

Does Shelter Assistance Reduce Poverty in Afghanistan?

CRAIG LOSCHMANN^a, CHRISTOPHER R. PARSONS^b and MELISSA SIEGEL^{a,*}

^a *Maastricht University, Netherlands*

^b *University of Oxford, UK*

Summary. — In this paper we assess the UNHCR post-return shelter assistance program in Afghanistan during 2009–11, motivated by the fact that the resolution of lost housing and property is commonly understood as a key ingredient in sustainable return and reintegration. We implement a variety of matching techniques in order to insulate our results from selection bias. Adopting a multidimensional approach, our results show that shelter assistance reduces the multidimensional poverty index of benefiting households by three percentage points. Looking at individual indicators of deprivation we find that assistance has the biggest effect on dietary diversity, food security, and heating.

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Civil wars and conflicts arguably inflict more suffering on humanity than any other social phenomenon” (Blattman & Miguel, 2010, p. 47). A particular consequence of armed conflict is often forced migration which imposes economically large burdens on refugee-receiving countries, represents significant losses for refugee-sending countries, entails substantial economic costs for responsible agencies like the UNHCR and UNRWA and above all, often destroys the lives of the refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) themselves. Should conditions in sending regions become suitably favorable, the successful return of forced migrants therefore may constitute a win–win–win–win scenario for the aforementioned parties. Unsurprisingly then, voluntary repatriation has all but been universally taken by many states as the durable solution of choice to the so-called global “refugee crises” since the end of the cold war (Black & Koser, 1999). While the process of repatriation is complex, post-return support is widely acknowledged as important in achieving sustainable return and reintegration, a key ingredient of which is the resolution of lost housing and property (Leckie, 2000; Simmons, 2001). Given the recent history of displacement in Afghanistan – the country most affected by refugee movements and home to at least 660,000 IDPs¹ – shelter assistance has been publicized as one of the top priorities of the Afghan government.² In this paper we conduct the first judicious analysis of the impact of UNHCR shelter assistance on the overall well-being of recipient households.

Forced migration is a particular issue for developing countries since they are the main source of refugees, host to over 80% of all refugees globally and home to the overwhelming majority of IDPs. In 2012, Afghanistan remained the leading source country of refugees in the world with nearly 2.6 million of its citizens, or 9% of its total population, registered abroad with UNHCR (see Figure 1). The main host countries of Afghan refugees are neighboring Pakistan and Iran, 1.6 million and 800,000 respectively, although the true figure is likely far higher since equivalent numbers of unregistered refugees are also present in both countries (Tyler, 2014). Given the prevalence of return over the years, Afghanistan also lays claim to the largest refugee repatriation operation in the world (O’Leary, 2014). Indeed today around one-third of the Afghan

population has at one point in their lives spent time outside the country. Moreover, the available data for IDPs show that even though the number of internally displaced declined rapidly post-2001 after reaching a high of 1.2 million during the early stages of the American-led invasion of the country, internal displacement has been once again steadily rising since the revival of the Taliban insurgency in 2005 (see Figure A1 in the Appendix).

Given the occurrence of forced migration in Afghanistan, it is important to emphasize how costly it is for all parties. In 2013, Pakistani Minister for States and Frontier Regions, Abdul Qadir Baloch, bemoaned the spiraling costs of Pakistan hosting Afghan refugees that he estimated had totaled some \$200 billion over a 30-year period (*The Express Tribune*, 2013). If spread equally across years this figure equates to almost 5% of Pakistan’s annual GDP in 2012. This is on top of the costs of accommodating forced migrants borne by UNHCR which in 2012 totaled some \$50 million in Iran and over \$133 million in Pakistan. From a sending country perspective, a back-of-the-envelope calculation suggests that should the remaining 2.6 million officially recorded Afghan refugees abroad return home to earn the mean income across Afghanistan in 2010, \$687 by World Bank estimates, the foregone earnings of those refugees would equate to around 9% of Afghan GDP in 2012, \$20.5 billion. Such a loss would in fact be far larger when compounded over the many years that the refugees have resided abroad.³ Of course the true economic costs for sending countries are far higher than can simply be captured through a crude approximation of lost earnings. Forced migrants also abandon their homes resulting in an instantaneous loss of wealth, leave behind their land and other

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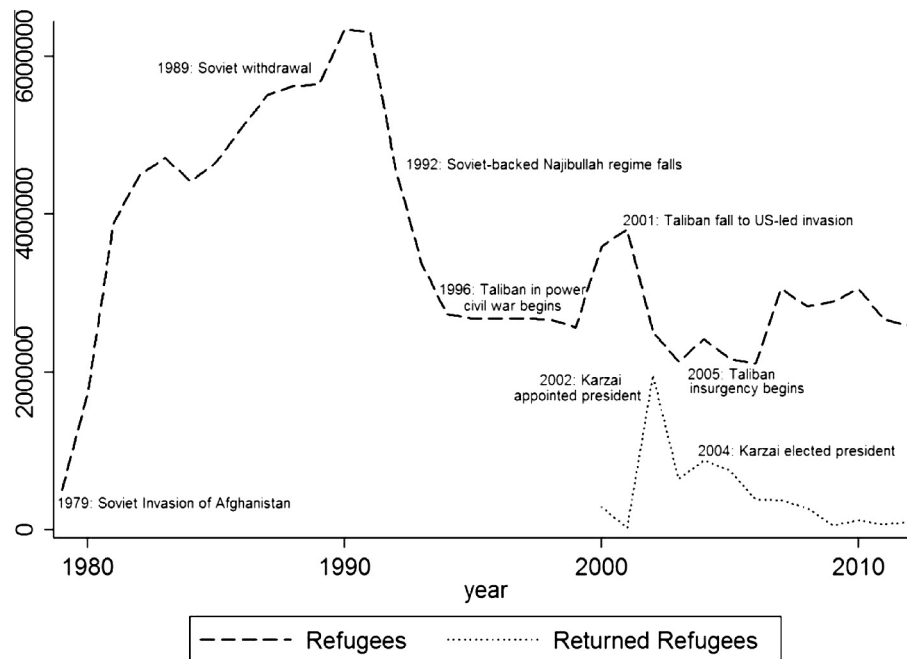


Figure 1. *Afghan refugee and return refugee stocks, 1979–2012.* Source: *UNHCR (2014).*

productive assets stemming any economic returns previously derived from them and subsequently reduce investment in other productive activities (Ibáñez & Moya, 2010). Moreover social institutions for community risk-sharing are often destroyed such that income shocks likely impact upon household consumption directly. Households may therefore adopt costly strategies to smooth consumption such as selling productive assets (Rosenzweig & Wolpin, 1993) or forego more profitable but riskier activities to smooth income, like the cultivation of a particular crop (Morduch, 1995). Such falls in consumption are likely to be even more severe among vulnerable subgroups, for example as during the severe drought in Burkina Faso in the first half of the nineteen-eighties (Kazianga & Udry, 2006).

Beyond the prevalence of forced migration in Afghanistan, it is important to also take into account the everyday living conditions of the population, which are among the worst in the world. The country ranks 175 out of 187 in the Human Development Index⁴ and despite modest developmental progress in recent years in health, education, and access to safe drinking water; the most recent National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment in 2011–12 details stagnation or deterioration in food security and poverty. The report estimates that nearly one-third of the population, some 7.6 million people, have insufficient caloric intake; while one-fifth, 4.9 million people, have insufficient protein consumption (CSO, 2014, p. xviii). Such chronic malnutrition among Afghan children – one of the world's highest – leads to stunting, lower lifetime productivity, and in turn lower economic growth (Alderman, Hoddinott, & Kinsey, 2006; Bundervoet, Verwimp, & Akresh, 2009).⁵

In this paper, we draw on unique survey data collected in 2012 to evaluate UNHCR's shelter assistance program in Afghanistan during 2009–11. The program's objective has been to contribute to sustainable return and reintegration through improvements to the socio-economic condition as well as livelihood potential of benefiting households. Despite their perceived importance in various contexts, shelter

assistance interventions have yet to be subjected to rigorous assessment. Where evaluations have been carried out (Ferretti & Ashmore, 2010; GHK Consulting, 2012; UNHCR, 2005), little effort has been made to establish causal inference.⁶ Our analysis uses propensity score matching techniques given the nonrandomness of the treatment group, to consider the broader impact of shelter assistance on household well-being. Our primary objective is to assess whether shelter assistance realizes UNHCR's aims of improving socio-economic conditions and strengthening the livelihood potential of beneficiary households. To this end, we adopt a multidimensional approach to poverty measurement, one based upon three principal dimensions: economic welfare, health and education, and basic services, before delving further into the various constituent elements of these measurements in order to gain a holistic understanding of the impact.

Our paper contributes to the literatures on migrant/refugee return, civil conflict and impact evaluation. In terms of the return literature, it is more closely related to scholarly work exploring the voluntary return of refugees and asylum-seekers (see Black & Gent, 2006; Black & Koser, 1999; Black, Koser, & Munk, 2004; Koser, 2001) – albeit differentiated by empirically testing the impact of post-return programs as opposed to discussing them more broadly – in comparison with the economics literature on return for example, which focuses, although not exclusively, upon the conditions under which migrants return home (see for example Bijwaard, Schluter, & Wahba, 2014; Dustmann, 1997; Stark, 1992). As for the burgeoning economic literature on civil conflict concerning predominately the causes and consequences of war (Blattman & Miguel, 2010), this paper speaks indirectly to both. First, by assessing the efficacy of shelter programs in Afghanistan we examine one type of policy that attempts to deal with a common consequences of civil conflict, forced migration. Second, since post-return programs also aim to facilitate reintegration by promoting household well-being, if successful they could also be argued to be an important ingredient in reducing the probability of future conflict. Providing

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