self-employment.
2. **Establish Women-Led Production Hubs:** Fund the creation of community-based tailoring, embroidery, and food-processing clusters for women. This model overcomes mobility restrictions by providing shared equipment, access to raw materials, and collective links to local markets.

Recommendation B: Foster Direct Market Linkages

1. **Scale Up Apprenticeship and Employer Referral Programs:** Create a formal mechanism to connect skilled returnees with local Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). This should include short-term wage subsidies to employers to mitigate hiring risks, build trust, and demonstrate the value of returnee labor.
2. **Develop Demand-Driven “Upskilling” Courses:** Partner directly with local businesses and employer unions to design and deliver short-term vocational courses focused on specific, emerging market needs (e.g., hybrid vehicle mechanics, modernized embroidery techniques). These courses must include guaranteed job placements for graduates to ensure immediate economic returns.

Recommendation C: Build Social Cohesion and Foundational Support

1. **Integrate Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) into All Livelihood Programs:** Recognize that economic well-being is linked to mental health. All economic reintegration projects must include components for MHPSS to address trauma, build confidence, and foster the resilience needed for successful economic activity.
2. **Fund Community Cohesion Micro-Grants:** Launch a small grants facility for joint projects developed and implemented by both returnee and host community members. These projects (e.g., neighborhood improvement, joint business ventures) will help reduce social tensions and foster positive collaboration.
3. **Provide Legal Aid for Civil Documentation:** Partner with specialized legal aid organizations to offer dedicated support for returnees. This service will help fast-track the acquisition of Tazkira (national ID cards) and other business or work licenses that are critical for formal economic participation.

Recommendation D: Strengthen Coordination and System-Level Response

1. **Establish a Unified Reintegration Task Force in Herat:** Advocate for and co-lead a formal coordination platform bringing together key government bodies (DoLSA), UN agencies (UNHCR, OCHA), and local/international NGOs. The task force’s mandate will be to de-conflict activities, share data on needs and services, and create a unified referral pathway to ensure returnees can easily access the support they need.

Appendices

Appendix A: Research Instruments

- *Focus Group Discussion Guide (A1: FGD Questionnaires.pdf)*
- *Key Informant Interview Guide (A2: KII Interview.pdf)*
- *Survey Questionnaire (A3: Questionnaire Form.pdf)*

Appendix B: Quantitative Survey Data

Table B1: Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents (n=267)

Category	Sub-Category	Count
Gender	Women	135
	Men	132
Age Category	20-35	163
	36-45	70
	46-55	26
	>55	8
Marital Status	Married	241
	Single	13
	Divorced/Widowed	13
Education Level	Illiterate	90
	Elementary School	125
	Secondary School	31
	Undergraduate	21
Years in Iran	1 to 5 Years	111
	6 to 10 Years	92
	11 to 15 Years	40
	> 16 Years	24

Table B2: Economic and Employment Status (n=267)

Category	Response	Count
Current Job	Jobless	87
	Daily Worker	94
	Small Business Owner	58
	House Cleaner	26
	Student	2
Actively Looking for Job?	Yes	243
	No	24
Average Monthly Income (AFS)	Less than 5,000	237
	5,000 - 10,000	30
Access to Financial Facilities to Start Business?	No	237
	Yes	30
Have a Plan to Improve Employment?	Yes	198
	No	69

References

- Cassarino, J.-P. (2004). Theorising Return Migration: The Conceptual Approach to Return Migrants Revisited. *International Journal on Multicultural Societies (IJMS)*, 6(2), 253–279.
- Loschmann, C., & Marchand, K. (2021a). The labor market reintegration of returned refugees in Afghanistan. *Small Business Economics*, 56(3), 1033–1045. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-019-00315-w>
- OCHA. (2025). *Afghanistan Returnees Overview*.
<https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-returnees-overview>
- UNHCR. (2025, August). *Afghanistan Situation* . Operational Data Portal - UNHCR .
<https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan>