

Early Recovery Assistance to IDPs Returning to Swat and Buner, NWFP, Pakistan: Focus Group Discussions

International Medical Corps

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In order to assess the requirements needed for those currently displaced by the ongoing crisis in North West Frontier Province (NWFP) Pakistan to return to their place of origin, International Medical Corps (IMC) conducted focus group discussions with individuals displaced from Swat and Buner who are currently residing in Chota Lahore Camp (Yar Hussain Mera), Swabi District. The purpose of this assessment was to obtain qualitative information to help guide the development and implementation of appropriate early recovery initiatives.

Key findings from the focus group discussions include:

- The majority of IDPs are eager to return to their place of origin however they want to be assured of the security situation and provided much-needed reconstruction assistance.
- Very few IDPs have access to information about the current situation in Swat and Buner. When they do receive information, the most trusted sources are the government and military.
- In light of the destruction they witnessed prior to fleeing, IDPs anticipate that they will return to find their homes, livestock and crops completely destroyed.
- Among female IDPs, a primary concern when considering return is security. Many women expressed fear for their families' as well as for their own safety, primarily as a result of Taliban activities.
- Both women and men indicated that financial concerns are the primary issue facing male IDPs. The fact that men have lost their livelihoods and have no resources to use in re-establishing their businesses or their crops is a significant stress as well as a critical factor as families consider return.
- Alongside provision of basic services, the primary form of support required for return is financial assistance.
- Respondents offered a variety of suggestions for how best to assist people in meeting their financial needs, including providing handicrafts training to women, paying recently displaced men for reconstruction projects in their communities, distributing loans for small business owners and supplying seeds and fertilizers to farmers.
- The prevalence of depression among IDPs was widely noted as well as the need for treatment centers to address people's psychosocial needs upon return.
- A majority of respondents stated that the Army should be involved in providing assistance to IDPs. The Army is most trusted to distribute assistance equitably.

- Many individuals noted a considerable amount of concern regarding favoritism and corruption in the distribution of assistance. Women expressed extreme distrust of community elders in particular, and advocated that these leaders not be involved in assistance efforts.
- It was widely agreed upon that there is a role for both male and female community members to play in reconstruction efforts, primarily with men providing the labor and women supporting them through household activities.
- For both women and men, the two most significant incentives for involvement in reconstruction are financial assistance and capacity building/training.

While the findings of IMC's focus group assessment is not representative of the entire displaced population, it does reveal critical factors that should be taken into consideration as early recovery initiatives are planned and implemented. Chief among these is the central role IDPs have to play in all stages of the return and reconstruction process.

BACKGROUND

Within a span of nearly eight weeks, from late April to mid June, it is estimated that approximately 2 million Pakistanis have fled from Swat, Buner and Lower Dir in NWFP as a result of a harsh offensive by the Government of Pakistan (GOP) against Anti-Governmental Elements (AGE). On June 14th, the government began an additional offensive in South Waziristan. To date, internally displaced people (IDPs) are seeking refuge in safer areas throughout NWFP including Mardan, Swabi, Charsadda, Peshawar, and Nowshera.

The numbers of displaced has officially been verified to be 1.9 million individuals, with many humanitarian agencies asserting that the number will exceed 2.5 million when the on-going verification process is complete. Approximately 260,000 of these IDPs are currently living in official and unofficial camps throughout NWFP. The remaining 1.6 million people have sought refuge in host communities, mostly in Swabi, Mardan, Nowshera, Peshawar and Charsadda. These IDPs have found shelter discreetly, often in the poorest neighborhoods of unfamiliar communities, sometimes with friends and relatives, sometimes amid strangers in already overcrowded cities. Most of the communities hosting the displaced are as destitute as those they are helping and are also in desperate need of humanitarian assistance. A significant portion of IDPs not in camps have also moved into government run schools. Whether in camps, schools or among host communities IDPs are facing severe shortages in basic necessities and services.

"I cannot tolerate the hot weather. And it is very difficult to live in one tent with two families of twelve members."

- Female focus group respondent

IMC has conducted several rapid assessments in Swabi and Mardan to identify the gaps, needs and intentions of IDPs in camps and communities as well as with the populations hosting high levels of IDPs. These assessments indicate that the vast majority of IDPs (87%) did not have enough time to gather their belongings prior to fleeing —37% had less than 6 hours between the decision to leave and their actual departure, and another 21% had 6-12 hours. As a result, most displaced individuals have very few basic necessities in their possession and rely heavily on relief efforts. According to assessments, the first

priority of IDPs is to obtain financial assistance. The next two greatest assistance needs are securing access to food and access to basic services such as water, sanitation, and electricity. IMC health clinics have observed the following disease trends within camps and mobile medical units, which highlight the additional need for consistent health services: acute respiratory infections (21%) and acute diarrhea (16%), with skin diseases ranking third. Despite efforts to provide much-needed support, persistent need for water and sanitation, shelter, health, food and NFIs exists in all camps and host communities.

Although there are government reports that some areas of Swat and Buner are clear and people should return, very few IDPs are returning to their place of origin as strikes are continuing in these areas and few necessities are available. As continued efforts are made to enable IDPs safe return, it is critical that services are tailored to meet the needs and desires of the targeted populations.

METHODOLOGY

With this assessment IMC endeavored to obtain qualitative information from IDPs currently displaced in Swabi district, capturing their attitudes about return and expectations for assistance during the process. IMC’s previous survey of IDPs, released on June 3, found that although an overwhelming 94% of IDP respondents intend to return to their place of origin, naming physical safety, the restoration of basic services, and the absence of militants and government as the main prerequisites for return, 84% had no idea when they would be able to return. The objective of this survey was to gather more in-depth information about the early recovery needs and intentions of IDPs displaced from Buner and Swat Districts.

Focus Group Participants		
Category	No. of Participants	Age
Female	10	41 – 60 yrs
Female	8	19 – 40 yrs
Female	8	10 – 18 yrs
Male	11	41 – 60 yrs
Male	9	19 – 40 yrs
Male	8	10 – 18 yrs

To reach its objective, IMC conducted focus group discussions (FGD) in Chota Lahore (Yar Hussain Mera) IDP camps in Swabi district. Six FGDs were conducted on June 20, 2009, involving a total of 26 female IDPs and 28 male IDPs ranging in age from 10 to 60 years of age. All of the participants are currently displaced from either Buner or Swat districts. Focus group participants were selected from different clusters of the camp randomly. Each cluster is evenly represented. Each FGD was facilitated by an IMC member of the same gender as the participants, with two note-takers present to document and record remarks and observations.

KEY FINDINGS

Intentions for Return

Focus group discussions indicated a near universal desire among both men and women to return to their place of origin as soon as possible. The extreme heat, anxiety as a result of being separated from relatives and the distress of having to wait in long lines for assistance were cited among the reasons for immediate return. *“I think more than 80% of people would go back. No one is happy to stay even one more night in this camp but we are staying here because there is no security in our area. Shops are destroyed and money is finished during the displacement.”* (FGD: males 10 – 18 years) Women also expressed an acute awareness of what they had left behind in fleeing from their homes, including husbands, livestock and household belongings. Motivating several women’s desire to return was concern for the family and belongings they had left behind. *“I have left behind my husband and my calf in the village. I am worried about their state and would like to go back to see if they are still alive.”*(FGD: females 19 – 40 years).

Despite the strong desire to return, most of the respondents provided conditional considerations as factors in their decision to return. Many IDPs want to be assured of the security situation and provided reconstruction assistance before they will return. As one man said, *“According to my opinion, peace and security are two main things. If these two would be assured in the region all the other problems would be resolved automatically”* (FGD: males 19 – 40 years). The predominant assistance factors influencing their return are: provision of financial/livelihoods assistance, shelter, health facilities, water, electricity and food.

“We want to go back when Government provides us assistance in the form of reconstruction of our homes and continue to support us financially so that we are able to fulfill our basic needs.”
– Female focus group respondent

It is worth noting that among the female respondents, several women expressed a more tentative attitude regarding return. These women’s responses highlighted the difficult circumstances families were facing prior to displacement. *“I don’t want to go back as my husband was on a daily wages and we were not able to make enough living.”* (FGD: females 19 – 40 years). The women are hesitant to return to the same struggles, specifically limited livelihoods and pervasive insecurity, which they left behind.

Access to Information

The vast majority of focus group respondents stated that they do not have access to information about the situation in their place of origin. Those who have received information rely on getting it from relatives who have recently traveled back to their homes in order to assess the situation, from family who remained behind and have mobile service or from other IDPs who have recently arrived in the camps. There is varying levels of confidence about the reliability of this information, although many respondents agreed that when information is provided by the government and/or military it is trustworthy.

IDPs' Concerns Regarding Return

In light of the destruction they witnessed prior to displacement, most of the IDPs anticipate that they will find their homes, livestock and crops destroyed when they return. In the rush to leave, men and women left everything they owned behind and are left with only uncertainty about what they will return to. Although they were reluctant to say with any confidence what the condition of their homes would be, most individuals expect to find very little in tact. *"We were at home when the mortar shells hit our neighbor's house and our relatives died in their house. Our house was shaken with the blast and now we believe that it will be fully destroyed."* (FGD: females 19– 40 years). In addition, IDPs think it is highly likely that their crops are devastated either due to lack of harvesting or as a result of being crushed by tanks. They also anticipate that their livestock is dead or has been stolen. Furthermore, they predict that the few marketplaces, health facilities and schools which were not destroyed prior to their departure are now eradicated. Those facilities that are not destroyed are likely not functional due to insecurity. As one man described, *"the health workers are not doing their duties due to fear of Taliban in the area"* (FGD: males 19 – 40 years). When discussing the destruction of community infrastructure, many of the respondents specifically described Taliban activity, including targeted bombings of girls' schools, looting of shops and destruction of government property.

"If we go back, we would be facing health issues because all health facilities are destroyed and some will be closed. And we also have information that Taliban have taken all the medicines from the health services. In emergency cases we used to travel easily even at night to health services unit but due to the current situation we cannot even imagine to step out of our homes in the day time. Our country is no longer safe."

Female focus group respondent

Given the widespread expectation that *"nothing will be left when we go back"* IDPs have a variety of concerns in regards to return. Predominant among women's concerns are lack of water and electricity, inadequate health facilities and limited provision of basic needs. Women are particularly concerned about their own as well as their husband's ability to provide for their family given that they have no source of income. When asked about women's needs, men also highlighted the need for women to have access to health facilities when they return. *"Women would have more problems in our area (Swat). The government should arrange maternity centers*

because most of the hospitals are destroyed and there is no female doctor to treat our women" (FGD: males 19 – 40 years).

Among the issues facing women, security is also a primary concern. Many women expressed fear for their families' as well as for their own safety, primarily as a result of Taliban activities. Women discussed having their movement restricted, witnessing beheadings and fearing the abduction of their children prior to displacement – all at the hands of the Taliban. It is apparent from women's responses that their lives were greatly impacted by Taliban activity and that this influences their outlook on return.

Both women and men indicated that financial concerns are the primary issue facing male IDPs. In support of this, many men cited male heads of households as the most vulnerable men among the displaced. The reason for this is the pressure these men face to provide for their families in extremely difficult conditions. Women worry about their husbands for the same reason. *"Due to the present circumstances we all are very depressed and worried about our husbands. My husband is under a lot of*

stress because of the unemployment and the sense of insecurity to the whole family. He also feels it a lot when his kids are standing in the queue for food or any other amenities.” (FGD: females 41 – 60 years). Men have lost their livelihoods and all of their assets – if they are to return to their homes, they have no resources to use in re-establishing their businesses or their crops and therefore will lack the means to provide for their families. This is a significant stress for men and women alike, as well as a critical factor as families consider their decision to return.

The predominant concerns for the children in displacement are security and education. Many parents expressed a persistent fear that their children will be kidnapped by the Taliban. As a result of this, parents are fearful to send their children to school when they return. This fear is augmented by the destruction of schools in many areas. The disrupted education of children is a pressing concern for IDPs.

It is worth noting that when discussing the issues facing women, men and children, many male respondents discussed the prevalence of depression as well as the need for treatment centers to address people’s emotional state upon return. Recommendations were made to establish handicraft centers for women, which would provide them with a way to reduce their tensions, as well as facilitating recreational activities for children. It is clear that war and displacement have taken a psychological toll on the population and that the need for psychosocial services is a significant concern.

“I am worried about my children’s state of mind upon their return and at present in the camp too... They have to stand in lines for hours to receive food, collect water and other items from the collection points and at times the items finish before their turn arrives. They are children. They don’t know what has happened to us and they demand for their needs as they used to get before the operation. If we cannot fulfill their demands then sense of deprivation and inferiority complex will grow in them, Which will hurt us more.”

- Female focus group respondent

When asked to discuss the reasons for the above noted concerns, men primarily focused on insecurity and the fighting between government forces and the Taliban. *“The main reasons of all these issues are current insecurity and extremism in the area which have compelled the army to raid and also forced the people to leave their homes/villages”* (FGD: males 19 – 40 years). Women, on the other hand, were more explicit in describing specific Taliban practices that impacted their situation.

Provision of Assistance

Men, women and children alike all noted the indisputable need for assistance if they are to return to their place of origin. As noted above, IDPs possess very little now that they are displaced and most anticipate that they will return to find very few, if any, of their assets remaining. For this reason, return and reconstruction assistance is needed to a great extent. *“Financial support is much needed as my crops have all ruined. If my shelter is destroyed then what will I do without it. We need basic facilities. There is no electricity, water, telephone and mobile services. There is not even a single cat left in my village (there is no life).”* (FGD: females 19 – 40 years)

Respondents noted that particularly in the initial stages of return they will require help providing for their most basic, essential needs. Many individuals stated that the same provisions which are provided to them in the camps should also be provided to them upon return, including food and shelter. It was also



noted that water and electricity infrastructure needs to be repaired, health and education facilities reconstructed and free medical services provided. In addition the need for psychosocial services was highlighted.

“Shelter, money and food assistance would be needed to all the people because we have nothing after displacement from our place of origin. Now we have no source of income. When we would go back to our area, in the initial stage we would be in need of these essential things.”
-Male focus group respondent

Alongside provision of basic services, the primary form of support required for return is financial assistance. Respondents offered a variety of suggestions for how best to assist people in meeting their financial needs, including providing handicrafts training to women, paying recently displaced men for reconstruction projects in their communities, distributing loans for small business owners and supplying seeds and fertilizers to farmers. It was clear from all respondents that among their most pressing requests is to be equipped with the resources to re-establish their livelihoods and provide for their families.

When asked who should be responsible for the provision of assistance, the vast majority of both women and men stated that the Army should be involved. According to respondents, the Army is without a doubt the most honest institution and can be therefore be trusted to distribute assistance fairly. *“I like Army and I trust them a lot. I am confident that if it is done through them it will be on equal basis. They are honest people”* (FGD, females 19 – 40). In addition to the Army, the government was cited as having an important role to play, particularly in making funds available and reconstructing homes and facilities. NGOs were noted as also having a role to play in providing basic necessities, livelihoods assistance, and health and education services.

Women in particular emphasized the critical function the Army should play in providing assistance. As opposed to the high regard they feel towards the Army, women expressed extreme distrust for community elders. In their opinion these leaders should not be involved in assistance efforts. *“Whatever aid is coming through the community elders is misappropriated and does not reach to us”* (FGD: females 41 – 60 years). The majority of women saw the Army, with assistance from the government and NGOs, as the key actors in ensuring that IDPs’ needs are met upon return to their places of origin.

“Military should be involved in providing assistance here in the camps as well as in our villages on our return. They are honest and they carry out distribution on equality. Assistance should not be distributed through the elders as they usually distribute it to non-deserving people and keep the good quality things for themselves.”
– Female focus group respondent

Many individuals, both male and female, noted a fear of favoritism and corruption in the distribution of assistance. In women’s opinion, the Army’s involvement would mitigate such concerns. Some of the male respondents recommended that the government be responsible for proper monitoring of all assistance and reconstruction. Others noted that local community involvement would be helpful in ensuring that assistance was distributed and utilized effectively. *“The Government, INGO and local NGO should cooperate and coordinate with each other by making local committee system in every village which has equal representation of every strata of the community”* (FGD: males 41 – 60 years). It is apparent that equitable distribution of assistance is a pressing issue for most of the IDPs.

Community Participation in Reconstruction

When asked to discuss the role that the community could play in reconstruction and resettlement efforts, nearly all respondents offered suggestions for how every member of the community could be involved.

It was widely agreed that men could provide the labor for reconstruction efforts. In addition, the educated and skilled men could be recruited to provide more substantive support. *“In our area there are some educated and skillful persons. The government and other organizations should recruit these local people from the community in the reconstruction works.”* (FGD: males 19 – 40 years). Women’s role was seen to be primarily in supporting government and NGO workers as well as their male families. This support was in many cases in the form of cooking meals, caring for children or assisting in the reconstruction of their own homes. For women who are educated, some respondents suggested that they provide trainings to other women and girls or serve as teachers and Lady Health Workers.

For both women and men, the two most significant incentives for involvement in reconstruction were financial assistance and capacity building. Providing women with sewing machines as well as training in tailoring and knitting was a widely noted request. It was also mentioned that women be provided with security so that they can work without male family members worrying about them. For men, training in masonry, mechanics and carpentry was suggested. In addition to building their capacity, it was considered critical by all respondents that men *“get reasonable wages so that we can live a normal life”* (FGD: females 41 – 60 years). The need for financial assistance was seen to be both a primary concern and a useful incentive.

“I think every person can play their role according to their needs and skills. All the community men can participate very actively in the activities. Youth can play their role by dissemination the important information in the community. Our women cannot go out from home, they can support the government or NGO workers in their homes with household activities.”
- Male focus group respondent

It is apparent that IDPs are eager to return to their homes and resume their lives, and they are willing and ready to play an active part in ensuring that this occurs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the Government of Pakistan continues to advocate for IDPs’ return, there is no doubt that movement will gradually occur. Displaced people are eager to return to their homes, and they are looking to authorities for information as well as security and support. The onus is on all relevant actors – government, international humanitarian actors and local authorities – to ensure IDPs return to a secure setting and have the resources to rebuild their lives. Based on feedback gathered during focus group discussions in Chota Lahore camp (Yar Hussain Mera), IMC recommends that return is not prematurely encouraged. The safety and protection of all people – including women and children – is a basic human right that must be ensured. Once return commences, it is critical that adequate assistance is provided and distributed in an equitable manner. IMC’s discussions with IDPs revealed a widespread trust in the

Army. The trust and efficiency that the Army offers should be utilized, with proper monitoring to ensure neutrality. Provision of basic needs (food and shelter) and reconstruction of essential infrastructure (health and education services) are essential to early recovery initiatives in Swat and Buner, however they should not overshadow psychosocial considerations. War and displacement have taken a psychological toll on the population; sustainable long-term recovery depends on addressing this. IDPs have made it clear that they are ready and willing to participate in the reconstruction of their communities. IMC recommends that all community members, men as well as women, are engaged in the process. Discussions with IDPs highlighted several unique ideas for participation – including handicrafts training for women, loans for small business owners and seeds and fertilizers for farmers. Ensuring community involvement starting in the initial stages will not only provide the necessary labor and support for reconstruction, it will also ensure community ownership of the process.

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