

STATEMENT BY THE DANISH REFUGEE COUNCIL HIGH LEVEL SEGMENT ON THE AFGHAN REFUGEE SITUATION

Honorable Mr. High Commissioner and Chair, honorable Ministers, excellences, ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Danish Refugee Council I want to confirm our commitment to a renewed effort to resolve Afghan displacement. It is our obligation to respond positively to the commitment of the Government of Afghanistan to work for an environment conducive to return. Displacement agencies, such as DRC, are able to draw on our work to establish lessons learned that can influence successful return.

Allow me to share five key experiences on this matter:

First: Principles and policies need to be right

I am very pleased with the statements from the Tripartite Commission Meetings between Afghanistan, the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan and UNHCR. We know that voluntariness, safety and dignity are therefore enshrined principles for the processes ahead.

And we have the necessary Regional Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees as an important response framework as well as a National Steering Committee to ensure the implementation of these initiatives.

The foundation is therefore set. And this is critical.

Second: Solutions to protracted displacement take time and information-sharing is key

We have to acknowledge the socio-economic reality in the region. I am reassured to hear the considerations to act on a phased approach. I think this is correct and needed. There are good reasons to assume that return will be a steady process and this gives an opportunity for improving conditions for solutions.

But we also have to put the individual at the center of all efforts, in order to be successful. I think we all can do better in listening to the views of refugees. They want to know what they can expect when going back. Will there be security? Where will we live? How will I get papers? Will I find a job? We need to be able to respond and we will need time for this.

And we have mechanisms to make this information accessible.

DRC has been arranging "Go-and-See visits" in many regions for years, where people can make unconditional visits to their return sites. I have personally witnessed the effectiveness of these visits for potential returnees the information they need for their decision making process.

Third: Hosting countries are critical to make a difference.

Let me start with the undisputed recognition of the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan's extraordinary commitment to their international responsibilities for the displaced Afghan communities.

Yet, I see an opportunity to reexamine our traditional hosting arrangements at global level- and I would like to also make reference to the recent debate in Europe.

Can we understand displaced communities also as an asset?

There is evidence of positive local economic impacts and several sectors of national economies even depend on foreign labor force, including displaced communities, and that these skills help returnees to quickly establish themselves on return to Afghanistan.

So, why not make this an asset also for return? If displaced are gaining skills, getting vocational training or engaging in trading business they have assets and established links they can use upon return?

I sense here is more potential than we perceive at the moment if wider economic access is given to the displaced if only for limited periods.

But there is also a very different element we need: data.

For planning purposes any entity will need reliable and disaggregated data. Such data collection is sensitive, as we all know, but it can be done when all actors agree to respect key principles of data management. For

instance, we have no clear figures of undocumented people and I think that a data collection process of those is needed, also for their interest in identifying solutions for them.

Fourth: Return requires integration support.

From all over the world we have learned that returnees cannot just be dropped at the border, if return is meant to be successful. Return must stand for a commitment for integration into society, and this requires support.

Let state some concrete examples here:

Return must happen within a legal framework which enables returnees to get documents to make them real citizen again. But also special issues for returnees- as recognition of foreign titles, degrees, or land and property rights- require special legislation and realization, and I think the context of Afghan return is no different in this respect.

We see that most returns happen to urban or semi-urban settlements as many returnees think job opportunities and access to services are simply better there, than in rural areas. The freedom of movement has to be accepted but poses a burden on cities struggling with its growth.

DRC has seen that urban planning is a critical tool in this respect. It allows authorities to actively prepare for its future. The provision of water and energy supplies, traffic and movement planning, residence and commercial centers and delivery of social services are equally relevant for residents as for returnees. Therefore, urban planning is a key investment in addressing the future for cities.

Another aspect is livelihood. There is vast experience in providing livelihood support for returnees, reaching from vocational training, cash grants, business support or work placement and also DRC has very positive experiences in urban settings in Afghanistan. The know-how is there, and with proper funding support and legal mechanisms a lot can be achieved.

But I want to make special reference to youth. They need to find links into the new society and we need to offer educational and professional opportunities them. I know 2016 will have a strong youth focus in UNHCR and this is most relevant because we may not lose the generation who will carry family responsibilities in the next years.

Fifth: Return requires inter-linking of all stakeholders.

Return is a very complex and dynamic process and requires short and long term. This requires cooperation among many actors.

We need the engagement of humanitarian and development actors. Return reaches from immediate response to long term structural changes. Therefore, we need all actors working on this goal. I call upon all of us to think outside the traditional box and seek cooperation with other stakeholders to make return a common effort.

But we also have to think cross-national and regional. We cannot perceive return within a national context only. The coordination across borders is critical so returnees can engage in displacement and are supported all the way through their return process.

I am very pleased to hear from my colleagues in the field, that we share this view with several partners, Governments, donors, UN agencies and follow NGOs.

Dear Excellences, return is possible, we know that.

With the right approach and joint efforts a lot can be achieved, but let us put all the displaced communities at the centre of our attention. From the onset of planning to the end of successful integration.

Thank you.