Integrated Housing and Settlement Upgrading in Afghanistan's Areas of Return

Submitted By: UN-Habitat



Organization Profile

Organization Name: UN-Habitat

Organization Type: United Nations entity

Website: www.unhabitat.org/afghanistan

Practice Details

Country(ies): Afghanistan

City(ies): Kabul, Herat, Jalalabad, Kunduz

Start Year: 2023 **Ongoing:** Yes **End Year:** N/A

Main Adequate Housing Components:



Housing Thematic Areas:

- Housing Rights & Social Inclusion
- Housing in Crisis & Displacement Contexts
- Housing & Climate Adaptation
- Housing, Land & Spatial Planning

Relevant SDGs:



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Problem & Context

Beginning in 2023, the Governments of Pakistan and Iran have implemented a policy of forced return of Afghan nationals. The volume of returns - over 3 million to date – is creating an unprecedented crisis. Urban informal settlements are experiencing high volumes of returns, with those returning struggling to access adequate housing. They also face insecure land rights, including the threat of eviction, compounded by inadequate access to basic services and jobs.

The impacts of these challenges are exacerbated by climate change. Afghanistan is ranked as one of the top ten countries at risk from climate change. People living in informal settlements are acutely vulnerable because of the settlements' territorial attributes (located in hazard-prone areas), the socioeconomic characteristics of their inhabitants (returnees and other vulnerable groups), and the settlements' existence outside formal governance systems (informal tenure, lacking critical municipal services).

Solution Developed

UN-Habitat developed an innovative integrated approach to improve housing in climate vulnerable returnee settlements. The integrated approach developed and deployed through UN-Habitat's housing practice incorporates three components.

(i) Strengthening communities' Housing, Land and Property Rights (HLP) rights: to reduce eviction risks and provide a foundation for long-term housing investments. Once tenure rights are improved, communities also tend to invest and engage in maintenance and upkeeping of community infrastructures.

(ii) Planning and implementing climate resilient housing investments that address the needs of the most vulnerable. Following needs assessments in the target communities, highly vulnerable households are provided with conditional-cash transfers to make housing improvements, which are monitored by UN-Habitat engineers.

(iii) Planning and implementing climate resilient community infrastructure investments. These investments consolidate informal settlements, increasing de facto tenure security to stimulate housing investment. They also reduce climate vulnerability through reducing risks of floods, landslides or increase access to water.

Implementation

UN-Habitat's housing practice has received financial support from a range of donors, including ECHO and United Nation's pooled funds (AHF, STFA). The key stakeholders in the housing practice are Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), which are included in all activities and decision-making processes. UN-Habitat – as well as other UN agencies - is engaging with relevant De facto government authorities (DfA) according to an agreed upon protocol and in a

“principled approach” .The sequencing and timing of project activities at the community-level is detailed below:

1. Participatory land use mapping to strengthen Housing, Land and Property (HLP) rights (months 1-4). This creates a spatial record of informal settlements, including approximate parcel boundaries. CBOs share local knowledge on the locations, the risks and challenges and then endorse the maps, and are supported to secure the endorsement of local Df authorities.
2. Participatory assessment and spatial planning (months 5-6) identify housing and community infrastructure deficits, with a focus on climate hazards. Participatory planning sessions produce community action plans to detail critical housing and infrastructure investments.
3. Housing and associated community infrastructure investments are implemented (months 6-12). Investments detailed in the settlement plan (developed under Step 2) are implemented to upgrade housing and associated community infrastructure in coordination with local authorities

Enablers & Obstacles

The key driver and enabler of the approach is UN-Habitat’s 15 years' experience implementing housing and land projects through CBOs in Afghanistan. This approach enabled (and continues to do so) the rapid identification of housing needs (of individual households) and responses and also enabled effective implementation by securing community buy-in of the project (inc. for transformative interventions that improve access to services or improve living environments for the entire community).

The engagement with the DfA for securing permission to work and implement participatory processes in informal settlements are the main challenges in the overall implementation process . Through intensive advocacy and negotiation, UN-Habitat is able to secure formal letters from DfA to enable the teams’ work in informal settlements. These letters themselves are important community-level HLP documents, because they signal authorities’ recognition of the settlements’ development.

Results & Impact

Over 206,000 people benefited from Housing, Land, and Property (HLP) strengthening through parcel boundary and land use maps, endorsed by authorities, protecting customary tenure and reducing eviction risks, and encouraging housing investment. DfA-endorsed housing and settlement plans strengthened community HLP rights, integrating infrastructure planning and lowering eviction risks for residents. Additionally, 63,000 vulnerable individuals received conditional cash transfers or construction support, enhancing housing conditions and reducing climate vulnerability. Community infrastructure investments, like drainage and flood defenses,

reduced climate risks for 113,000 by addressing flooding and other neighborhood threats. These upgrades also improved tenure security by strengthening community-authority relationships. Housing toolkits were developed to scale this approach across Afghanistan, meeting urgent needs of returnees and vulnerable groups in urban and peri-urban informal settlements, ensuring sustainable resilience and housing.

Replication & Scale Up

The housing toolkits have been well-received by Afghanistan's humanitarian and development community, with implementation scaling up nationwide. UN-Habitat uses the tools in Herat and Jalalabad with IOM to assess housing, gender, and climate risks, and led a Joint Assessment Team of UN agencies and NGOs to deploy toolkits in the North-Eastern region, assessing IDP and returnee needs. This led to a large joint project in Kunduz province addressing housing, land, and climate vulnerabilities for displacement-affected people.

There are two drivers that can scale this housing practice. First, is mainstreaming UN-Habitat's approach in the activities of other humanitarian and development partners. As highlighted in this document, this process is on-going, with UN-Habitat housing toolkits informing the programming of organizations across the country. Second, increased funding is required to implement the approach at scale. There are currently challenges in international developing funding supply and geopolitical issues that limit the resources available for housing interventions in Afghanistan.

Policy Uptake

This housing practice is a new or innovative practice that is not yet adequately or fully integrated into formal policy frameworks.

The current geopolitical context means that UN-Habitat's policy engagement with the DfA remains limited at this point. However, it is envisaged that the DfA will see the positive benefits of UN-Habitat's housing practice and integrate into their (future) housing policies. In addition, UN-Habitat has incorporated the lessons learned from this housing practice into key UN strategic documents, including the 2025 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) and the 2025 Integrated Response Plan for Afghan returnees from Pakistan (Border response and reintegration response in areas of return).

Lessons & Takeaways

The implementation of the housing practice is on-going, and UN-Habitat is consistently improving the approach to improve efficiency and equity. A key improvement that is currently being implemented is to address intersectional housing vulnerability. To this end, UN-Habitat has worked closely with UN-Women to refine the approach to ensure women's housing needs

are addressed. Moving forward, refining the tool further to better address disability and other intersecting vulnerabilities will be prioritised.