

Protracted Displacement and the Complex Vulnerabilities of Internally Displaced Persons in Afghanistan

This paper explores how the erosion of traditional cultural norms and coping mechanisms—stemming from prolonged wars, conflicts, and their enduring psychosocial and economic consequences—has heightened the vulnerabilities faced by Internally Displaced Persons in Afghanistan. It further explores how a lack of institutional support worsens these challenges, ultimately forcing IDPs to adopt harmful survival strategies, including child labour, child marriage, organ sales, and the exchange of children to settle debts. By employing positionality as a methodological framework, the paper highlights the institutional and lived realities of displacement, providing a nuanced understanding of how weakened and eroded cultural practices and resilience strategies impact IDPs' well-being and capacity to cope.

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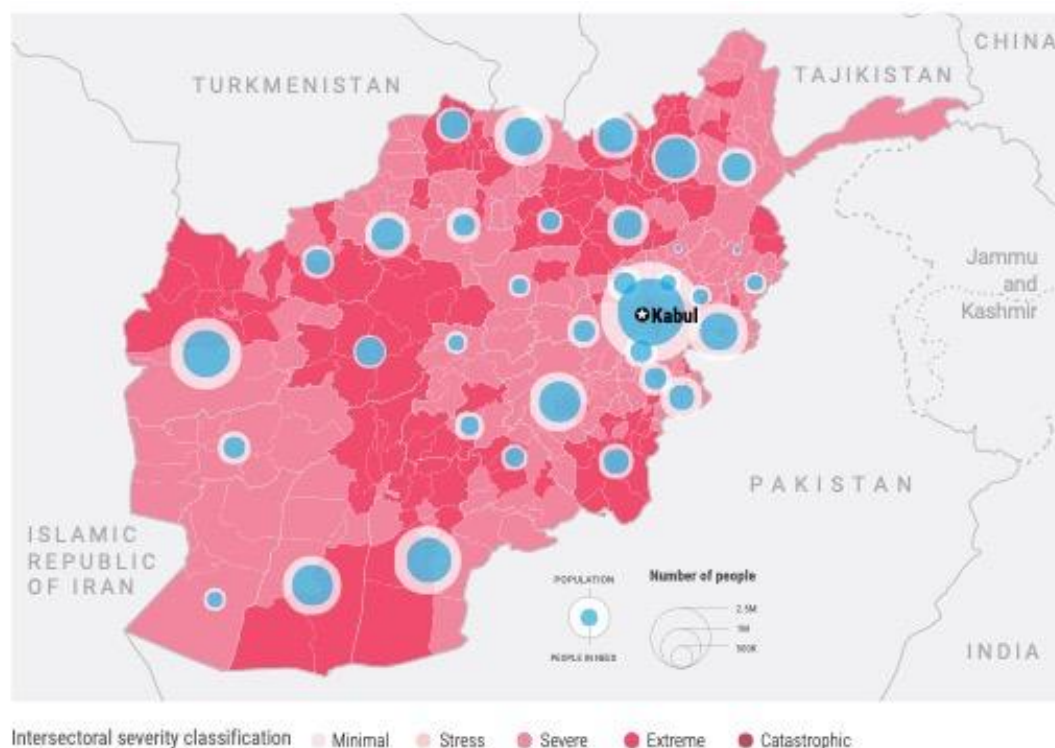
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Background

The displacement of millions of Afghans is the consequence of years of increased political violence and a dire economic situation. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), Afghanistan is home to over 5.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), making up 70% of total internal displacements in South Asia in 2022 (IDMC 2024). Over 4.1 million of these people were forced to flee their homes due to conflict, while more than 1.5 million were displaced by natural disasters (ibid). This situation is further exacerbated by the forced returns from Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and EU countries, which add additional pressure to the already strained and complex vulnerabilities of IDPs in Afghanistan.

According to a report by OCHA, one in seven Afghans are experiencing long-term displacement since 2012 (OCHA 2023, p.3).

The same report indicates that 23.7 million Afghans will require humanitarian assistance to survive in 2024 (OCHA 2023, p.8; see Map 1). The areas identified in Map 1 as home to the most vulnerable populations also have the highest number of IDPs in the country (IOM, 2024). The priority needs for the most vulnerable IDPs include food, healthcare, livelihood support, and access to drinking water (ibid). Efforts to address these acute challenges—termed 'resilience practices'—have proven difficult for IDPs, who are forced to adapt to severe conditions to survive. With each episode of political upheaval and socioeconomic hardship, protracted IDPs must confront increasingly harsh challenges, often with limited resources at their disposal. In fact, for many, resilience has become synonymous with existential strategies relying on both individual and collective efforts to remain alive.



Map 1: Intersectoral Severity of Needs and Distribution of People in Need. Source: OCHA - Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan Afghanistan, p.16

Repeated disruptions of social networks through forced displacement—whether due to natural disasters, climate change, or government policies demolishing IDP settlements—trap IDPs in a cycle of displacement, where the struggle for survival is deeply intertwined with efforts to rebuild connections and a sense of community. Having exhausted traditional and formal resilience practices, which are often unsustainable (such as selling assets or borrowing from friends), a significant number of IDPs are compelled to resort to harmful coping mechanisms, including selling organs, exchanging children to settle debts, and selling children to endure ongoing acute adversities (Aljazeera 2022; Conn 2022; World Vision Afghanistan 2022).

However, one of the critical factors in developing positive or formal resilience practices among IDPs is the implementation of supportive governmental policies and the interventions of humanitarian organizations that emphasize the inclusion and protection of this vulnerable population. Such policies and actions are instrumental in fostering an environment beneficial to the development and sustainability of adaptive practices. For instance, the Afghan Ministry of Refugee and Repatriation (MoRR) has documented the provision of emergency food assistance to hundreds of IDPs across the provinces of Baghlan, Farah, Kandahar, Kapisa, Faryab, and Kunduz. Likewise, OCHA plans to provide life-saving assistance to 17.3 million vulnerable Afghans, taking into account factors such as the environment of deteriorating protection, water scarcity, food insecurity, and sudden crises caused by man-made or natural disasters (OCHA 2023, p.21).

Conversely, restrictive measures can stifle these efforts and exacerbate vulnerability. For example, demolishing informal settlements for IDPs in Kabul by authorities resulted in more than 800 vulnerable families becoming homeless once again (NRC 2024). The story of resilience among IDPs is therefore one of dynamic adaptation—a testament to their courage and ability to reimagine life in the face of recurrent profound adversities. It emphasizes the need for holistic approaches in policy and humanitarian action, focusing on empowering IDPs to build sustainable futures through both immediate and long-term support. By understanding these evolving resilience practices, stakeholders can better design interventions that not only address immediate needs but also nurture the inherent strengths of IDP communities.

Government Response to IDP Challenges: Institutional Outreach

Historically, Afghanistan has lacked comprehensive refugee legislation and a dedicated institution to effectively address displacement issues. Although large-scale displacement began with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, displacing over six million Afghans who sought refuge worldwide within the first year (Hiegemann 2014), the Afghan government did not initiate formal efforts to manage these challenges until the mid-1980s. In 1986, the Afghan government established a Committee of Refugee Repatriation (CRR) as the first governmental body responsible for addressing issues related to refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, MoRR 2021). However, as the conflict in Afghanistan evolved—marked by a civil war (1989-1995), the rise of the Taliban (1996-2000), U.S. military invasion after the September 11, 2001 attacks, the resurgence of the Taliban from 2004 onward (Solomon and Stark 2011), and return of the Taliban into power in August 2021—millions more were uprooted, both internally and across borders. In response, various institutions with differing capacities were established by the Afghan government to manage refugee and displacement issues. To more effectively address the humanitarian needs of the escalating displaced population in the 1990s, driven by the intensifying civil war following the Soviet withdrawal, the CRR was elevated to a full ministry - the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) (MoRR 2021). (See Table 1 for a historical overview of institutional bodies managing internal displacement.)

Table 1: Institutional Development for Protection Displaced Population in Afghanistan

Date	Institution	Institutional level	Institutional Environment
1986-1990	Committee of Refugee Repatriation	Council of Ministers	Government led by People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
1990-1992	Ministry of Refugee and Repatriation	Ministry	Government led by Peoples' Democratic Party of Afghanistan

1992-1996	Ministry of Refugee and Repatriation	Ministry	Civil war
1996-2001	Directorate of Refugee and Repatriation	Administered under the Ministry of Martyred and Disable Affairs	Government led by the Taliban
2001-2021	Ministry of Refugee and Repatriation	Ministry	Government of Afghanistan supported by international community
2021-Present	Ministry of Refugee and Repatriation	Ministry	Acting caretaking government of the Taliban

Afghanistan currently lacks dedicated legislation to protect the rights of IDPs (UNHCR 2019). However, the country has committed to various international frameworks, including the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998), the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1967 Protocol, and multiple humanitarian conventions, such as the Geneva Convention, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. These agreements have provided the Afghan government with a foundation for action over the past two decades. Reflecting these commitments, the National Policy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on Internal Displacement (2015) aligns with the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and adapts the Principle's definition of IDPs:

...persons or group of persons who have been forced...to flee or to leave their homes or places or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disaster, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border (UNSEC 1998).

The Afghan government recognizes that addressing displacement requires comprehensive protection measures, including socio-economic rights and cooperation with humanitarian agencies (National Policy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on Internal Displacement 2015). In 2012, it established the IDP Task Force to manage and implement displacement policies. Collaborating with national and international agencies, this Task Force developed key policies, such as the National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons and Land Distribution for Shelter, to uphold the rights of IDPs and returnees in line with legal standards.

During a panel discussion on Afghanistan's Return and Reintegration Policies, hosted by the Bilim Organization for Research and Social Studies in Kabul on March 9, 2024, the Acting Director of the General Directorate of Policy Planning at the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, Mr. Mahmudolhaq Ahadi, emphasized that Afghanistan's Interim Government is steadfast in its commitment to the international legal frameworks it has ratified (Decentring the Study of Migrant Returns and Return Policies - GAPS 2024). Mr. Shukrullah Shaker, Director of Return and Reintegration at the Ministry, elaborated that the government has initiated land allocations for vulnerable displaced persons including returnees who meet the eligibility criteria (ibid). He explained that land distribution is tailored to the size of the displaced and returnee families; for instance, a family of four is entitled to 400 square meters (ibid).

Despite some important developments, the implementation of IDP policies has been impeded by structural challenges (e.g., gaps in administrative organization) and operational limitations (e.g., insufficient human capital and financial resources), ultimately falling short of meeting the actual needs of IDPs. Both Mr. Shaker and Mr. Ahadi emphasized that the international community should support the Interim Government in developing sustainable mechanisms to address displacement and reintegration issues within the country (ibid).

However, several key structural challenges limit the interim Afghan government's ability to effectively address its institutional capacity development needs. One significant issue is the lack of international recognition of the Afghan government as a legitimate governing body by the UN and several key donor countries, including the United States, the

United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, and the European Union—although these countries contribute significantly to humanitarian emergency funds through UN agencies such as the UNDP, UNHCR, and IOM. This non-recognition severely restricts the international community's capacity to engage directly with the MoRR in developing long-term sustainable frameworks to address Afghanistan's protracted IDP challenges

Moreover, these structural challenges are compounded by political and financial constraints that hinder the establishment of bilateral and or multilateral agreements aimed at developing and implementing institutional and individual capacity-building projects for Afghan civil servants working at MoRR. Factors such as travel bans, visa restrictions, and concerns about funding projects that may directly benefit the Taliban government officials create a significant barrier to international cooperation and assistance. Consequently, these barriers limit opportunities to improve governance capacity, formulate sustainable policies, and effectively address the long-term needs of IDPs in the country.

How Can Resilience be Conceptualised in the Context of IDPs in Afghanistan?

Resilience is defined by scholars from diverse backgrounds across various disciplines within the social and natural sciences. However, all emphasize that resilience is the process through which individuals develop proactive measures to adapt to change and, most importantly, the ability to cope with stressful or adverse situations that threaten social order (Holling 1973; Masten 2014; Cutter 2016). In this framework, Ungar (2021) approaches resilience from a multisystemic lens, conceptualizing it as a dynamic process that adapts to shifts within psychological, sociocultural, and institutional spheres. His perspective embeds principles of social justice, portraying resilience as the capacity of interconnected systems—spanning individuals, communities, and institutions—to mobilize resources amid adversity (Ungar 2021 p. 9-10). This perspective underscores the essential role of negotiating and aligning supportive resources in ways that resonate meaningfully with the specific cultural and contextual nuances of each setting. Viewing resilience through this lens reveals that the study of resilience within any society or community

necessitates a thoughtful consideration of its unique cultural and contextual dimensions. Resilience practices are not universally transferable; they are shaped by the particular challenges, values, and social frameworks that characterize each community. Consequently, examining resilience requires a deep appreciation of how these localized realities influence adaptive strategies and the accessibility of protective resources in ways that reflect the lived experiences within that context.

The results from a field survey among IDPs in the Nangarhar, Mazar-e Sharif, Kabul and Kandahar provinces of Afghanistan explored how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their socio-economic well-being, access to essential services, and the ways they managed these challenges (conducted between the 29th of July and the 16th of August 2020) revealed that many IDPs turned to friends and family for financial support, seeking assistance or loans to help them navigate the economic difficulties brought on by the pandemic. Additionally, as a survival strategy, nearly half of the respondents shared that they had to send their children to work to ease their household's financial burdens. In the absence of formal social support systems, children—particularly boys—are often viewed as a critical means of social and economic support for families in Afghanistan. Boys are expected to contribute to household income through labour, which becomes a necessary strategy for families facing economic hardship. In some cases, men may marry a second or third wife to increase the likelihood of having more children, especially sons, who are seen as valuable contributors to the family's socio-economic stability. This informal reliance on children reflects broader socio-economic challenges in Afghanistan, where limited access to structured social assistance forces households to adopt alternative mechanisms for survival. The practice underscores the cultural and economic significance of having male children, as sons are often expected to support their parents and contribute to family resilience in times of need.

In response to a question about why vulnerable groups among IDPs continue to have children, despite limited resources to support them, one respondent (interviewed in May 2024) explained that having children — particularly sons—is viewed as a strategic approach to strengthen family resilience against current and anticipated socio-economic hardships. For

many families, sons are seen as future providers and protectors, expected to contribute financially and socially. Additionally, in some cases, girls are viewed as a source of economic gain through the practice of demanding a marriage payment, traditionally known as *sheerbaha* (mother's milk price) or *toyana* (wedding price). This custom involves receiving a sum from the groom's family, which can provide financial support for the bride's family. These practices reflect a long-term survival strategy where expanding the family is perceived as a means to secure support and resources in the face of ongoing and future challenges.

In exploring resilience across various systems—such as human, ecological, and technological—Ungar (2021) theorises that resilience is not a simple cause-and-effect phenomenon but rather a complex, dynamic process. This process requires multiple systems to interact, adapt, and mutually support one another in response to external pressures. In this multisystemic view, resilience within one system can potentially exert harmful effects on co-occurring systems, highlighting the need to consider the broader interdependencies and trade-offs that influence resilience outcomes across interconnected systems (Ungar 2021, pp 13-17). For example, having more children, child labour, and child marriage (demand for marriage payments by parents)—may contribute to the socioeconomic resilience of vulnerable Afghan IDPs. However, these practices have a detrimental impact on educational resilience, child rights resilience, and humanitarian resilience.

The resilience practices that use children as a strategy to overcome poverty represent a deeply problematic and harmful approach. This practice deprives children of their fundamental rights, most importantly their right to education, which is critical for their personal development and future opportunities. For example, children are often forced into labour or early marriage as a means of alleviating economic hardship. Such normalised resilience practices among economically disadvantaged IDP households, including poor households in host societies, not only undermine children's immediate well-being but also have long-term consequences on their ability to access and benefit from education. Child marriage, in particular, poses severe challenges to children's resilience in pursuing their fundamental rights. It often forces children to take on adult responsibilities, such as managing the household and raising children, at

a very young age. The psychosocial impacts of these practices not only hinder children's ability to access basic rights like education but also perpetuate the cycle of poverty, limiting the potential of the next generation to break free from systemic economic hardship

Schoon (2021) argues that resilience is a socially constructed phenomenon practiced differently among people from various social structures and cultures. According to Schoon, resilience and positive adjustment are culturally and contextually defined (2021, pp. 340-41). Catherine Panter-Brick, in her exploration of resilience within humanitarian and peacebuilding contexts, emphasizes that resilience should be rooted in local culture, social norms, and everyday practices (Panter-Brick, 2021). For example, in Afghanistan, sociocultural and religious tolerance for practices like polygamy and marriage payments are structural factors that play a key role in shaping the socioeconomic resilience of Afghan IDPs. However, it is not to say that these practices resonate traditional culture in Afghan society. Rather, over the past half-century, incremental, multidimensional, and multilayered challenges—particularly the lack of institutional mechanisms to promote human welfare, compounded by wars, conflicts, and natural calamities—have led to the development of routine folk remedies and informal practices that, over time, have become normalized. Regrettably, these practices have gradually supplanted traditional cultural values that once emphasized social harmony, tolerance, and humanity.

To understand how traditional cultural practices have deteriorated over time into harmful folk remedies, it is essential to shed light on Afghan cultural patterns. In traditional Afghan society, despite men holding dominant roles and authority, women played a crucial role in shaping societal values such as dignity, honour, and tolerance. They bore the important responsibility of passing these values on to the younger generation (Dupree 2002). Nancy Hatch Dupree, an American historian who dedicated her life to studying Afghan history, culture, and identity, characterises Afghan culture as being deeply rooted in honour. She defines honour as a positive sense of pride in independence, grounded in self-reliance and the fulfilment of societal obligations, including respect for the elderly, women, loyalty to friends and colleagues, tolerance towards others, rejection of fanaticism, and aversion to ostentation

(Dupree 2002, 979). Moreover, love for poetry and music is pervasive in Afghan society, with women's voices celebrated in both Pashto and Dari (Afghanistan's official national languages) literary traditions as enduring inspiration and models for future generations (ibid).

However, over the past five decades of wars and conflicts, these traditional practices and cultural values have been significantly eroded, giving way to rigidity, puritanism, radicalism, intolerance toward others, gender-based violence, the marginalisation of minorities and civil wars fuelled by ethnic divisions. Among the most concerning developments is the normalisation of harmful practices such as child labour and, more specifically, child marriage, often justified under misinterpreted religious beliefs. These practices pose significant challenges to the psychosocial well-being of future generations. As previously mentioned, these practices not only deprive children of their basic rights, such as education and personal development but also perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality. Moreover, the normalisation of such practices under misinterpreted religious discourses undermines the development of ethical and safe resilience practices, ultimately hindering the social and economic progress of IDPs.

This shift reflects a broader social adaptation to persistent adversities, where, in the absence of formal support systems, communities turn to alternative, harmful, practices that ultimately reshape cultural norms, which sometimes turn out to be detrimental to human welfare.

The Complexity of IDP Situations and Resilience in the Face of Vulnerabilities

Although IDPs in Afghanistan have demonstrated resilience after living in conflict, instability, and repeated displacement, the complex social, economic, political, and psychological hardships are exerting growing pressure on their already strained coping mechanisms and resilience practices. For example, IDPs now face further restrictions on access to essential services such as education, healthcare, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), and employment opportunities, with women disproportionately affected. As traditional coping mechanisms, including the sale of household assets and migration, have been depleted, many Afghans are forced to resort to increasingly desperate and harmful

strategies. Among the most vulnerable groups, these strategies include child labour, child marriage, the sale of organs, and even the sale of children (Protection Cluster Afghanistan 2021a; 2021b; Aljazeera 2022). For example, a highly distressed IDP from Herat province (Safar – pseudonym), unable to hold back his tears, said, “A man to whom I owe 20,000 Afghanis (\$1.00 = about 70 Afghanis) is forcing me to give up my seven-year-old daughter.” For Safar, it is a painful decision to force his 7-year-old daughter to marry a 60-year-old man to whom he owes 20,000 AFG. However, for the 60-year-old man, it may be considered a normal practice.

Another IDP from Jalalabad (Rafiq – pseudonym) , while bursting into tears, stated:

The ongoing wars have taken the lives of our male family members. I also lost my leg in the war. I have no access to social or economic assistance from the government or aid organizations. I am the only breadwinner in the family. Being disabled and without a job, we are in a shattered financial situation. I cannot fulfil my obligation to feed my children, and it makes me feel miserable. I don't know what to do or how to feed my family.

Rafiq's situation is deteriorating. Having lost all family members and being disabled is the worst situation one could face in a country like Afghanistan. Rafiq's chances of securing an income are much lower than those of non-disabled IDPs. In a culture where being a protector and guarantor of the family is highly valued, his inability to fulfil this obligation as an Afghan man has a detrimental effect on his psychological well-being. Living in a shattered financial situation, exhausted by traditional resilience practices, and facing cultural pressures along with psychosocial hardships, people like Rafiq are forced to adopt survival strategies that are extremely harmful to individual well-being.

As stated earlier, in the face of rapidly changing adverse humanitarian and socioeconomic situations, IDPs' resilience practices have changed dramatically and forced them to adopt harsh survival practices. A family stated, in informal discussions, that they had adopted a newborn IDP baby in exchange for about 70,000 AFG. We encountered a similar case in which a family adopted a newborn IDP baby for about 50,000 AFG. In both

cases, the adopting families initially agreed to support the child's family over the long term; however, after the adoption, they tended to detach themselves from the child's original family. Save the Children reported similar cases in a survey of 30 debt-stricken families who exchanged a child to settle debts (Fairfield 2022). Data from the field and newly published reports and documents indicate that the number of vulnerable IDPs adopting harmful resilience practices (selling organs, selling children, child labour, exchanging children to settle debts) is on the rise. Amid growing socio-economic uncertainties, particularly deteriorating financial and environmental conditions (lack of access to fundamental needs and recurrent natural disasters, such as earthquakes and floods), the plights of IDPs tend to remain one of the most pressing humanitarian emergencies in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

To conclude, the resilience of Afghan IDPs, though remarkable in the face of ongoing conflict and displacement, is being pushed to its limits by overwhelming social, economic, and emotional hardships. Over time, traditional practices and cultural strengths that once helped these communities adapt have become stretched thin, with limited access to essentials like water, food, healthcare, and employment. As options shrink, many families are turning to desperate measures, including child labor, early marriages, and even child exchanges, to survive. These difficult choices, while deeply painful, reflect both the informal resilience and the harsh realities that Afghan communities endure. This situation calls for culturally informed support that goes beyond basic aid, recognizing the dignity and resilience of these families and providing pathways to rebuild sustainable lives within their communities. Only then we can honor their resilience and help preserve the cultural values that once offered strength and stability.

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