



TOWNSHIPS IN AFGHANISTAN

Lessons Learned for Advancing Durable Solutions and Re-integration



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Cover Photo: Alina, age 9, with her 66-year-old grandmother outside their renewed shelter (shelter in background), repaired by UN-Habitat with support from the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund in Kabul's Dasht-e Barche, one of the city's major informal settlements. [UN-Habitat/Piroz Amin, April 2025]

EXECUTTIVE SUMMARY

This document summarizes more than a decade of lessons learned from Afghanistan's experience with land-allocation and township developments, with a particular focus on UN-Habitat's projects and role before and after the 2021 takeover. It synthesises evidence from the EU-funded project Sustainable Human Settlements in Urban Areas to support Reintegration in Afghanistan (SHURA; 2018–2021), alongside from UN-Habitat's broader work and research on housing and community infrastructure; recent settlement analyses using the Participatory Hazard Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (PHVCA) in existing settlements in Eastern Afghanistan, and the MoRR township assessments (2022). The document also includes reference to projects / programmes implemented by other organisations. Together these findings aim to inform ongoing discussions on investments in townships for (re-)integration of unprecedented numbers of returnees in Afghanistan in this point in time.

As Afghanistan continues to receive hundreds of thousands of returnees, with 2.8 million people returning in 2025 alone, and another 2 million expected in 2026, the pressure on urban, peri-urban, and rural areas of return has significantly intensified and there is an urgent need for practical, scalable, and community-driven solutions to support sustainable reintegration.

Several key findings emerge from the review of different documents undertaken for this report:

- **Location and connectivity** are critical determinants of successful (and sustainable) township development. Even formally planned townships, including those with infrastructure investments, often remain uninhabited when located far from livelihood opportunities.



Afghan returnees set up their tents in the outskirts of Kunduz, close to the city centre, December 2025. UN-Habitat/
Rebecca Dawson

- **Investments in basic and essential infrastructure**—such as water and sanitation (WASH), education facilities, basic health services, and, for the most vulnerable, shelter support—are necessary to allow people to settle and become “self-reliant” over time. The scale and cost of these investments depend heavily on the site’s location and should be proportional to the intended population size, while allowing for phased, incremental development.



Temporary returnee shelters arranged in an urban informal settlement. March 2026. ©UN-Habitat

- **Spatial planning** ensures that land is allocated for local services (markets, shops, public services such as education, health, WASH facilities, etc.) from the outset, in addition to plots for housing—while fully accounting for climate-related risks, and gender and sociocultural norms¹. By contrast, unplanned informal settlements - where people settle on their own account for different reasons - often lack appropriate spaces for such functions, making later service provision or upgrading more challenging and costly.
- **Tenure security** encourages residents to invest in improving and expanding their homes or businesses and is a criterium for enabling “durable solutions.”
- **Local economy** at the settlement level can emerge and be fostered over time but requires a minimum population threshold to thrive.
- **Social mix** will occur naturally in settlements that grow incrementally, especially in urban and peri-urban areas. People arrive at different times, and over time, returnees, IDPs, and local communities will live side by side. Focusing on one population group (e.g. returnees), while other groups are facing similar challenges linked to the location rather than an “arrival date” might impact social cohesion.
- Many returnees and displaced families settle in informal urban or peri-urban areas hoping to access livelihoods and basic services. Integrated and spatially informed settlement upgrading efforts that improve their living conditions along with also socio-economic development

¹ [Housing Primer: Why adequate housing matters](#) (UN-Habitat)



Upgrading of shelter and housing as first step for “safety”, Nangarhar, Afghanistan. December 2025. ©UN-Habitat

opportunities, are needed to avoid a downward spiral creating and deeper, long-term dependency on humanitarian aid. Acknowledging that solutions for displacement have a strong urban/peri-urban dimension, alternative approaches for the integration of urban returnees could be explored to reduce further (unplanned) expansion of settlements, including but not limited to cash for rent support. Strengthening urban systems—such as water supply, electricity, waste management—must be scaled up for longer-term and sustainable urban solutions to rapid population growth².

- Findings from a MoRR 2022 assessment and UN-Habitat’s [PHVCA](#) as well as the Whole-of-Afghanistan Assessment³ in areas of return show the same systemic gaps: limited access to clean water, weak or absent sanitation and waste management systems, unpaved roads limiting access, unsafe and inadequate housing solutions, limited access to and reduced availability of education and health facilities, incomplete land or tenure documentation (or personal identification documents), and high exposure to environmental hazards and climate-related risks in many locations. Addressing these deficits requires area-based, inclusive, incremental, and climate-sensitive settlement upgrading – that benefits all people living in a neighborhood (whole-of-society approach).

UN-Habitat, in Afghanistan and globally, has long advocated for and implemented settlement upgrading and responsible urban expansions grounded in spatial planning and risk assessments. This includes incremental housing solutions, strengthening HLP rights and targeted investments in essential infrastructure—approaches also adopted by many other actors in Afghanistan.

² [Towards inclusive solutions to urban internal displacement: A global framework for Governments, UN agencies, the Resident Coordinator System and partners.](#) | UN-Habitat (UN-Habitat, 2025)

³ REACH Initiative. (2025). Whole of Afghanistan Assessment (WoAA) 2025: Key sectoral findings factsheet. REACH, IMPACT Initiatives.

Overall, this lessons-learned paper argues for a strategic approach that includes:

- Detailed, location-specific analysis to assess risks and opportunities for long-term sustainability of a **location**;
- **Spatial planning** as the foundation for investments (upfront or for settlements upgrading) including for service and community infrastructures, public spaces, housing, livelihoods/ economic activities, markets etc. Housing/shelter support for the most vulnerable needs to be considered in parallel;
- **Integrated settlement upgrading approaches** rather than isolated sectoral interventions, combined with strengthening communal tenure rights (where absent) through basic infrastructure investments⁴;
- **Prioritising planned densification and urban expansion** over large-scale “greenfield” townships investments, while including considerations of the risk of “overuse of services” (thus cross-sectoral approaches are needed). People will only settle permanently where they have livelihood opportunities and access to basic services.
- **Inclusive and transparent beneficiary selection** that considers the most vulnerable across population groups, including those from the local population, and investments that support reducing tensions between local and newly arrived people.
- Supporting **community-based governance structures**, essential for social integration, fosters investment prioritisation based on local knowledge, joint understanding, and fosters local ownership; investing in local systems (water, electricity, waste management) allows to include early consideration of environmental constraints such as groundwater availability and environmental degradation due to lack of waste/wastewater management.

While there is no “**one-size-fits-all**” **solution for Afghanistan**, this paper is based and portrays different examples of “durable solutions”, showcasing what was done through various interventions to enable displaced populations live in safety and dignity, access services and livelihoods, secure housing and land, and participate in decision-making process at community-level. Afghanistan’s experience demonstrates that such outcomes are not delivered by building townships in isolated areas, but by reinforcing urban systems and integrating displaced people into existing settlements. UN-Habitat’s area-based approach provides this pathway by combining spatial planning, service delivery, incremental tenure security, climate resilience, gender-sensitive infrastructure, and inclusive local governance, moving beyond stand-alone humanitarian infrastructure toward sustainable urban integration.

4 Flower, B., [Securing land tenure for climate resilient informal settlements: a case study of an integrated approach in Afghanistan](#), (UN-Habitat Afghanistan, 2024)

Returnees set up their tents in the outskirts of Kunduz, close to the city centre, December 2025. UN-Habitat/Rebecca Dawson



1

CHAPTER

Returns, Urban Pressure and Land Allocation

Large-scale forced and spontaneous returns from Pakistan and Iran have driven a sharp demographic shift in Afghanistan, resulting in an overall population increase of more than 12%, according to the World Bank. In 2025 alone, over 2.8 million people returned, bringing the total number of returnees since September 2023 to more than 4.5 million. A further two million returnees are projected for 2026, and around 21.9 million people – approximately 45 per cent of the total population – are projected to require humanitarian assistance, reflecting the combined impact of overlapping shocks and deep structural vulnerability⁵. Many arrive following detention, harassment or confiscation of documentation and property, and reach border points in acute vulnerability with immediate needs for food, shelter, health care, protection and livelihoods (HNRP 2026). As many seek livelihoods and opportunities in urban areas—also due to reduced rural income prospects linked to climate-change impacts or the lack of agricultural skillsets—the rapid influx has placed extraordinary pressure on urban and peri-urban areas. Informal settlements have not only expanded significantly but have also densified rapidly over recent years.

In response to this substantial high-influx of returns –described by UNHCR as the largest in Afghanistan’s history—the De facto Authorities (DfA) have revived land allocation as a key reintegration strategy, through Decree 190 (2023) and Decree 6 (2024). These decrees aim to provide returning families with access to state land. However, lessons learned from earlier returnee movements, and initial implementation of the current decrees highlight persistent systemic constraints, including limited availability of well-located land, unclear oversight mechanisms, the absence of gender-equitable ownership provisions, and the high costs associated with even basic infrastructure provision. In this context, the jointly drafted [Briefing Paper on Townships](#)⁶ provides a concise overview of pre- and post-2021 legal frameworks and policy efforts, underscoring that township development is not a new concept in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan previously operated land allocation schemes (between 2005 and 2021), based on the Presidential Decree (PD) 104 and later transitioning to PDs 305 and 108. These initiatives sought to provide serviced plots to returnees and IDPs as a durable solution to displacement. Under the former governments, UN agencies played an integral role in multiple stages of the process, including beneficiary selection. Following recent policy changes, however, oversight by non-DfA actors is no longer permitted, explicit gender protections are absent, and risks related to transparency and equity in beneficiary selection for land allocation have increased ([Briefing Paper on Townships 2025](#)).

Afghanistan’s “township history” offers evidence over a long-term period in time. In the Jalalabad and wider Eastern Region, where multiple rounds of high influx of returns (like in 2010) triggered substantial population growth, masterplans were developed, and over time, some returnee and IDP settlements, such as Baba Sahib in Laghman, benefited from lighter, area-based programming and gradual investments in basic services, largely supported by the international community.

Although settlement growth happened over a long period of time, it was based on formally prepared masterplans and gradually expanded and densified in alignment with broader city-scale planning frameworks (while in some cases, even after 15 years, not all allocated plots have been developed

5 [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\). \(2025\). Afghanistan: Humanitarian needs and response plan 2026. United Nations.](#)

6 Flower, B., Faruqi Stocker, F., Hashemi, S., 2025: [Briefing Paper on Townships for Returnees \(UNRCO, NRC, and UN-Habitat\)](#)

or occupied). Over time, these planned “city-extensions”, often referred to as “city-near townships,” evolved through self-built housing and the establishment of community-based governance structures responsible for service management and dispute resolution. These bodies—previously Community Development Councils (CDCs), Gozar Assemblies (GAs), and more recently Local Implementation Committees (LICs) or Community Representative Councils (CRCs)—played (and continue to play) a key role in local decision-making, service coordination, and representation of community priorities. They also reflect a distinctive continuation of UN-Habitat’s participatory, people-centred approach (“the people’s process”), now applied by several UN agencies, including IOM and UNOPS.

Despite persistent service gaps and exposure to environmental risks, these settlements have maintained relatively stable, and in some cases growing populations. This stability has been reinforced through targeted investments from the international community, authorities, and other stakeholders to expand or backfill essential services. It is important to highlight that these locations have adequate connectivity to existing economies in the nearby urban areas, which enables access to livelihoods, markets, and, although limited, health and other services.

Experience from these sites shows that targeted spatial analysis, sustained community engagement, and incremental housing construction, combined with phased investments in basic service infrastructure, can create conditions for settlement consolidation and lay the groundwork for future investments, consistent with UN-Habitat’s area-based approaches to sustainable urbanization and planned city extensions.

Further lessons emerging from the consultations with other partners, including UNHCR, show that Afghanistan already contains several township-like areas where large numbers of returnees self-settled and established stable governance structures despite minimal services many years and before the current land allocation process under the DfA.



Children gathered for an outdoor class in Shikhmesri, Nangarhar. January 2025. ©UN-Habitat

The current debate is therefore often less about the land allocation mechanism itself—which is used in comparable forms in other country contexts—and more about issues of trust, transparency, and accountability among stakeholders, particularly regarding beneficiary selection and the predictability of investments, including through the DfA.

The aim of this brief is to synthesise these diverse experiences to inform discussions and decision-making on investments and engagement in townships, grounding them in lessons learned, while acknowledging that multiple parallel discussions are ongoing and that not all processes or approaches may be fully transparent at the time of drafting.

2

CHAPTER

Lessons from Planned Township Development: Evidence from the SHURA Programme

The Sustainable Human settlements in Urban areas to support [Reintegration in Afghanistan](#)⁷, SHURA programme, funded by the European Union, and implemented from 2018 until the take-over of the DfA in 2021, was Afghanistan's most comprehensive attempt to implement a structured, transparent, and community-driven township model under PD 108. Although the implementation of SHURA was significantly disrupted by the August 2021 DfA takeover, when most activities were halted, the initiative had already produced a robust operational framework and a substantial evidence base. The donor, as well as other donors supporting investments in the two selected locations, allowed a short extension to finalise ongoing construction works, but the project was fully suspended by the end of December 2021. Importantly, many of the insights from SHURA built upon pre-2021 reintegration work undertaken by UN-Habitat, UNHCR, NRC, IOM and others, which collectively demonstrated that sustainable return and settlement depend on suitable location, access to services, transparent processes, and community-based planning and governance.

Under PD 108, UN-Habitat's EU-funded SHURA programme (2018-2021)—which was originally framed for implementation in three rather than two locations—piloted the establishment of townships in Herat (Saadat) and Kabul (Eltifat). The programme demonstrated effective practices in transparent beneficiary selection systems, suitability-based land identification and the creation of a “land bank,” participatory planning, and incremental housing solutions complemented by early investments in essential infrastructure. These efforts were supported by robust community-governance mechanisms, including the establishment of 15 CDCs and 3 GAs (Gozar Assemblies) created specifically for SHURA, alongside continuous consultations throughout the implementation process with already selected beneficiaries.

Infrastructure investments, based on an intensive urban and spatial planning process, led to the implementation of essential infrastructure such as water systems, electricity and access roads, and 240 housing units were completed in Herat (Saadat), with beneficiaries also receiving tenure certificates. In Kabul (Eltifat), the programme demarcated 1,000 plots and completed master planning and detailed designs, but no housing units were constructed under the project (SHURA Final Report, 2022). Eltifat nevertheless developed into a functioning settlement, building on masterplans and basic services gradual investments.



Houses and community centre in Saadat Township in Herat province. June 2020. ©UN-Habitat

7 UN-Habitat. (2022). End of programme report: Sustainable Human Settlements in Urban Areas to Support Reintegration in Afghanistan (SHURA). United Nations Human Settlements Programme.

Despite these achievements, SHURA also highlighted persistent structural constraints that continue to affect township development: remoteness of some locations (notably Herat), non-transparent government-led land allocation processes, political complexity and high infrastructure costs with limited livelihood prospects linked to remote siting, all of which undermine the sustainability of investments.

Selection of Beneficiaries

In Herat (Saadat) and Kabul (Eltifat), SHURA established a beneficiary selection system in partnership with former government counterparts, including the then MoRR, ARAZI, NSIA, municipalities, and UN agencies. Over 20,000 households were assessed, and 3,175 families were formally allocated land plots with verified documentation, consistent with SHURA’s objective to support IDPs and returnees amid unprecedented return movements of approximately three million people. Public balloting and biometric registration (with GIS) reduced fraud and strengthened accountability. This transparent, vulnerability-based process supported a socially diverse mix of beneficiaries. These elements mirrored approaches used by NRC’s HLP programming, emphasizing documentation-based, vulnerability-sensitive selection and community-accepted criteria as essential to preventing tensions and ensuring legitimacy. UNHCR’s Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration programme (PARR) similarly applied transparent targeting to strengthen coexistence between hosts and returnees (SHURA Final Report 2022).

Urban and Spatial Planning as a Basis for Investments Across Sectors

SHURA also advanced coordinated urban planning across multiple township sites in Afghanistan. Although the programme was originally designed in 2017 with a geographic focus on Jalalabad, where the donor-approved scope was to identify and register land for IDPs and returnees, the then Government subsequently allocated 4,000 plots. UN-Habitat’s role, under the SHURA project, at



Public beneficiary selection and community consultation in Kabul, Afghanistan. June 2021. ©UN-Habitat

that stage was primarily to support the Government in land identification, registration with ARAZI for the land bank component, and ensuring that legally sound, planned settlement areas were prepared for future development. The masterplan for Jalalabad was developed and approved by UN-Habitat, and similar master planning processes were later done in Kandahar, Laghman, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kabul, and Herat in coordination with the former Ministry of Urban Development and Land. Some of the current township plans build upon these earlier plans.

Across these locations, UN-Habitat, through SHURA, developed masterplans, structure plans, and incremental housing frameworks using GIS analysis, land-suitability assessments, and participatory design workshops. These plans incorporated mixed-use development, hierarchical access roads, public-space networks, and zoning for schools, clinics, mosques, and markets. While zoning for these facilities was completed in most sites, actual construction of schools, clinics, and markets did not occur, and in some locations, such as Kabul, only zoning identification was completed without detailed designs. Nevertheless, the cross-sectoral planning activities anchored the planned settlement development within a long-term, expandable spatial vision (SHURA Final Report 2022).

Housing and Infrastructure Delivery

Housing and infrastructure delivery represented another major achievement, particularly in Herat, which became the most advanced township site. Under the SHURA project, UN-Habitat implemented a full water supply system designed to serve the planned township area of 10,097 households (over 70,000 people), constructed 14 km of access roads, built drainage and culverts, and established a community centre.



Some houses and water services were available during construction in Herat. March 2020 ©UN-Habitat

A total of 240 incremental housing units were constructed in Herat (Saadat), using a homeowner-driven approach and handed over to families. Importantly, construction in Herat continued even after the political transition, allowing the programme to reach completion.

In Kabul, the programme finalised master planning for the specific location, demarcated plots, completed road alignment and initiated five prototype houses that were never constructed. Designs for the water-supply system and social facilities were also prepared. In this sense, some initial infrastructure works were planned, however, construction could not proceed due to security constraints. Although incomplete, the site has since developed into a functioning settlement, drawing on SHURA's plans.

In Jalalabad, although continuation of activities and donor support had initially been anticipated, implementation ultimately halted. Beneficiaries were not selected, infrastructure planning did not progress beyond the approved masterplan, and the donor decided not to continue engagement after the 2021 takeover, with remaining funds returned (SHURA Final Report, 2022). Nevertheless, land identification and master planning completed under SHURA for nearby sites, Khanakay and Qasimabad, mean that these locations could still serve as entry points for future targeted investments and incremental upgrading.

The SHURA project illustrates a core lesson widely acknowledged among humanitarian and development actors: township development requires significant up-front investment in basic services, including water, sanitation, access roads and climate-resilient infrastructure. Without such investments, settlements risk stagnation or abandonment (Briefing paper on Townships, 2025). SHURA's varied progress across provinces demonstrates how security, and steady donor support are critical to progressing from planning to construction and to functional, habitable settlements.

Community Governance

Community governance emerged as a defining element of the SHURA project. A total of 15 CDCs and 3 GAs were established and legally registered during the process. These bodies managed procurement, oversaw construction, ensured financial transparency, and coordinated service delivery with local authorities. Their continued functioning during the 2021 transition demonstrated that community-owned governance is a cornerstone of sustainable township development (SHURA Final Report, 2022). CDCs and GAs also played a critical role in mediating relations with neighbouring local communities and facilitating collective decision-making, mirroring the experience of UNHCR's PARR committees, and proved essential in reducing tensions between host populations and returnees.

These governance structures were not pre-existing in the selected township areas but were established after beneficiary selection and before construction commenced. Although households had not yet relocated, selected families were mobilised to form CDCs/GAs and participated in planning workshops, spatial design consultations and key decision-making processes. Once construction began, the same bodies transitioned into on-site governance structures.



Community members during a mapping exercise presenting settlement layouts in Kabul, Afghanistan. June 2021. ©UN-Habitat

Participatory and inclusive approaches, used during the SHURA project and still applied in UN-Habitat projects today, built on nearly two decades of UN-Habitat’s pre-2021 work to institutionalise a community-centred development model in Afghanistan, under which CDCs—created through the National Solidarity Programme and later the Citizens’ Charter—became the backbone of local governance, managing over USD 2.3 billion in community-implemented infrastructure applying community-driven processes.

Following the abolition of CDCs by the DfA in 2023, UN-Habitat has adapted its community-centred programming by working through community-based organisations (Local Implementation Committees (LICs) or committees established by other actors), and using participatory tools such as PHVCA, and Community Action Planning (CAPs). While CDCs were legal bodies, LICs or Community Representative Councils (CRCs, as established and trained through a large-scale World Bank funded project, implemented by UNOPS) are informal, often non-elected groups created for project implementation and engagement; while the DfA are aware of their existence, they are not formally recognized and have no legal status. These committees primarily support project coordination, facilitate dialogue and enable community participation, often building on capacities developed under former CDC arrangements.

Key Lessons from SHURA

While SHURA’s implementation was ultimately constrained by remote locations (such as in Herat), delays in government decision-making, and the August 2021 take-over, the programme remains a proven evidence base identifying core conditions for township viability.

- **Location and connectivity** consistently emerged as decisive: when settlements are too distant from services and livelihood opportunities, households either avoid relocation or rapidly re-settle from there. Social Integration with surrounding communities might also be challenging.

- **Integration into surrounding urban systems** proved feasible only when townships functioned as genuine “urban neighbourhoods”, like planned city extensions, with mixed-use layouts and shared services: SHURA’s planning approach and CDC-based community engagement mirrored lessons from former UN-Habitat projects as well as the UNHCR’s PARR programme (or similar approaches from other organisations), where integration flourished in areas with shared social and economic spaces benefiting host communities as well.
- Likewise, **transparent, beneficiary selection proved** essential for social cohesion and conflict prevention. While the former government focused narrowly on returnees and IDPs, UN-Habitat’s would usually advocate for a social mix, as applied in other contexts, to also stimulate local economic activity, allow different social groups to benefit and support inclusive and vibrant human settlements, in line with the New Urban Agenda⁸.
- Finally, all evidence points to the **necessity of substantial up-front investment in basic services and climate-resilient infrastructure**. SHURA’s water, road, and drainage systems in Herat illustrated the scale of investment required to achieve habitability.

Taken together, these findings highlight that township success depends simultaneously on suitable location, strong mixed-use urban planning, transparent and socially inclusive beneficiary processes, integration with surrounding urban systems and communities, and early investment in services and climate-resilient infrastructure. Within SHURA, the Kabul (Eltifat) site proved significantly more viable than Herat, due to proximity to economic opportunities, easier terrain, stronger community acceptance following targeted engagement, and adjacency to existing urban areas—factors that enabled earlier beneficiary mobilisation and greater long-term viability. [SHURA ultimately provided clear lessons and evidence on what makes township interventions succeed, and what can jeopardize their viability.](#)



Solar-powered water supply facility in Saadat Township in Herat province. June 2020. ©UN-Habitat

⁸ UN-Habitat. (2020). The New Urban Agenda illustrated handbook. United Nations Human Settlements Programme.

3

CHAPTER

Adaptive Settlement Pathways: Settlements in Eastern Afghanistan

Afghanistan's township landscape is characterized by a long history of land-allocation schemes, many of which resulted in empty, or minimally inhabited townships due to distance from services, limited livelihood opportunities, or inadequate planning under previous decrees. Against this backdrop, Baba Sahib (Mehterlam, Laghman) and Shikhmesri (Surkhroad, Nangarhar) stand out as functional examples of settlements, where people have settled in large numbers and remained. Both locations have established community-based organisations structures such as CDCs and now Local Implementation Committees (LICs), residents have partially documented tenure, and there is an overall strong community engagement, despite facing severe service gaps, infrastructure deficits and environmental vulnerabilities, resulting in inadequate living conditions and exposing residents to climate-related risks such as flooding. This chapter examines what differentiates these settlements from earlier township approaches, such as the SHURA model.

Baba Sahib hosts approximately 30% IDPs and returnees, resulting in a pronounced social mix, where local and displaced communities live together in the same neighbourhood. As a result, investments made in the area (e.g. service delivery), after participatory processes, benefit all residents, fostering social cohesion and integration rather than segregation, which can occur when interventions focus predominantly one social group. Although Baba Sahib is not formally designated as a township, the Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan (STFA) has recently implemented a durable solutions programme, as joint programme with different UN agencies, with interventions from UN agencies supporting community engagement, adequate living conditions, access to services and livelihood opportunities.

Shikhmesri is a former IDP settlement established in 2010 and consecutive years (under the previous government) and is today an official township approved by the Df Ministry of Urban Development and Housing (DfMUDH), with land documents provided to many returnees. In 2024 and 2025, large numbers of returnees settled in Shurkhroad and Mehterlam districts, including in Shikhmesri township and the surrounding areas. This return dynamic was the main reason Surkhroad was selected for durable solutions programming in the Eastern Region under the STFA, with UN-Habitat implementing flood-mitigation projects and durable solutions interventions,



Children walking around Baba Sahib, Laghman. February 2025 ©UN-Habitat

including water-supply systems, complementing sister agencies' work. In addition, and with funding from the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (AHF), UN-Habitat has implemented shelter-repair activities in the same district. Many other agencies have also supported people living in these areas through humanitarian and basic human needs programmes.

Unlike earlier township developments or settlements located far from economic hubs, these two settlements have evolved into urban extensions, whose “success” derives less from comprehensive infrastructure provision and more from sustained occupancy, rooted social networks, and long-term settlement continuity and a good connectivity to existing economies. Both host large and stable populations—approximately 2,680 households in Baba Sahib and around 3,000 households in Shikhmesri—who hold partial land documentation, have formed active local governance structures, and livelihood systems (shops, small production sites, markets, etc.), despite limited external support. As housing is “self-constructed”, homes are often unsafe though (no earthquake resilience, inadequate or simply lack of understanding of stable construction methods). Still, the combination of spatial plans, existing population, community organisations and local governance structures, and some degree of tenure recognition makes them more sustainable and suitable for additional population growth and integration than many other land-allocation sites.

Their existing fabric and service nodes provide solid entry points for donor investments, allowing future increase of population, and adequate living environments through upgrading infrastructures, and HLP rights interventions to build on already inhabited settlements rather than initiating development in empty or newly created township sites. As such, these two locations could serve as “jump-start” foundations, through spatial planning approaches, for piloting improved settlement models, service delivery, climate-resilient upgrading and area-based land-rights programming **in locations where people have “chosen to settle”**.



Children crossing a river on their way to reach the Shikhmersi settlement, Nangarhar. December 2024 ©UN-Habitat

These settlements can not only be upgraded to improve living conditions for current residents but can also be strategically strengthened to accommodate additional returnees in the context of ongoing mass returns, offering a more feasible and cost-effective alternative to creating and investing in new townships from scratch. It should be noted that local DfA authorities play a role in land allocation, particularly in Shikhmesri township, as well as for any other township process ongoing at this point in time.

The 2022 MoRR “LAS Returnee Townships”⁹ report highlighted widespread gaps in water supply, sanitation, roads, and public facilities across returnee settlements, conditions that mirror those in Baba Sahib and Shikhmesri in the present. Both settlements continue to face limited clean-water access, inadequate sanitation, unpaved and eroded roads, and an absence or very limited availability of clinics, schools, and market spaces. Housing remains highly vulnerable, land documentation is incomplete, and both locations are highly exposed to floods, drought, and erosion. These structural deficits identified in 2022 remain unchanged, as confirmed by recent UN-Habitat’s participatory assessments (PHVCAs) in both settlements.

In practice, however, it is pre-existing returnee and IDP communities like in Baba Sahib and Shikhmesri that most closely embody what “township schemes” originally envisioned: places where land was allocated, families constructed and gradually expand their homes, community governance structures emerged, and social life consolidated gradually over years rather than months. In both locations, UN-Habitat and other actors’ projects (including IOM) under various donors, further reinforced settlement consolidation through investments in shelter/housing, basic services, flood-mitigation and livelihood activities.



Capacity building of a LIC in Laghman, eastern Afghanistan, June 2025 ©UN-Habitat/Piroz Amin

9 Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR). (2022). Land Allocation Scheme (LAS) and returnee townships in Afghanistan. Government of Afghanistan.

A defining feature of both settlements is the presence of robust community governance structures, notably LICs established and trained by IOM and UN-Habitat under STFA projects. These support social and inclusive processes, and serve as “bridging mechanisms” between residents, the DfA and humanitarian or BHN actors, supporting coordination, mobilising residents for collective action, and enabling decision-making processes that reflect the participatory, people-centred approaches that UN-Habitat has promoted in Afghanistan for over two decades.

UN-Habitat’s Participatory Hazard, Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (PHVCA) Approach

The assessments in both locations were conducted using UN-Habitat’s Participatory Hazard, Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (PHVCA) methodology¹⁰ —a structured, community-based approach to analysing past hazards, current threats, and the vulnerabilities and capacities shaping disaster risk. In Afghanistan, UN-Habitat has adapted and localised the PHVCA to capture specific urban vulnerability drivers, including displacement, insecure land and housing, informal settlement growth and climate-related risks.

In addition to mapping hazards and capacities through focus-group discussions, hazard matrices, seasonal calendars, participatory mapping and transect walks, the Afghanistan-specific PHVCA integrates a gender-safe component, developed with UN Women. This involves separate consultations with women to identify safety concerns, harassment risks and heightened exposure to climate-related hazards, and to define gender-responsive and climate-resilient solutions¹¹.



Female community members participating in a PHVCA training to identify hazards within their communities in Kabul, May 2025. ©UN-Habitat/Wrishmina Muneeb

10 UN-Habitat. (2026). Community engagement as a crucial step for advancing durable solutions for returnee integration in Afghanistan: PHVCA and community action planning (CAP). United Nations Human Settlements Programme.

11 Flower, B., UN-Habitat. 2025: [Protecting the housing, land and property \(HLP\) rights of displacement-affected communities in Afghanistan. United Nations Human Settlements Programme.](#)

This gender-safe PHVCA now strengthens all UN-Habitat needs assessments in Afghanistan and has been adopted as a best practice by the Durable Solutions Working Group for large-scale, inter-agency programming. Overall, the PHVCA process not only produced robust risk profiles for Baba Sahib and Shikhmesri¹² but also strengthened community cohesion, supported inclusive decision-making, and provided a practical basis for designing tailored, area-based and climate-resilient interventions.

Despite weak infrastructure, the combination of long-term residence, self-built housing and active community governance makes Baba Sahib and Shikhmesri important examples of settlements shaped by large-scale displacement and return. Families have incrementally improved their shelters over time, and small shops and service points have emerged, indicating the development of modest local economies.

These dynamics suggest that planned settlement or “township” development remains viable in peri-urban areas when households perceive long-term social and economic value in remaining on their plots, and when investments in infrastructure, shelters and livelihoods are supported to improve living conditions. Interventions can therefore focus on strengthening tenure security, upgrading vulnerable housing, improving WASH systems, reducing environmental risks and enhancing connectivity to nearby economic centres.

Where living conditions are inadequate, area-based upgrading may be more feasible under current political and financial constraints than pursuing new large-scale greenfield township development. It also offers opportunities to integrate HLP rights into the existing urban fabric, where land is already claimed, used and valued, while strengthening the capacity to integrate



UN-Habitat community mobilisers assessing shelter conditions and households needs in Nangarhar, January 2025.
©UN-Habitat

12 UN-Habitat. (2025). Participatory Hazards, Vulnerabilities and Capacities Assessment (PHVCA) report: Baba Sahib IDP and returnees settlement, Laghman province, Afghanistan. United Nations Human Settlements Programme. UN-Habitat. (2025). Participatory Hazards, Vulnerabilities and Capacities Assessment (PHVCA) report: Bar Shikhmesri IDP and returnees settlement, Surkhrod district, Nangarhar province, Afghanistan. UN-Habitat.

future returnees. In Shikhmesri, this potential is reinforced by its official township status and existing land documentation, while in Baba Sahib, expanded investment could provide a strategic pathway toward future official recognition.

Baba Sahib and Shikhmesri are not “successful” because they are well serviced (which they are not), but because they are in areas which allow people to be self-reliant. Their social fabric, established leadership structures, and continued occupation make them viable entry points for further expansion and densification. With strategic investments, these settlements can serve as pilots through climate-resilient settlements upgrading, housing interventions (including repairs) community-driven planning, and the integration of HLP rights into urban and settlement development processes.

4

CHAPTER

Conclusion: Programmatic Options for Scalable Reintegration and Donor Priorities

The future of “re-integration programming” in Afghanistan depends on aligning ambitions with on-the-ground realities. In a context marked by large-scale returns, scarcity of adequate land, limited infrastructure financing, and political sensitivities around planning approvals, beneficiary selection processes and investments, including those led by the DfA, the most viable path forward is an evidence-based and integrated approach - based on different considerations.

Sustainable township development hinges on some core conditions:

- suitable location and connectivity;
- mixed-use, cross-sectoral (spatial) planning;
- transparent and socially inclusive beneficiary processes;
- credible opportunities for integration into surrounding economies, communities and service systems;
- substantial early investment in basic and climate-resilient infrastructure
- settlements upgrading - in locations where people have chosen to settle - should remain a viable and cost-effective option and needs to be well planned.

The paper aims to share lessons learned while acknowledging that no “one-size-fits-all” solution exists.

Large “greenfield” township developments, even with spatial plans, require extensive investments and infrastructure packages, and have repeatedly struggled in Afghanistan, particularly when implemented in poorly located or remote areas. (The DfA have repeatedly shown paper-versions of the full masterplans for different townships to different organisations, in different locations, but currently not shared further – while there are re-occurring news that implementation efforts have been advanced by DfA).



UN-Habitat engineer assessing shelters in Nangarhar, June 2025. ©UN-Habitat

Today, township initiatives proposed under Decree 6 face comparable structural constraints, including limited availability of well-located land, high infrastructure costs, and the absence of transparent oversight mechanisms which include other actors apart from DfA (Briefing Paper on Townships, 2025).

The key implication for programme design is that the most viable re-integration investments might be those that reinforce or expand already inhabited locations, (e.g., in peri-urban areas) but in a planned, cross-sectoral manner, as those locations have already demonstrate the core elements of urban consolidation: stable populations and economies, partial or documented tenure, local governance structures and opportunities for functioning economic development.

By directing resources toward upgrading and gradually expanding settlements through urban planning (e.g., as implemented in Somalia)¹³, interventions can simultaneously improve living conditions for current residents and create additional services needed to accommodate current and future returnee inflows. This dual benefit—supporting existing communities while integrating new displacement movements —makes upgrading inhabited settlements a higher-impact and lower-risk strategy than initiating new township developments from scratch.

Durable Solutions Outcomes

Durable solutions, as defined by the IASC Framework, are achieved when displaced populations can live in safety and dignity, access services and livelihoods, enjoy HLP security, and participate in governance without discrimination. UN-Habitat’s area-based urban approach translates these outcomes into integrated, neighbourhood-level interventions, particularly in urban and peri-urban contexts.



Lack of water and sanitation in Baba Sahib, Laghman, cause health challenges for people. January 2025. ©UN-Habitat

13 [UN-Habitat, 2025: Berdaale Strategic Urban Plan for Durable Solutions to Displacement](#)

The cases of Baba Sahib and Shikhmesri illustrate a strong return on investment: when land allocation is followed by actual, sustained habitation, socio-economic development often tends to emerge organically. These examples highlight the advantages of investing in settlements where people already live, rather than attempting to attract populations to newly planned sites or remote locations. Investments can therefore focus on unlocking “existing settlement potential” rather than financing new, township developments.

Durable Solutions Outcome	UN-Habitat Area-Based Operationalisation
Safety and dignity	Spatial planning informed by hazard, vulnerability and climate-risk assessments (e.g. PHVCA), including flood mitigation, safer access routes, lighting and public space design that reduces protection and safety risks.
Access to basic services	Integrated upgrading of water, sanitation, drainage, roads, waste management, education and health facilities, aligned with urban systems and municipal service delivery rather than stand-alone infrastructure.
Access to livelihoods	Settlement location and connectivity analysis, integration with local markets, mixed-use planning, and support neighbourhood-level economic activity.
Housing, land and property security	Incremental tenure recognition linked to infrastructure investment and settlement upgrading, enabling household self-investment and reducing the risk of secondary displacement.
Participation in governance	Community-based governance structures (e.g. CDCs, LICs, CRCs), participatory planning, and inclusive decision-making processes that link communities with local authorities and service providers.

Gender and inclusion are cross-cutting enablers of durable solutions. UN-Habitat’s gender-safe PHVCA and participatory planning processes ensure women’s safety concerns, access to services and tenure insecurity¹⁴ are identified and addressed at settlement level¹⁵. Framed as sustainability and risk-management issues, the absence of gender-equitable tenure and participation undermines household stability, investment returns and long-term settlement viability, even where political constraints limit formal legal reform¹⁶.

14 Tempira, O., 2021 (UN-Habitat): [WOMEN, LAND AND PEACE. Sustaining peace through women’s empowerment and increased access to land and property rights in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Key Messages.](#)

15 UN-Habitat, UNHCR, NRC (2021): [A Brief Guide to Women’s Land Rights in Afghanistan - Afghanistan | ReliefWeb](#)

16 UN-Habitat Factsheet | [10 Gender Gaps in Afghanistan’s Urban Neighborhoods](#): Emerging Trends, 2026:10 Gender Gaps in Afghanistan’s Urban Neighborhoods

5

CHAPTER

Complementary Approaches and Lessons from Other Organisations

In parallel to UN-Habitat’s engagement in township development and settlement planning, other UN agencies and NGOs have accumulated substantial operational experience supporting return and reintegration in urban and peri-urban contexts in Afghanistan, offering complementary and reinforcing lessons on what enables sustainable outcomes for returnees, IDPs and host communities. Those lessons learned should help to advance dialogue and agreements for future decision-making processes.



Men participate in a community mapping session to identify local hazards in Baba Sahib, Laghman. January 2025. ©UN-Habitat



Children in an informal settlement in Eastern Afghanistan. March 2026. ©UN-Habitat

UNHCR – Land Allocation Schemes (LAS) and Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARR)

UNHCR has supported integrated programming in township-like settlements and areas of return since the early 2000s, including shelter, roads rehabilitation, WASH and protection-sensitive interventions, in parallel with Government-led Land Allocation Scheme (LAS) sites established under Presidential Decree 104 (2005) and later revised through Decree 305 (2018). Experience across these schemes consistently shows that land allocation alone does not constitute a durable solution. Where plots were allocated in remote, poorly serviced or economically disconnected locations, many townships remained partially inhabited or were abandoned, as households could not sustain livelihoods or access basic services. This experience highlights the importance of minimum site-suitability standards prior to land allocation or public announcements, including access to water, hazard risk assessments, proximity to markets, public services, and overall absorption capacity. Land allocation and township development were most fragile when not explicitly linked to shelter provision and livelihood opportunities, including labour-market access and transport connectivity. Previous schemes showed that the absence of these elements undermined settlement viability, regardless of formal land tenure.

Beneficiary selection emerged as a central determinant of legitimacy and social cohesion. Under Decree 104, documentation requirements, verification processes and commission-based selection created space for exclusion, manipulation and elite capture, often disadvantaging the most vulnerable, particularly IDPs. While Decree 305 broadened the range of acceptable documentation for returnees, IDPs frequently faced greater barriers to proof, and reliance on return documentation sometimes incentivised forgery. UNHCR experience underscores the importance of transparent criteria, published beneficiary lists, appeals mechanisms, and independent oversight and complaints mechanisms, even though such safeguards have become increasingly constrained post-2021.

Alongside land-based approaches, UNHCR has implemented the Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARR) programme, focusing on communities experiencing high levels of refugee return and displacement. PARR applied transparent targeting and community-level selection processes, drawing on NRC's HLP-based vulnerability and documentation practices, with the primary emphasis on returnees and other displaced populations. Assistance was deliberately extended to host communities through a whole-of-community approach, aimed at promoting social cohesion, mitigating tensions, supporting durable solutions and strengthening community resilience. Interventions focused on strengthening and extending essential services and facilities, including shared community infrastructure, to support stabilisation and reintegration in mixed settlements. During the SHURA implementation period, the public announcement of township allocation processes meant that many households residing in or originating from PARR areas subsequently registered for SHURA townships, illustrating the operational linkages between area-based reintegration approaches and formal land allocation mechanisms.

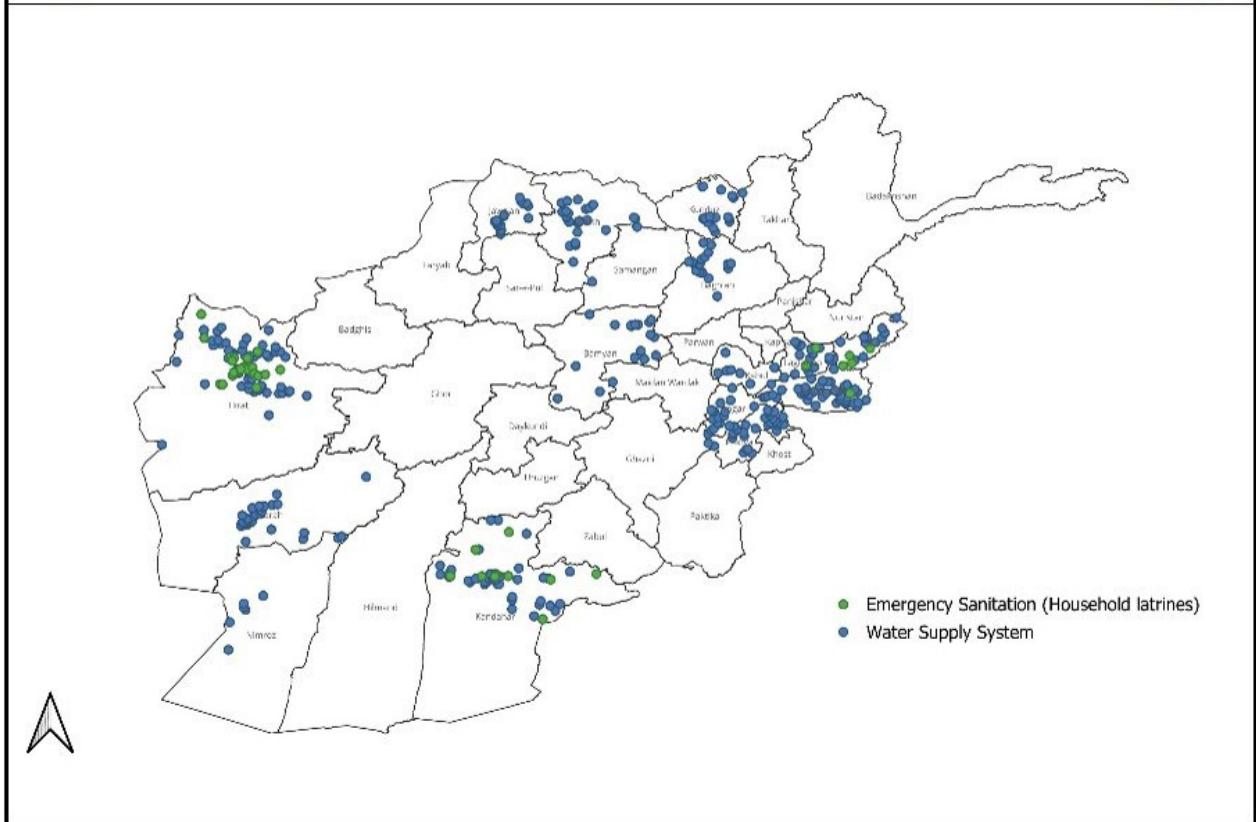
UNICEF – Area-Based WASH Interventions and Social Cohesion in Areas of Return

UNICEF's experience in areas of return highlights the critical role of WASH services in supporting social cohesion and sustainable reintegration in displacement-affected urban and peri-urban contexts. Limited access to WASH services remains a major crisis in Afghanistan, exacerbated by conflict, climate change, recurrent drought, seasonal floods, large-scale returns, weak infrastructure and poor resource management. According to the Afghanistan 2023 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), over 30 per cent of the population lacks access to basic drinking water services, while open defecation and unsafe hygiene practices remain widespread, particularly in locations hosting high numbers of returnees where systems are easily overstretched.

To reduce competition over scarce resources and strengthen cohesion between returnees and host communities, UNICEF has implemented integrated WASH interventions focused on durable solutions in Areas of Return (AoR) across 15 provinces over the past three years. Programming combined life-saving WASH responses at border and reception points with resilient and durable WASH services within return locations, based on detailed community consultations and technical assessments. More than 390 climate-resilient community water supply systems were implemented, benefiting approximately 1.2 million people, including large numbers of returnees settled within host communities.

Interventions prioritised equitable access to safe drinking water through solar-powered boreholes with piped systems, rehabilitation of existing wells, gravity-fed systems, reservoirs, piped networks and household connections, easing pressure on communal facilities and reducing time, distance and protection risks associated with water collection, particularly for women and girls. To support sustainability, Water User Committees and Water Management Committees were established and trained to manage operation, maintenance, and cost-recovery mechanisms.

Complementary sanitation and hygiene interventions included household sanitation facilities and Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) approaches where feasible, with targeted latrine support for the most vulnerable where CLTS was not appropriate. UNICEF's experience demonstrates that inclusive, climate-resilient and community-managed WASH systems, serving both returnees and host communities, reduce health risks, mitigate resource-based tensions and can function as a core pillar of durable solutions, rather than a standalone sectoral response.



Map highlighting the emergency sanitation (household latrines) and water supply system in areas of return and reintegration. ©UNICEF Afghanistan

IOM – Township-Related Programming and Area-Based Returns Planning

IOM's engagement on townships and settlement-level programming in Afghanistan has emphasised the importance of location, sequencing and risk-informed planning in supporting sustainable reintegration. Based on operational experience, IOM prioritises peri-urban locations for pilot township or settlement interventions, given their closer proximity to core services, city-based markets, and existing livelihood and infrastructure opportunities, which are critical to longer-term integration outcomes. At the same time, IOM highlights the need to mitigate potential pull factors associated with large-scale township investments. Highly visible or concentrated assistance risks unintentionally incentivising premature or additional returns if perceived as guaranteed support. For this reason, township-related interventions should be aligned with principled, needs-based and risk-informed targeting, carefully sequenced to avoid unintended impacts on return dynamics.

Where feasible, IOM advocates for building on existing development rather than initiating entirely new investments. This includes prioritising townships or settlements (such as older sites designated under the former Republic) where basic infrastructure, service access and economic activity already exist, or where tangible progress has been made, as these locations offer more realistic foundations for consolidation and reintegration.

IOM also views ongoing township discussions as an opportunity to strengthen broader area-based returns response planning. Under the evolving coordination architecture, Regional Teams can use lessons learned from township experiences to advance area-based planning in Areas of Return (AoR), covering both rural and peri-urban settings in high-return districts, in line with the priorities and workplan of the National Durable Solutions Working Group (N-DSWG) for 2026.

Central to IOM's approach is the need to anchor township and settlement planning in meaningful community consultation and participation, with specific attention to inclusion of women, youth, persons with disabilities and marginalised groups. This is seen as essential for strengthening local ownership, accountability, and social cohesion. Finally, IOM underscores the importance of articulating shared, written criteria for engagement across agencies, to ensure consistent messaging and a common framework of intervention that can be communicated, as needed, to the De facto Authorities.



Baba Sahib, Laghman from above. February 2024 ©UN-Habitat

Differentiated Urban Pathways for Sustainable Reintegration as a Model for Implementation

- References to UN-Habitat's Global Framework on Solutions to Urban Displacement

Urban displacement and return require context-specific and differentiated solutions, particularly in urban and peri-urban settings experiencing sustained population pressure due to returns and internal displacement. Evidence from Afghanistan and other contexts facing urban internal displacement shows that sustainable reintegration cannot be achieved through a single, uniform solution, but instead depends on enabling multiple, adaptive urban pathways that reflect people's capacities, choices and the functioning of local urban systems. This requires area-based and context-specific assessments of existing services and infrastructure, access to livelihoods and markets, land and housing conditions, as well as the socio-economic profiles, skills, education levels and age structure (including youth) of displaced and host communities, supported by sex-, disability- and age-disaggregated data.

UN-Habitat's global framework, [Towards Inclusive Solutions to Urban Internal Displacement \(2025\)](#) emphasizes a shift away from stand-alone displacement responses toward pathways to inclusive urban development, where housing, land, basic services, livelihoods and participation are addressed in an integrated inclusive manner at neighbourhood level. In practice, this implies complementing any land-based or planned settlement approaches with settlement upgrading, incremental and homeowner-driven housing solutions, access to rental markets, and strengthened connections to urban services and labour markets, especially in areas where displaced and returning populations are already settling. Such approaches recognize that urban displacement is often intertwined with broader patterns of urbanisation, and that investments which reinforce existing urban systems can yield shared benefits for displacement-affected and non-displaced communities alike.

At the same time, while acknowledging the political sensitivities around townships support, an indicative and general model for donor support to sustainable reintegration in urban and peri urban contexts can be guided by a set of light, evidence-based and community-centred parameters, rather than prescriptive solutions.

These include: prioritising well-located areas with connectivity to livelihoods and services; supporting incremental housing, shelter repair and settlement upgrading to enable self-reliance over time; investing in basic infrastructure and service delivery at settlement or neighbourhood scale; strengthening inclusive community-based governance and participation mechanisms as entry points for social cohesion and localisation; and applying a gender-sensitive area-based analysis and data to inform sequencing, targeting and risk management. While further experience from other contexts and agencies should continue to inform practice, these principles provide a pragmatic foundation for donor engagement that aligns humanitarian and durable solutions objectives in urban displacement settings supporting not only social cohesion and local integration, but also improving cost-effectiveness, reinforcing existing urban systems, and helping to prevent further displacement and the consequences of failed management of returns.

Children in Kunduz travel long distances to fetch water, highlighting the critical need for water supply infrastructure in many settlements and communities, July 2026.
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Summary of Recommendations

- Building upon UN-Habitat's Experiences and the Multi-Actor Discussions in April 2026

For technical and financial partners, this analysis and discussions held in April 2026 translate into the following actionable investment pathways:

1. Prioritise well-located, service-ready areas with existing or expandable connectivity to livelihoods, jobs, markets and basic services; select pilots for investments in townships based on location criteria;
2. Support light, mixed-use and risk-sensitive planning, as basis for settlements upgrading;
3. Invest early in essential and climate-resilient infrastructure, including water points, drainage systems, culverts, climate-protection measures and access roads;
4. Support inclusive community governance structures (e.g. LICs, CDCs, GAs) to strengthen social cohesion and transparent community-driven outcomes;
5. Progressive Housing, Land and Property arrangements enable homeowner-driven incremental and context-appropriate housing and tenure arrangements that reduce eviction risks through financing of core units, materials and technical assistance, or by supporting shelter repair and upgrading to improve living conditions; pair shelter and housing interventions with access to basic and other services and access to livelihoods;
6. Empower people towards self-reliance and resilience;
7. Focus investments where settlement is already occurring, including informal and unplanned peri-urban areas that could be upgraded into planned city extensions, to maximise impact, prevent under-use of newly developed sites, and support planned expansion of existing settlements to integrate future influxes of returnees.



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For A Better Urban Future
