

The logo for SEEFAR, with 'SEE' in blue and 'FAR' in orange. The background of the entire page is a photograph of a man and a woman walking in a rural, arid landscape under a cloudy sky. The man is on the left, wearing a grey jacket and pants, walking away from the camera. The woman is on the right, wearing a blue burqa and white pants, walking towards the camera.

# SEEFAR

## Reluctant Journeys

Why Afghans migrate irregularly to Europe

Results from the beginning of a longitudinal study of Afghans planning irregular migration to the European Union

ABOUT US

*Our vision is for a world in which  
vulnerable people have more  
opportunities to advance themselves.*

*The purpose of our social enterprise  
is to work with those people to build  
a better future.*

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#1 REASON FOR  
**STAYING**  
MIGRATING  
ECONOMIC



#1 SOURCE OF  
INFORMATION



WORD OF  
MOUTH

MOST PREFERRED  
DESTINATION



GERMANY

#1 EXPECTATION  
AT 1<sup>ST</sup> PREFERRED  
DESTINATION



GET A  
JOB

MOST EXPECTED  
LENGTH OF  
THE JOURNEY



1-3  
MONTHS

HIGHEST EXPECTED  
AMOUNT  
TO PAY  
SERVICE  
PROVIDER



USD 15,000

## INTRODUCTION

Seefar is committed to helping stakeholders understand and responsibly respond to irregular migration. This requires a robust evidence base that allows the voices of affected women, men and children to impact programs and policy.

This report is the first component of a longitudinal study into the dynamics of irregular migration from Afghanistan. It offers insights from a structured survey administered to 40 Afghan respondents in the eastern province of Nangarhar in August 2016. The first round of data collection was aimed at testing the research methodology on a small sample of the target population before beginning data collection from a larger sample. Based on this preliminary data, Seefar will conduct a longitudinal analysis assessing migration perspectives and prospects of 200 Afghans over the next two years.

Seefar will publish four subsequent reports: a baseline study and benchmark reports every six months. The longitudinal dimension of the study will allow for a clear understanding of how the circumstances impacting migration in Eastern Afghanistan evolve over time.

Prior to beginning the full longitudinal analysis, this first report provides initial insights into:

1. The motivations of Afghans planning to use irregular channels to reach Europe<sup>1</sup>;
2. The conditions that affect an individual's migration decision; and
3. The key sources of influence in motivating, planning and facilitating an irregular journey abroad.

As a preliminary report with a small sample size, these findings are not intended to be representative of all potential Afghan migrants<sup>2</sup> to Europe but are indicative findings that will inform future rounds of data collection.

<sup>1</sup> The study's screening criteria sought Afghans who hoped to migrate to Europe, and consequently the study's findings do not speak to Afghans interested in migrating to other locations.

<sup>2</sup> This report uses the term 'migrant' broadly and recognizes that movement in and around Afghanistan is extremely complex and often multi-causal. In this context, the term 'migrant' should be viewed as an umbrella for various categories of people on the move, including asylum-seekers. This report makes no judgment on the merits of an individual respondent's potential claim. to asylum.

## KEY FINDINGS

The following trends and insights were observed in the sample:

### Income and security concerns motivated migration decisions

Most respondents cited both employment (55%) and security concerns (50%) as reasons for migration. Those with jobs were just as likely to cite employment as a motive for migration to Europe as those without, suggesting underemployment is an issue. Respondents sometimes attributed poor job prospects to nepotism and lack of local networks.

### Willingness to stay hinged on economic conditions improving

Despite widely citing conflict as a major factor in their decision to migrate, most respondents indicated that they would remain in Afghanistan if they could obtain a sustainable livelihood. The vast majority (88%) of respondents said a change to their personal or family's financial circumstances would encourage them to abandon migration plans.

After economic considerations, personal security and safety was the second-most important factor influencing the decision to migrate through irregular channels. About half of respondents said a change to their personal or families' security circumstances would impact their decision-making process. Only two respondents said nothing would persuade them to stay in Afghanistan.

### Short-term financial gain increased migration motivation

Research revealed a more nuanced relationship between a potential migrant's economic well-being and their desire to migrate. *Short-term* or *immediate* financial gains were viewed by many respondents as means for financing migration and might be expected to increase the speed of departure; where respondents saw economic improvements as *long-term* or *sustainable*, they were more likely to stay.

### Migration decisions were made over a period of months

Migration was not a spur-of-the-moment decision for respondents. Most had been in the process of planning a journey abroad over a period of months. This incubation period means there is ample opportunity to provide potential migrants with more information about the realities of irregular migration as well as targeted, alternative opportunities within Afghanistan.

### Few held positive views of migration despite making plans to migrate

Respondents had mixed opinions on the emigration of their peers.<sup>3</sup> Just 13% of respondents viewed emigration from Afghanistan favorably. The overwhelming majority of subjects (82%) had either a mixed or negative perception of migration. The overall sense was that migration was a decision reluctantly undertaken out of necessity.

Despite the lack of positive views of migration, 83% of respondents reported that migration had become more popular in the previous year.<sup>4</sup> For donors, better understanding Afghan perceptions of migration can help inform policies designed to establish viable alternatives to irregular migration. This will be a key area to highlight during the longitudinal study.

### Specific threats triggered migration decisions in several cases

Respondents who cited insecurity and violence as factors motivating migration highlighted two dimensions of concern:

- 1. Links with the Afghan government or Western actors** - Many respondents feared that connections to international organizations, foreign states or armed forces made them and their families potential targets for armed non-

<sup>3</sup> Survey question "What do you think of people who emigrate from Afghanistan?"

<sup>4</sup> Respondents were asked "What do you think of people who emigrate from Afghanistan?" and "In your opinion, how has the popularity of migration changed over the past year?"

state actors. Those with ties to the Afghan government or Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) expressed the same fear.

2. **High crime levels** - Others noted high crime levels as major concerns.

## Social networks and family heavily informed migration decisions

Personal networks strongly influenced migration planning:

- Almost every respondent stressed that information received via word of mouth was the most important source of information about migration for those considering the journey.
- Friends and relatives who are currently abroad strongly influenced the choice of destination for more than two-thirds (68%) of respondents.
- More than half of respondents knew someone who had returned to Afghanistan after migrating abroad. Among respondents that knew someone who had previously migrated, almost all had discussed migration options with them.

## Respondents understood that irregular journeys are risky

Respondents were generally aware of the dangers of an irregular migration journey, listing as examples dangerous border crossings, police brutality, and the possibility of drowning in the case of sea voyages. Their knowledge of migration-related hazards and migrant vulnerabilities came from stories relayed by families and friends. However, the ability of respondents to clearly articulate some of the dangers of irregular migration does not indicate whether they accurately assessed the level of risk assumed in such a journey.

## Respondents found smugglers easy to access and engage

Many respondents mentioned that a smuggler could easily be found through family and friends. Forty percent of respondents had already made contact with a smuggler. Respondents said that smugglers are expected to provide transport, food and accommodation during the journey. They are also expected to connect the migrant with other service providers further along the route.

## BACKGROUND

### Decision-making

Afghanistan has experienced decades of political instability, economic difficulty, conflict and insecurity. This context has created a complex picture of migration and displacement. Within the country, there is significant movement of both internally displaced persons (IDPs) as well as more economically-motivated migrants. The domestic situation is further complicated by the recent influx of returnees from Iran and Pakistan. At the same time, many Afghans still seek cross-border migration to Pakistan and Iran, and many continue their journey in an effort to reach Europe. In 2017, Afghans were the third-largest national group arriving in Greece, the principal point of entry for irregular migrants on the Eastern Mediterranean route.<sup>5</sup>

Legal pathways for international migration are extremely limited for Afghans, forcing those wishing to leave the country into irregular routes. For many, the outcomes of irregular migration have been disadvantageous or dangerous. Migrants may be stranded in transit countries, vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking, or suffer physical or psychological trauma.

Assessing the quality and amount of information available to potential migrants is a key part of understanding decision-making on irregular migration. Migrants may come to regret the decision to migrate when the anticipated rewards of irregular migration—usually some combination of safety and economic prosperity—do not justify the physical, economic, and emotional investments made. For example, migrants may underestimate the fees they need to pay smugglers, while overestimating the ease and speed of finding work at their destination. Thus, Afghans may make the decision to irregularly migrate on the basis of poor, misleading, or misinterpreted information. While legal options are hard to come by, many Afghans dismiss the possibility of legal alternatives based on poor information, including poor understanding of how to access legal and regional migration opportunities, local economic activities, or educational offers.

### Need for longitudinal research

Existing research tends to focus on high-level, structural drivers of migration. While this approach makes clear that endemic economic and physical insecurity are deeply related to Afghan migration, it often fails to explain why some people choose to leave their homes while others do not.

Moreover, research tends to focus on migrants who have reached the EU and applied for asylum. Such research explores, implicitly or explicitly, individuals who actually reach destination countries – excluding those who are unsuccessful or who do not depart at all – and whether would-be applicants qualify for asylum. Analyses therefore tend to view migrant motivations through the prism of destination country politics, asylum law, and policy. While often revealing, this method does not offer a full picture of the complex and dynamic decision-making process that leads an individual to leave his or her home country in the first place.<sup>6</sup>

Even where this ‘destination bias’ is acknowledged, there are further challenges in applying much of the current research on Afghan migration to design interventions aimed at influencing migrant behavior so that they make well-informed migration decisions:

- Migrants struggle to retroactively describe their decision-making processes – as do most people when asked to recount thought processes, especially after traumatic events.
- After prolonged exposure to other journeying migrants and people smugglers, migrants are often better-versed in the language of European policy, and consequently may be less likely to reveal the real aspirations that motivated their journey.
- The reasons a migrant may not want to return home can be (or become) different from why they left in the first place.
- Non-longitudinal research gives a ‘snapshot’ of

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR recorded 3,653 arrivals of Afghan irregular migrants to Greece between January 1, 2017 and January 31, 2018. See <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179> (accessed February 28, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> For a deeper discussion, see <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Before%20the%20Boat-Townsend-FINALWEB.pdf>.

how migrants think and feel at a certain moment in time, but does not capture how their views evolve over time as a result of changes in the local context.

## Research at origin

Studies conducted at a potential migrant's location of origin with a focus on decision-making are, however, growing in number. Studies between 2011 and 2014 involving structured surveys and interviews with Afghans before (a potential) departure emphasized employment concerns (e.g., lack of available jobs, lack of well-paying jobs, etc.) as the primary motivating factor.<sup>7</sup> For example, the Asia Foundation's 2017 Survey of the Afghan People emphasized insecurity and unemployment as core motivations for migration. However, it found respondents' immediate situation (household income) a less important indicator of the willingness to travel than their future outlook (levels of optimism).<sup>8</sup>

Given the protracted nature of the humanitarian challenge in Afghanistan, a number of humanitarian actors have commissioned research relating to migration. These studies tend to focus on populations already on the move, including IDPs and returnees.<sup>9</sup> Others highlight government harassment and corruption as key concerns, although these factors are often mentioned by respondents in the context of constraints on their economic progress.<sup>10</sup> For some former employees of Western armed forces and organizations, migration is a response to the fear of reprisals by local armed actors, including the Taliban and the Islamic State group (also known as Daesh).

## Research for intervention

The aim of this study is to engage with potential migrants before departure. Over the last few years, development actors have been redirecting funding to address the 'root causes' of migration, yet programming may be inefficient without a clearer understanding of how and why people make the decision to leave.

By understanding migrant aspirations and motivations, donors can better direct development spending to construct safe and legal alternatives to irregular migration, while also empowering potential migrants to make fully-informed migration decisions.

This study will build on existing knowledge to explore, over a two-year period, how Afghans in Nangarhar decide whether irregular migration is the best response to their circumstances. The data collected by this longitudinal study will:

- Offer insight into individual decision-making processes from the perspective of migrants themselves, and explore why some Afghans embark on irregular migration journeys while others stay put.
- Understand what kind of interventions at origin might help change minds, and where such an intervention could be cost-effective for policymakers.
- Provide a better understanding of how potential Afghan migrants understand, process and react to policies in transit and destination countries.

## Why Nangarhar?

Nangarhar (Figure 1) was chosen as the field site because:

- The population is highly transient and includes large numbers of returnees and IDPs.
- EU member state embassy officials have reported it as a major region of origin for irregular Afghan migrants arriving in Europe.<sup>11</sup>
- Violence and unemployment are high relative to country averages.

Nangarhar is a mountainous province in the east of Afghanistan bordering Pakistan. It is home to a majority-Pashtun population of approximately 1.5 million people.<sup>12</sup> The eastern provinces of Afghanistan have a long history

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.border.gov.au/ReportsandPublications/Documents/research/irregular-migration-afghanistan.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> [https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2017\\_AfghanSurvey\\_report.pdf](https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2017_AfghanSurvey_report.pdf), 14.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the variety of research studies commissioned by NRC-Afghanistan in recent years.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.gsdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/HDQ12432.pdf>, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Private communication between officials at an EU embassy and Seefar staff.

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.landinfo.no/asset/3493/1/3493\\_1.pdf](http://www.landinfo.no/asset/3493/1/3493_1.pdf), 7.

Figure 1: Nangarhar



of circular migration, displacement, and trade across the border with Pakistan. Millions of Afghans sought refuge in Pakistan during periods of conflict and violence, including the conflict with the USSR in the 1980s, the NATO-led operation in Afghanistan, and the more recent conflict between coalition-supported Afghan troops, the Taliban, and the Islamic State group .

While the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has supported the voluntary return of Afghans from Pakistan since 2002,<sup>13</sup> Pakistan's growing unwillingness to host Afghan refugees has led to a sharp increase in the number of returnees in Nangarhar in recent years. Conditions for Afghans living in Pakistan

have become more difficult as Pakistan has introduced policies to promote the return of both documented and undocumented Afghans, as well as passport controls at the Torkham border crossing.<sup>14</sup>

In the second half of 2016, the number of returnees to Afghanistan was estimated as high as 565,000, according to UNHCR.<sup>15</sup> While the overall number of returnees continues to grow, the pace of returns has declined in recent months.

While some returnees receive cash-based assistance on return, there is little long-term reintegration support available in Nangarhar. Returnees arrive in Afghanistan with little information regarding the ongoing conflict or

<sup>13</sup> [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mp\\_afghanistan\\_0.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mp_afghanistan_0.pdf), 33.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/14/pakistan-coerced-refugee-return-endangers-thousands>.

<sup>15</sup> See: <http://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/briefing/2017/2/589453557/tough-choices-afghan-refugees-returning-home-years-exile.html>; <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/02/13/pakistan-coercion-un-complicity/mass-forced-return-afghan-refugees>.

knowledge on how to access livelihood opportunities and social support.

They also return to high levels of internal population movement. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimates that there are over 1.5 million IDPs in Afghanistan,<sup>16</sup> while the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports over 400,000 conflict-induced displacements in Afghanistan in 2017 alone.<sup>17</sup>

In Nangarhar, the districts of Behsood and Jalalabad—where interviews for this report took place—host large numbers of both returnees and IDPs. Throughout the province, one in three people is either a returnee or IDP.<sup>18</sup> The 2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) notes that “the number of informal settlements [in Nangarhar] increased from 29 to 53 between February and July 2017 and the population size from approximately 429,000 to

just under one million.”<sup>19</sup> This enormous influx of returnees and displaced persons—as well as migrants arriving in Nangarhar en route to Pakistan—has put extraordinary pressure on local services such as housing, education and healthcare, leading to a boom in property prices.<sup>20</sup>

The complex migration context in Nangarhar is also affected by a volatile security environment. Insurgent activity, including attacks with Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and kidnappings, is common.<sup>21</sup> Clashes between the ANSF and the Taliban took place throughout 2016 and 2017 alongside confrontations between different non-state actors. The Islamic State group has maintained a presence in the region since 2015. Both the Government of Afghanistan and international forces have conducted airstrikes against the militants.<sup>22</sup> Cross-border shelling, which has become a major concern of humanitarian actors, has resulted in displacement, injury, and death along the border with Pakistan.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/afghanistan>.

<sup>17</sup> <https://data.humdata.org/organization/ocha-afghanistan>.

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/dms/afg\\_2018\\_humanitarian\\_needs\\_overview\\_0.pdf](https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/dms/afg_2018_humanitarian_needs_overview_0.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Resettling%20Nearly%20Half%20a%20Million%20Afghans%20in%20Nangrahar\\_%20The%20consequences%20of%20the%20mass%20return%20of%20refugees.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Resettling%20Nearly%20Half%20a%20Million%20Afghans%20in%20Nangrahar_%20The%20consequences%20of%20the%20mass%20return%20of%20refugees.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/us-cites-progress-against-islamic-state-in-afghanistan/2017/04/06/70609d38-1ace-11e7-8598-9a99da559f9e\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.24724976fc13](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/us-cites-progress-against-islamic-state-in-afghanistan/2017/04/06/70609d38-1ace-11e7-8598-9a99da559f9e_story.html?utm_term=.24724976fc13).

## DECIDING TO LEAVE

### Understanding the sample

All respondents in the sample were screened for their intention to migrate to Europe within a year of the survey.

The vast majority were originally from Nangarhar, including Jalalabad (40%) and Behsood (38%) districts. The remainder came from districts elsewhere in the east of country.

All respondents were male—a sampling decision reflective of the overwhelmingly male composition of Afghan arrivals in Europe.

The sample was otherwise diverse:

- 45% said they were full-time, salaried employees; 35% were unemployed and looking for work; 10% were full-time students; 5% were self-employed and 5% in part-time employment.
- 38% had completed university, while 15% did not complete secondary school;
- 23% conducted at least part of their education outside of Afghanistan, primarily in Pakistan.

While not statistically significant, the diversity of respondent characteristics reflects the highly individualized and varied circumstances in which respondents were planning their journeys. This underscores how migration transcends many traditional demographic categories in Afghanistan.

### Work and conflict

Motivations for migration were complex and overlapping. Economic concerns and insecurity were the most common factors cited by respondents in explaining their migration intent (Figure 2).<sup>23</sup>

Poor economic conditions in Nangarhar clearly impacted decisions. The majority of respondents were either

“Here there is no work. What shall we do, eat dirt?”

Pashtun male, 19-24 years, from Behsood

unemployed (35%) or engaged in part-time, self-employed, or casual work (20%).

Employed would-be migrants also gave economic reasons. Only three of 22 employed respondents were satisfied with their job. Some aspired to obtain particular jobs or higher education, and those respondents largely felt that they could not fulfill these ambitions in Afghanistan.

“I’m getting paid USD 2 per day. My father also works on and off, plus we are getting help from abroad, but it is not enough, we are barely surviving.”

Pashtun male, 15-18 years, from Chamray

Dependent family members may also be a contributing factor, although not explicitly cited by respondents. Many respondents were the primary income-earner for their household despite facing economic difficulties. Slightly more than half of respondents had dependent children.

Determining whether a migrant is employed or unemployed fails to capture the extent of the economic stress experienced by interviewees. It was clear that even for those who were working, poor wages were a major concern. Some respondents genuinely felt that they are ‘not able to survive’ due to insufficient or unstable wages, regardless of employment status.

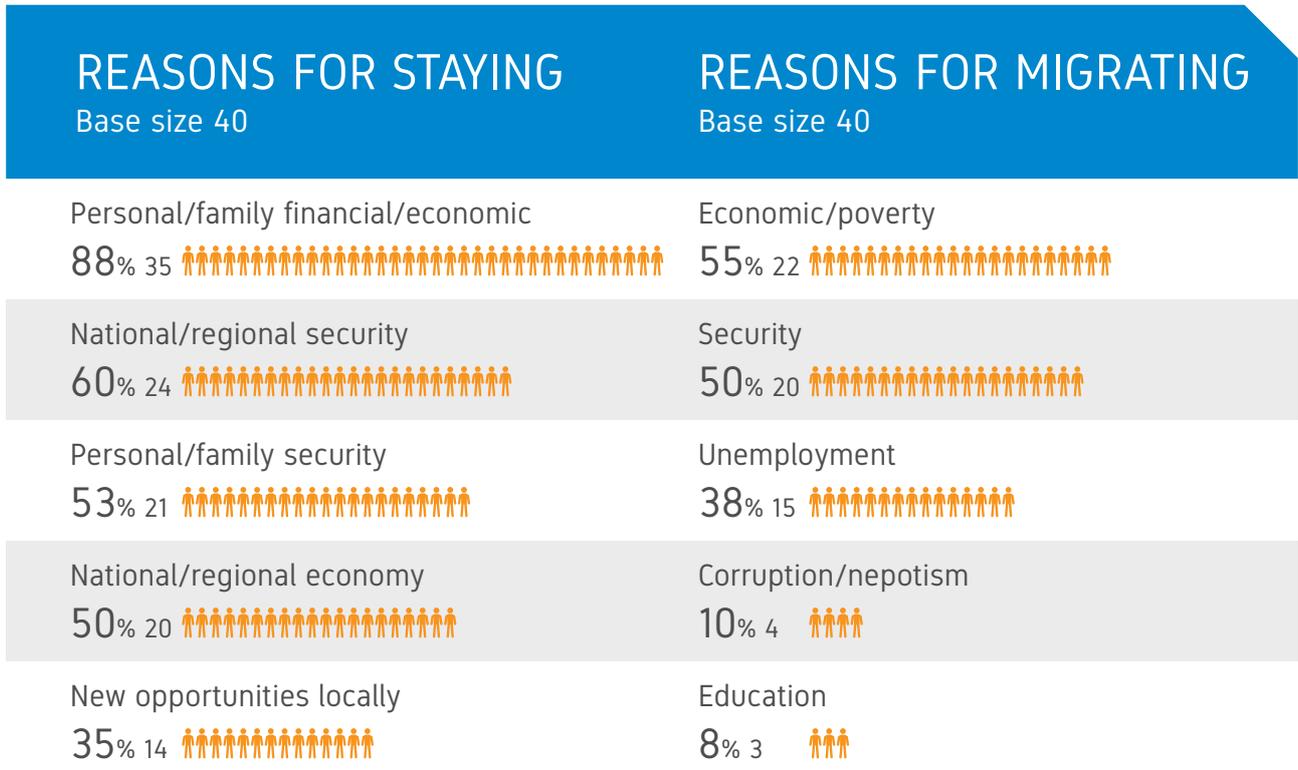
Dissatisfaction with available livelihoods is highly relevant to job creation programs designed to reduce irregular migration.

Responses were clear in highlighting the two-way relationship between conflict and economic viability. Most respondents were not directly motivated to leave Afghanistan due to a fear of violence or armed conflict. Instead, most were concerned that protracted insecurity would continue to depress economic opportunities in the future.

One individual working full time in a low-skilled job for an international organization claimed he did not earn enough to survive and therefore needed to migrate.

<sup>23</sup> Question: “Why are you migrating?” Multiple responses were possible.

Figure 2: Reasons for staying (#, %)



This point was emphasized in answers to questions about which factors would lead respondents to reconsider their migration plans. While a majority of respondents were keen to migrate due to insecurity, nearly all respondents said that a positive change to their financial situation would encourage them to stay in Afghanistan. Although respondents recognized the risks of armed conflict and violence in Nangarhar, they appeared willing to continue to cope with these dangers if their economic conditions improved.

A short-term increase in income may result in a decision to leave Afghanistan. Respondents who were not immediately ready to migrate said that it was often a lack of money that prevented them from doing so. This suggests that some Afghans who have decided they want

to migrate may be more likely to depart if they are able to access additional financial resources.

The key distinction in understanding how economic circumstances relate to migration appears to be the sustainability of an individual's financial situation. Access to short-term resources may enable Afghans that have already decided to migrate to finally depart. Sustainable, long-term improvements to financial circumstances, on the other hand, could encourage respondents to plan for the long-term locally. Crucially, it is the respondent's own perceptions of income sustainability that is pertinent to changing their decisions in the longer term.

### Corruption

While less prominent than lack of income or conflict, corruption was cited by some respondents as a factor related to irregular migration. Like conflict, corruption is intertwined with certain economic issues (e.g. the ability to register a business in Afghanistan) that can leave Afghans in a difficult situation. Corruption can affect an individual's ability to get a well-paying job commensurate with his or her skills and education (see text box below).

"If all youth had the means to emigrate they would've done so; those who say 'I don't have a plan to go' are simply saying that they don't have money to fund their journey. As soon as they can afford to do so, I assure you they will."  
Pashtun male, 25-34 years, from Behsood

"I spent about 18 years educating myself. I can speak fluent English. I'm an expert user of computer applications, yet I'd take an entry-level job for 5,000 Afghans [USD 80] per month. The sad part is that even such low-level jobs cannot be acquired without bribing or knowing someone."

Pashtun male, 25-34 years, from Behsood

Bribery and nepotism affect many spheres of life in Afghanistan and relate to broader issues of governance in the country.<sup>24</sup> Afghanistan has a highly decentralized government that empowers local officials with little external or national accountability. This context is reflected in the data, as a quarter of respondents commented that a change in local government would encourage them to stay. This finding raises questions about the responsibility of local government in addressing the factors that lead Afghans to migrate.

## Reluctant departures

Respondents indicated that irregular migration is viewed as a measure of last resort in Nangarhar. In some regions of origin, such as West Africa, research shows that any opportunity to migrate abroad is often looked upon favorably, regardless of circumstances.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, respondents in Afghanistan appeared more likely to view emigration as a step taken out of necessity, based on economic and conflict conditions noted in the previous section. Most respondents were only considering migration because, in their opinion, remaining in their homeland had become untenable.

First, respondents tended to view emigration negatively or with ambivalence. When asked what Afghans think of people who emigrate:

"If I had a better income, I'd be crazy to leave my own country."

Pashtun male, 25-34 years, living in Jalalabad

- Few (13%) had a positive impression of those who emigrate.
- Nearly a third (28%) had a negative impression of those who emigrate.
- And just over half (54%) had a mixed impression, acknowledging that there were negative and positive elements to migration.

While a large majority lacked an overtly positive view of migration, most respondents (83%) nonetheless felt migration had become more popular. This is echoed in The Asia Foundation's 2017 nationwide survey, which found the desire to migrate had risen compared to the previous year.<sup>26</sup> Based on open-ended responses to other questions in the survey, it can be surmised that a 'negative' view amounted to the opinion that needing to migrate abroad was regrettable - and that life in Afghanistan, if tenable, would be preferable.

Second, for many respondents, irregular migration to Europe is not a knee-jerk reaction to personal circumstances but rather a decision mulled over time, usually several months. Respondents were at different stages of planning their journey at the time of research. Nearly half of respondents did not expect to leave in the coming six months (Figure 3). This points to an incubation period of several months between the formulation of the aspiration to migrate and the actual departure.

## Returnees' perspectives

Given the long history of migration and movement in Afghanistan, it is no surprise that several respondents had previously lived abroad. For some of these respondents, they were considering migrating irregularly even though they had prior negative migratory experiences.

"The economy was booming in Afghanistan. Two of my brothers returned before us and started work as car body repairers."

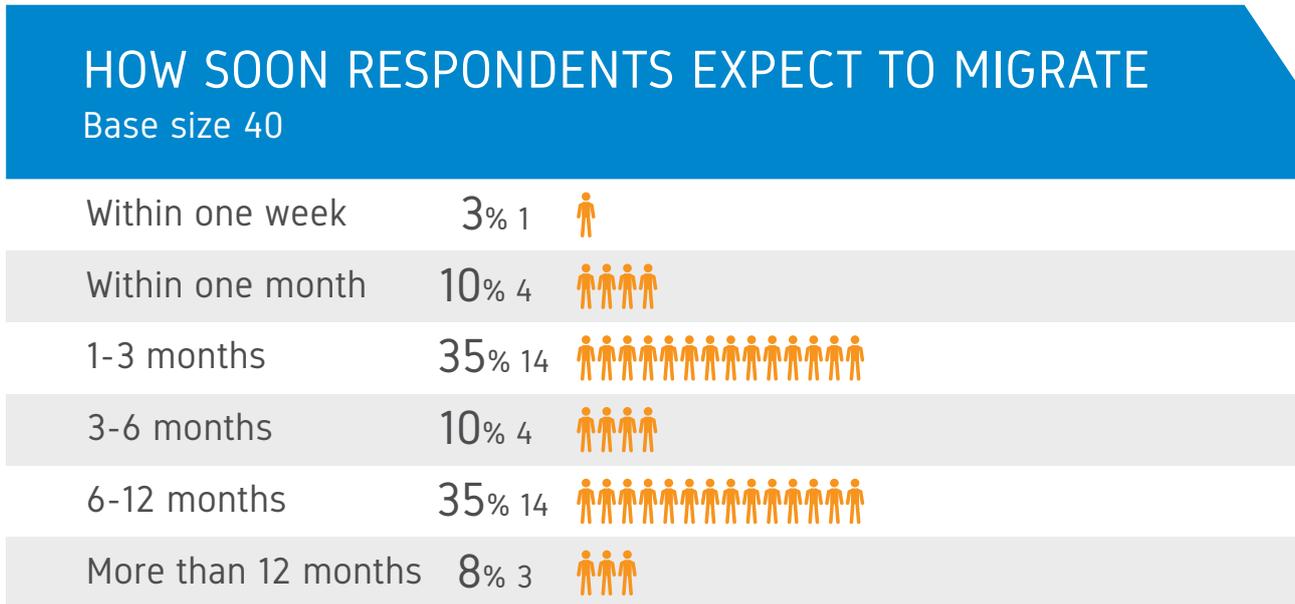
Tajiki male, 25-34 from Behsood. Returned from Pakistan in 2006

<sup>24</sup> <https://asiafoundation.org/where-we-work/afghanistan/survey>, 176.

<sup>25</sup> A wide literature discusses the association between migration and 'greener pastures' across West Africa. For one of many examples, see [http://www.migration.ox.ac.uk/odp/Diasporas%20Reimagined/Diasporas%20Reimagined\\_Chant.pdf](http://www.migration.ox.ac.uk/odp/Diasporas%20Reimagined/Diasporas%20Reimagined_Chant.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> In 2016, 29.6% indicated they would migrate if given the opportunity; in 2017, this rose to 38.8%. See [https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2017\\_AfghanSurvey\\_report.pdf](https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2017_AfghanSurvey_report.pdf), 167-8.

Figure 3: How soon before respondents expect to migrate (#, %)<sup>27</sup>



A number of respondents intending to reach Europe had previously migrated. Some were forced to return, including one subject whose refugee camp in Pakistan was destroyed in flooding. Others chose to return because of the perception of improved economic opportunities in Afghanistan.

The fact that these respondents once again have decided to migrate demonstrates that migration is not a temporary issue to be addressed through one-off interventions, but is an ongoing dynamic deeply influenced by economic, security, and political conditions. It is also instructive that knowledge of the irregular migration journey and its risks sometimes increased migrants' confidence in the journey, rather than deterring them.

Three respondents (Figure 4) had returned from Europe and were planning to migrate once again. Their stories are particularly relevant to this research:

- Haseem returned to Afghanistan after he was deported from the United Kingdom.<sup>28</sup> He originally migrated from Afghanistan following threats by the Taliban against his father, who worked for an international organization, and spent four years abroad. Feeling that his economic future in Afghanistan was bleak, Haseem decided to

attempt the journey to Europe once again, but did not know which country would be his final destination. Having "seen it all before," he was aware of the challenges of the route and planned to spend a relatively high amount of money (USD 8,000) to guarantee his successful passage.

- During Ehsan's first migration journey, he arrived in Europe but failed to reach his desired destination of France despite spending USD 3,500 on 'guaranteed' passage. At the time of interview he was exploring an alternative route via Latin America and the United States to Canada, obtaining a visa for Brazil in connection with the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. His expectation that a future migration journey would only take one week suggests that he had not transferred lessons learned from his first attempt to reach Europe.
- Ahmed reached Belgium on his first migration journey, but decided to return to Afghanistan on learning that his mother was unwell. He currently is planning to return to Belgium because he felt well-treated there. However, his departure was contingent on him raising enough money to finance the trip.

<sup>27</sup> Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding.

<sup>28</sup> Not his real name.

Figure 4: Case studies of returnees from Europe

## THREE CASE STUDIES

### EHSAN

*"The jobs that we can get will be mostly hard labor but there are opportunities."*

2007

2008

2009

2010

2011

2012



Spent 4-5 years in the UK.



Left Afghanistan in 2007. His family was at risk from the Taliban because his father had worked with an international organization.

Eventually deported by the UK authorities and returned to Afghanistan in 2012.

### HASEEM

*"I made it as far as Greece back in 2012 and lived there for 10 months. It was a harsh life back then - all of Europe was very harsh to refugees and immigrants."*

2012

1 month

2 months

3 months

4 months

5 months

6 months

7 months

8 months

9 months

10 months



Spent 10 months in Greece and attempted to reach France several times.



Left for Greece in 2012 due to unemployment and insecurity.

Returned to Afghanistan after becoming hopeless about the situation.

### AHMED

*"Our life is very bad financially, I would like to know how one can leave without spending a lot of money."*

2014

1 month

2 months

3 months

4 months

5 months

6 months



Spent less than 6 months in Belgium.



Traveled to Belgium in 2014 due to economic reasons.

Decided to return when his mother became ill.

## PLANNING THE JOURNEY

Information and financial resources are prerequisites for departure, while also minimizing risks during the migration journey:

- **Information** - an understanding of the potential rewards of migration, such as the ability to earn more money in Europe, underpins the desire to migrate. Knowledge of how to realize a migration aspiration, such as finding a smuggler recommended by family or friends, can spur the development of concrete plans to depart.
- **Financial resources** - paying for the journey is a practical necessity that can be met through a variety of formal, informal, and illicit financing techniques. Estimates of smuggling fees indicate that migrants may be departing without sufficient funds to pay for the journey, increasing their vulnerability.

Respondents said they were raising money through the sale of property and savings from earnings. Alternatively, families could pool their money to finance an individual journey. While not observed in the data, this strategy is often used as a coping mechanism by IDP families due to their inability to access livelihoods in their place of displacement.<sup>29</sup>

### Information sources<sup>30</sup>

While respondents became aware of migration opportunities through local contacts, it was usually contacts abroad who were the actual sources of encouragement. Almost all respondents (93%)<sup>31</sup> had heard about the opportunity to migrate in person, through word of mouth—from a family member, friend, or community member. Three quarters of respondents said this was their most trusted source. Facebook (58%) was an important, though less prominent, source of information.

Meanwhile, the decision to migrate was mainly influenced by friends already abroad, with Afghanistan-based household members having significantly less influence.

For most respondents, collecting information about the journey from contacts abroad appeared straightforward. Most respondents had overseas connections and used information technology to exchange information rapidly. Facebook Messenger (78%) was the top method of staying in touch with contacts abroad, while some respondents also used WhatsApp (13%).<sup>32</sup>

Even for those without strong overseas networks, details of the migration journey were easily accessible because of the high levels of returns to Nangarhar. Over half of the sample knew someone who had returned from abroad; among that group, most had talked with a returnee about migration options.

### Costs and logistics

Irregular journeys require migrants to negotiate a complex array of physical and financial threats. Building a picture of how irregular journeys are planned is essential for understanding where key vulnerabilities and information gaps lie.

“I’ll fly to Turkey and take a bus to Europe.”

Pashtun male 35-44, from Surkrood

Anticipated costs of the journey varied significantly among the respondents. About half expected total costs to be upwards of USD 7,000 (Figure 6), a fairly realistic estimate, except for the few planning to migrate with multiple family members. Five respondents expected to pay less than USD 2,000, which is likely an underestimate of the eventual costs of the journey. Having an unrealistic expectation of the costs of financing a migration may

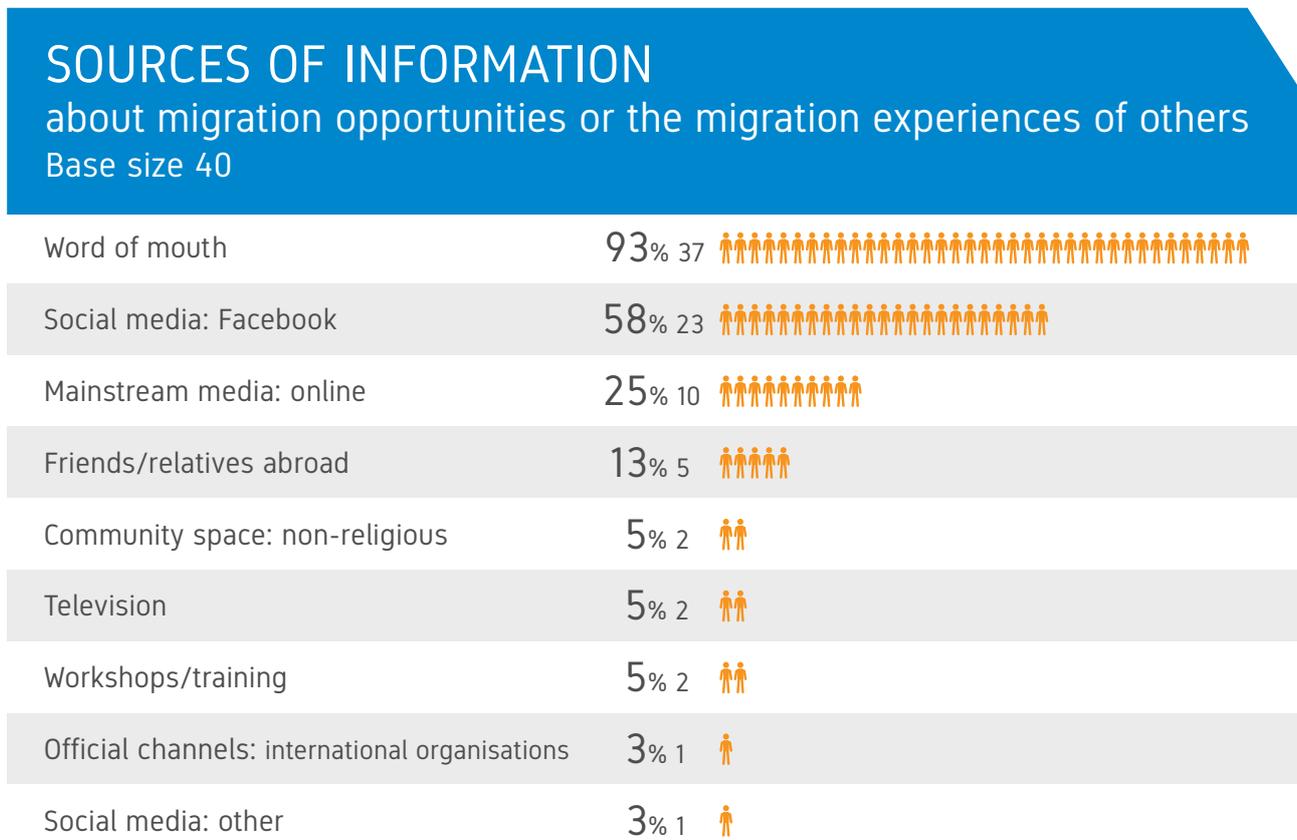
<sup>29</sup> For example, see Samuel Hall. “Going ‘Home’ to Displacement: Afghanistan’s Returnee IDPs,” December 2017. <http://www.internal-displacement.org/assets/publications/2017/20171214-idmc-afghanistan-case-study.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> Respondents were asked two questions about migration information: 1) *Where do you receive information about migration opportunities?* 2) *Which would you say is your most trusted source of information?*

<sup>31</sup> Respondents were able to select multiple responses, therefore responses do not total 100%.

<sup>32</sup> In answering the question ‘How do you communicate with the people you know in (country with strongest network)?’ respondents were allowed to select more than one answer, therefore responses do not total 100%.

Figure 5: Sources of information about migration opportunities or the migration experiences of others (#, %)<sup>33</sup>



heighten vulnerability by exposing migrants to trafficking, forced work, and/or extortion.

A quarter of the group was already raising funds to be able to migrate. Some described borrowing the money from family members. Several mentioned that the trip would be funded through the sale of land once they found a buyer. Such a decision is reflective of how, in some circumstances, family members who are left behind may become worse-off due to the decision to migrate.

### Expectation of smuggler's role

The complexity of irregular migration usually encourages migrants to seek support from smugglers, agents or brokers. Brokers were usually not known by respondents but part of extended networks, although several respondents had family or friends working in this role. More than half of respondents were already in contact with someone who would 'help them with the journey.'

Respondents were proactive in seeking out smugglers—38% had initiated contact. In contrast with other regions of origin where smugglers can be more aggressive in their recruitment tactics, such as in the Horn of Africa, smugglers in Afghanistan largely depend on 'organic' (and widespread) demand generated by clients seeking to leave the country.

The services provided by smugglers were similar, as illustrated in the expectations respondents had of smuggler services:

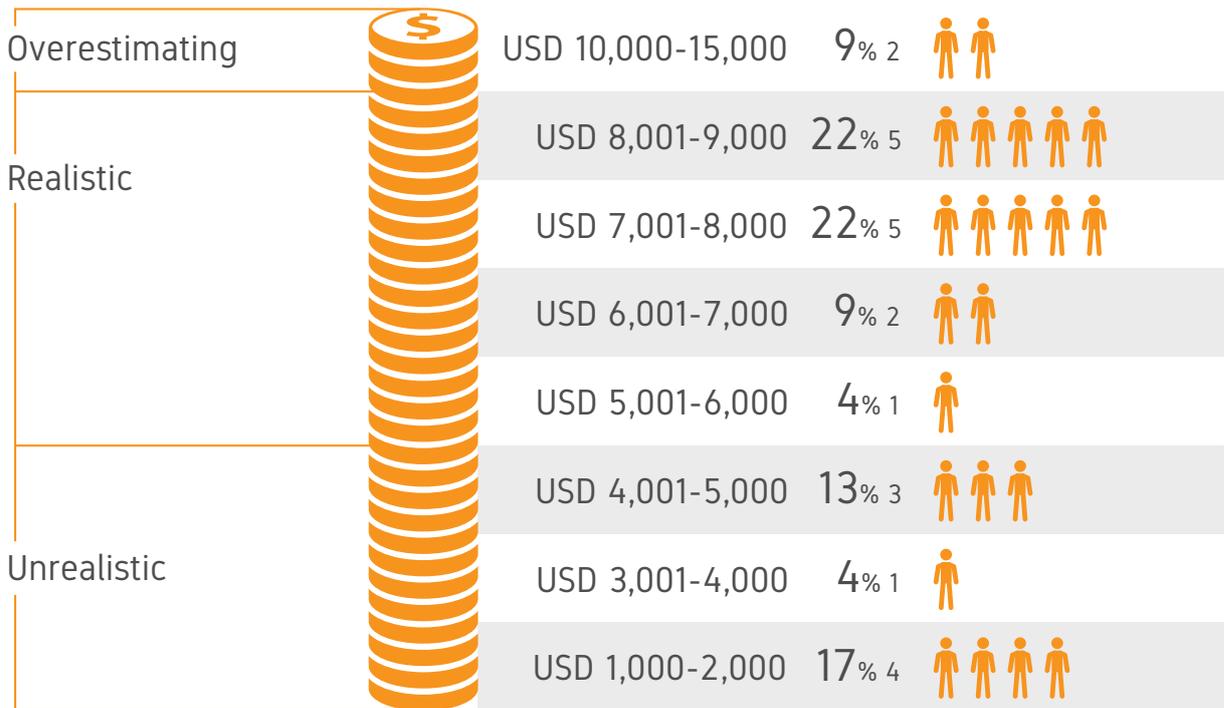
- Half of respondents expected smugglers to provide transport, accommodation, and food during the journey;
- About one third of respondents expected smugglers to provide contacts with other service providers for onward movement, with Turkey being a key transit point;

<sup>33</sup> Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding.

Figure 6: How much respondents expect to pay the service provider (#, %)

## HOW MUCH RESPONDENTS EXPECT TO PAY THE SERVICE PROVIDER

Base size 40



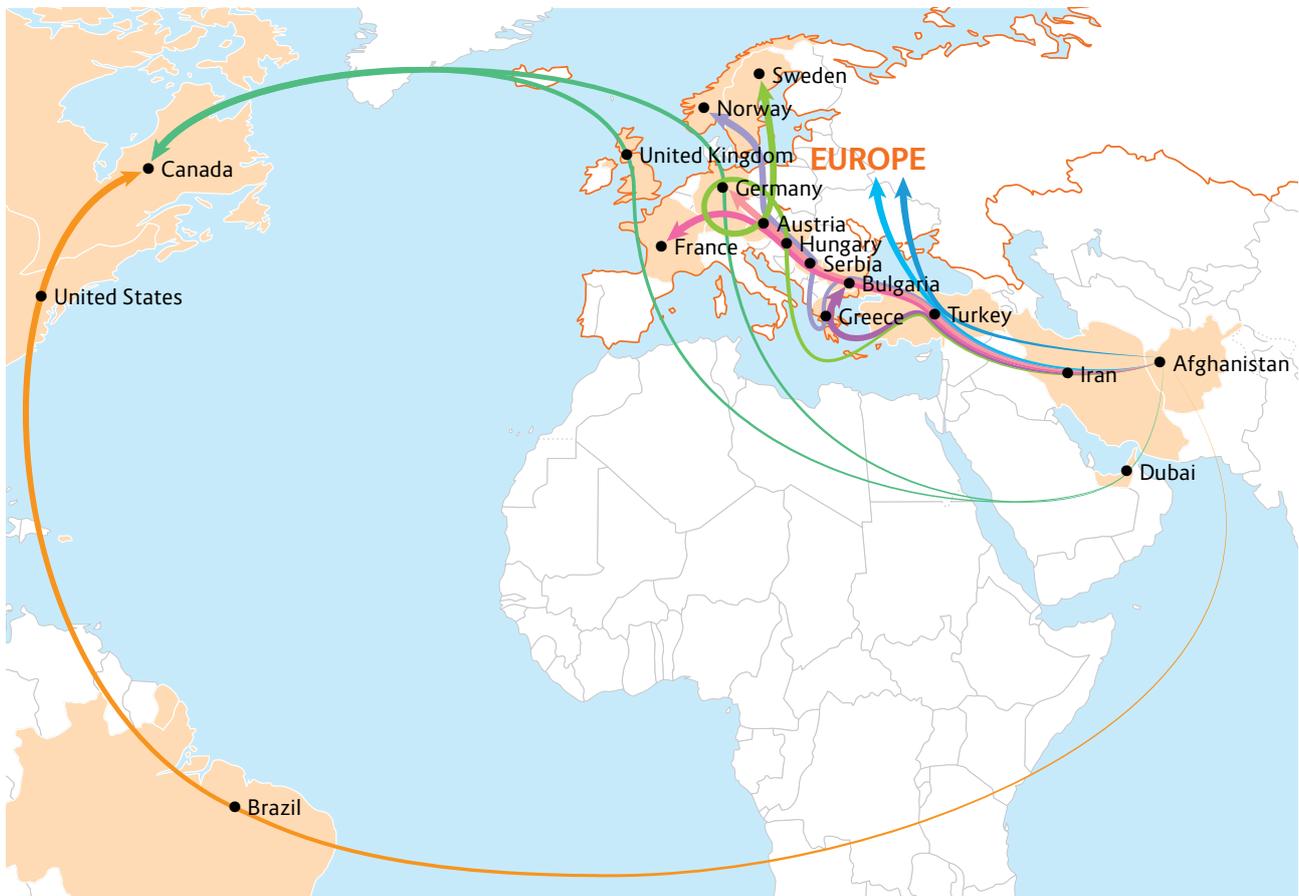
- Few respondents expected smugglers to provide them with help obtaining genuine documentation, such as passports, or to acquire forged documents such as a European passport or Schengen visa;
- There was little expectation that smugglers would facilitate employment en route or at destination;
- Almost no respondents expected smugglers to provide assistance in applying for or receiving asylum on arrival.

Researchers and policymakers often report smugglers as an almost homogenous entity, whereas respondents saw smugglers as individuals. This perception suggests that a respondent's negative experience with a particular smuggler would make him turn to another smuggler rather than discount the advice of smugglers completely.

“People say some smugglers are good and some are bad. The first time I attempted the journey, [the smuggler] took me as far as Iran and left me there. Within three days I was deported to Afghanistan. Now I’m looking for another who is more trustworthy.”  
Tajiki male, 19-24 years, from Jalalabad

“It is very difficult to get there. My nephew lost consciousness several times, my cousin was harshly beaten by the Hungarian border police force, to the extent that he couldn’t move for a week. The people-smugglers ride horses while others are expected to walk for days, even if one wants to get on a horseback, you have to pay a lot of money.”  
Tajiki male, 25-34 years, living in Behsood

Figure 7: Routes from Afghanistan to destination countries



## Routes

The majority of respondents (65%) were able to detail the route they planned to take to Europe. Remaining respondents were unsure of the route they would take.

Of those who already knew their route, the majority planned to cross the border with Iran and travel to Turkey before continuing to Europe. Respondents indicated that their mode of migration would be a combination of vehicle and on-foot travel.

## Journey length

Most respondents had some sense of the difficulty and length of the journey based on a mix of positive and negative stories relayed by friends or family. These stories helped them understand that migration could vary in both difficulty and duration.

Respondents struggled to translate awareness of the potential complications of the journey to their own

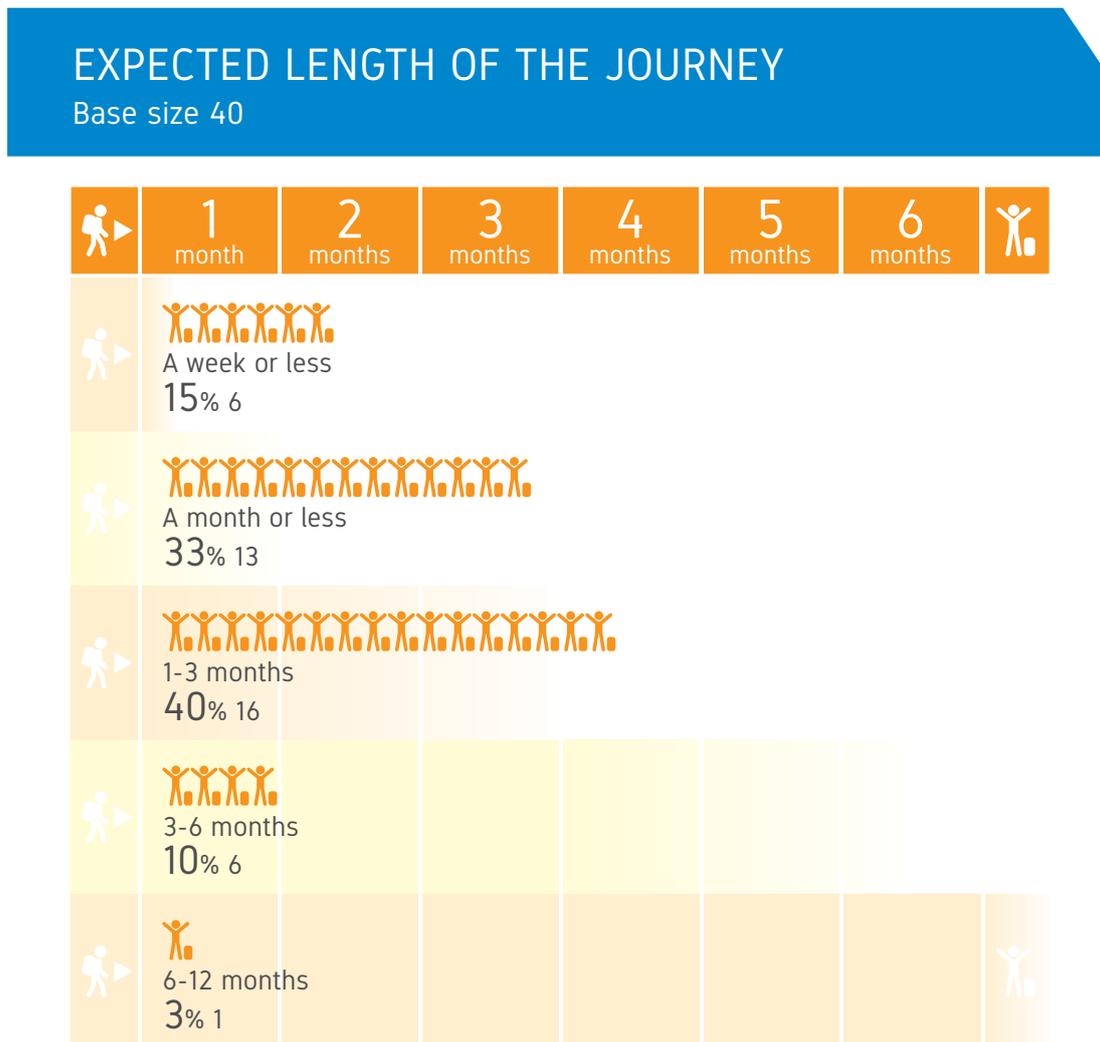
situation. The vast majority thought the journey would be relatively quick, with 19 respondents (48%) expecting to arrive in mostly Western European destinations in less than a month and 16 others (40%) estimating it would take between one and three months (Figure 8). Despite apparent awareness of potential complications, just one respondent said that they expected the journey to take more than six months.

“They all went through people smugglers. Two of my nephews and two of my cousins are living in camps, they are all singles and haven’t been accepted yet. Except those in camps, the rest are working.”

Tajiki male, 25-34 years, living in Behsood

It is interesting to contrast these expectations with the case studies in Figure 4. For example, while Haseem arrived in Greece fairly quickly after his departure from

Figure 8: Expected length of the journey (#, %)<sup>34</sup>



Afghanistan, (for unknown reasons) he was unable to reach France even after trying for 10 months.

### Choosing destinations

Respondents consistently noted their intention of reaching a particular country in Europe, indicating a high level of specificity about their desired destination (rather than aiming for ‘Europe’ in general).

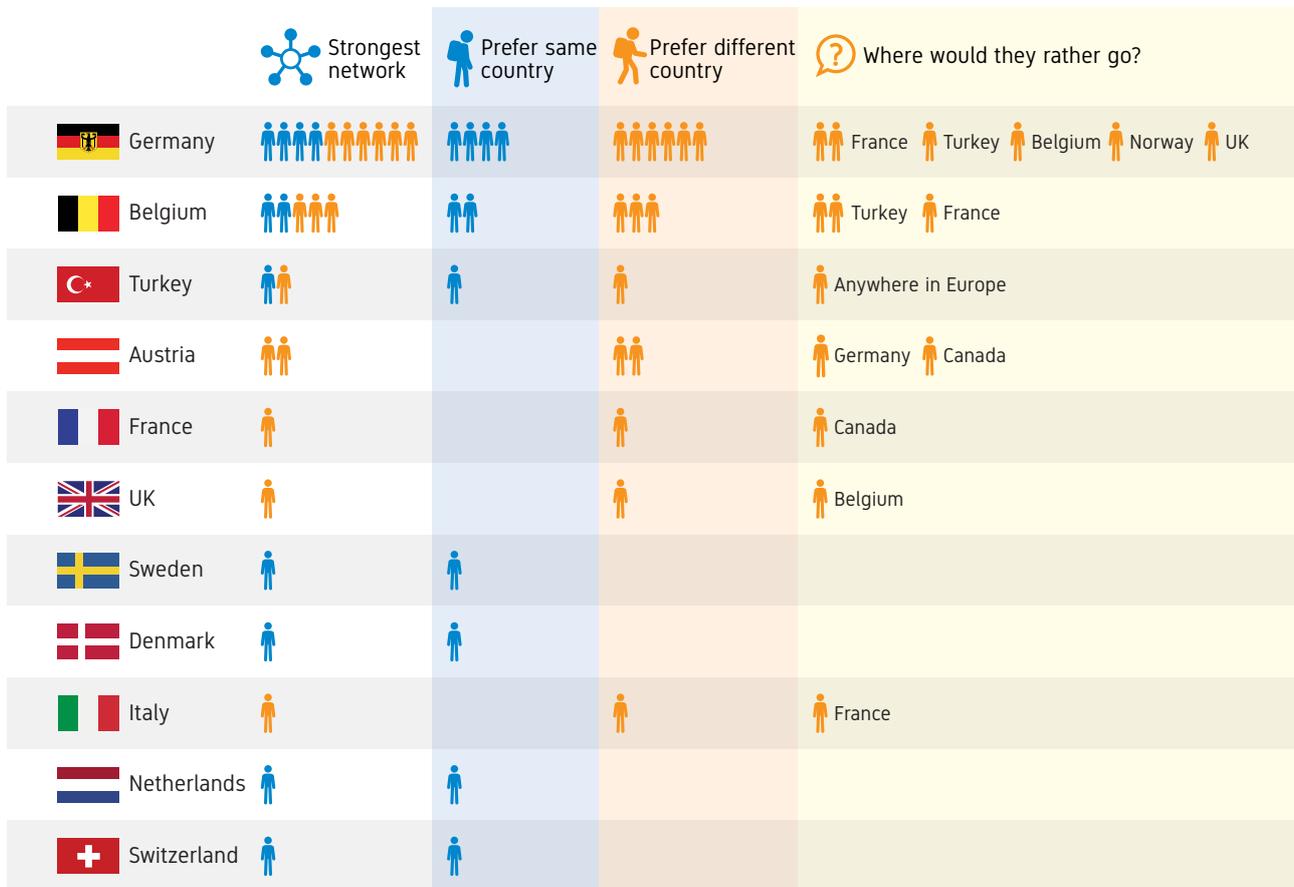
Most had a strong first preference—usually Germany or France— but were uncertain about their second best option. Several respondents were not exclusively interested in traveling to Europe, expressing a willingness to migrate to Turkey or North America. There also

appeared to be a link between a respondent’s destination choice and his international network. While most respondents had contacts outside of Afghanistan, most only had small overseas networks. A majority (76%) of respondents said that friends or relatives abroad were the main influence on target country.

However, the destination choice did not always match the location of a respondent’s strongest international contact base (Figure 9). While 10 respondents reported having their strongest network in Germany, only four said they intended to migrate there. When asked about destination choice, several respondents suggested that Afghans increasingly viewed Germany as “full,” and they consequently set their sights elsewhere.

<sup>34</sup> Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.

Figure 9: Did respondents prefer to migrate to the country where they had their strongest network?<sup>35</sup>



## Expectations of Europe

Most respondents (65%) had positive impressions of life in European destinations. In general, these positive impressions are based on the perception that destination countries would offer job opportunities, including specific types of work sought by respondents.

“The people smuggler told me [the destination] is safe with lots of jobs around.”

Pashtun male, 15-18 years, from Markaz.....

“I’m not fixated on any country. I’ll go wherever they accept asylum seekers.”

Pashtun male, 25-34 years, from Surkhrood

Support for migrants to study the language of their destination country was also viewed as important to respondents.

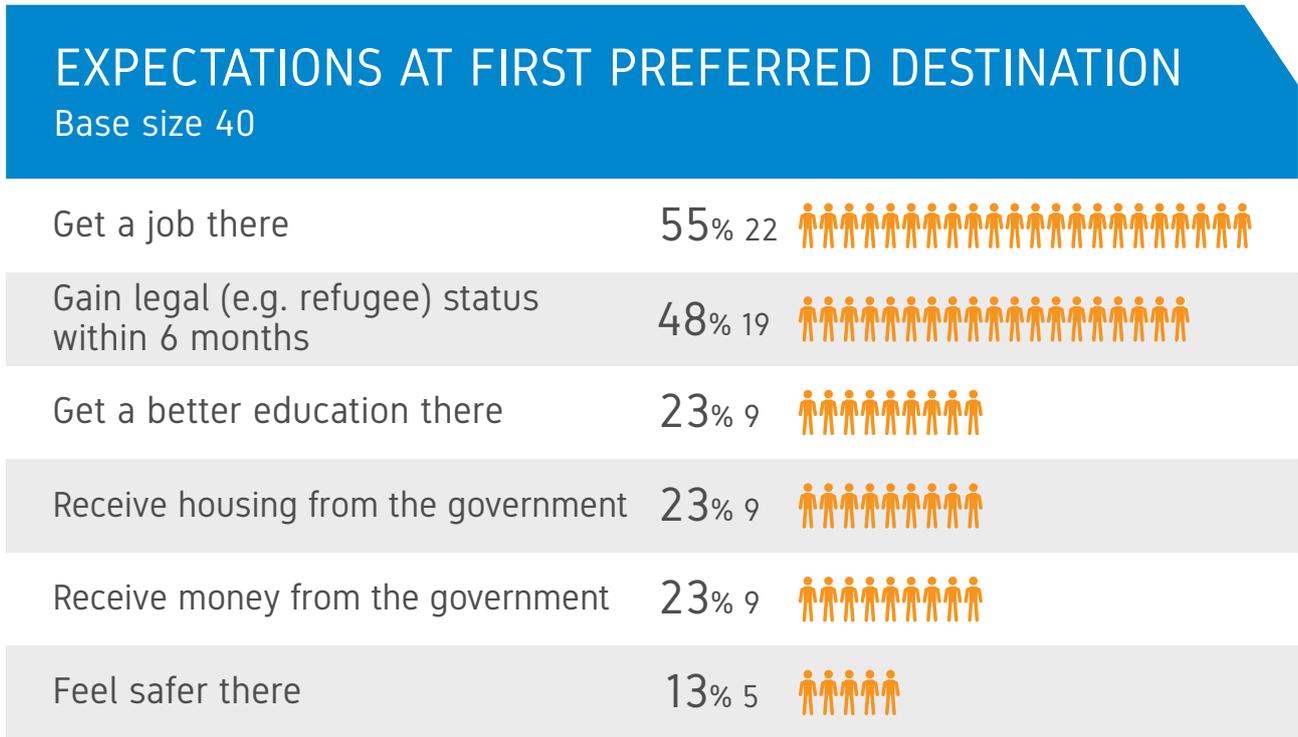
The sample was split between those who expected to integrate fairly easily on arrival and those who expected it to be more difficult (Figure 10).

**Employment** - About half of respondents expected to obtain a job at their destination within six months. This division in the sample reflects that some Afghans were convinced (by smugglers and their networks) that finding work was relatively easy. Respondents sometimes connected this to their willingness to perform low skilled, difficult work. Of course, half of respondents also believed the opposite - that getting a job would be difficult.

**Legal status** - Just under half of respondents expected to gain legal status in their destination country within six

<sup>35</sup> Of an overall base size of 40, 29 responses to this question were recorded; 11 respondents indicated they did not know their preferred destination. One respondent’s preferred choice of Canada not included.

Figure 10: Expectations at first preferred destination (#, %)



months.<sup>36</sup> Some indicated that a country’s policy towards asylum-seekers would be a factor in their choice of destination. Uncertainty in this area also led to uncertainty in destination choice. Some of the respondents who believed they lacked information on the likelihood of receiving asylum said they would decide on their final destination in transit.

**Cultural differences** - Respondents felt that adapting to European culture would be a significant challenge. Concerns about cultural differences underscores the

reluctance endemic to the migration decisions of many, and helps to explain why many Afghans would prefer to remain at home if possible given economic and security concerns.

“I know life in the West lacks socialization as we know it. There are far fewer human interactions and less warmth.”

Pashtun male, 25-34, from Behsood

<sup>36</sup> In answering the question, “Which of the following do you expect at your first preferred destination”, respondents were allowed to select more than one answer. Percentages therefore do not total 100.

## CONCLUSION

Mixed migration driven by physical and economic insecurity has been a feature of Afghan life for decades. Yet despite many Afghans being in the process of planning their own migration journey a striking number of them view irregular migration negatively. The qualitative data at hand indicates that leaving Afghanistan is a decision made reluctantly, with concerns about the cost of the journey and social integration upon arrival paramount.

Greater economic well-being and self-sufficiency would encourage many respondents to remain in Nangarhar, even for those who view conflict and violence as reasons to migrate. For many, poor wages and/or a feeling that jobs are not commensurate with skills or education were motivating factors in their desire to migrate. Consequently, respondents would require *good* and *sustainable* jobs to be convinced to stay. This suggests that the creation of mass, low skilled, low paying jobs—as has been touted as a solution in other major regions of origin of irregular migration—may be ineffectual in reducing emigration from Afghanistan.

Economic interventions designed around sustainable livelihoods (rather than short-term interventions) could encourage potential migrants in select segments of the population to stay. It would be important for potential migrants themselves to view such opportunities as long-lasting, if they are to replace resettlement in Europe as the primary ambition. Prolonged conflict may be the greatest hurdle to overcome in this regard.

### Future research waves

This report is the predecessor to four future rounds of data collection, which collectively will form a longitudinal study lasting two years.<sup>37</sup> There are three findings in particular that merit close attention in future waves:

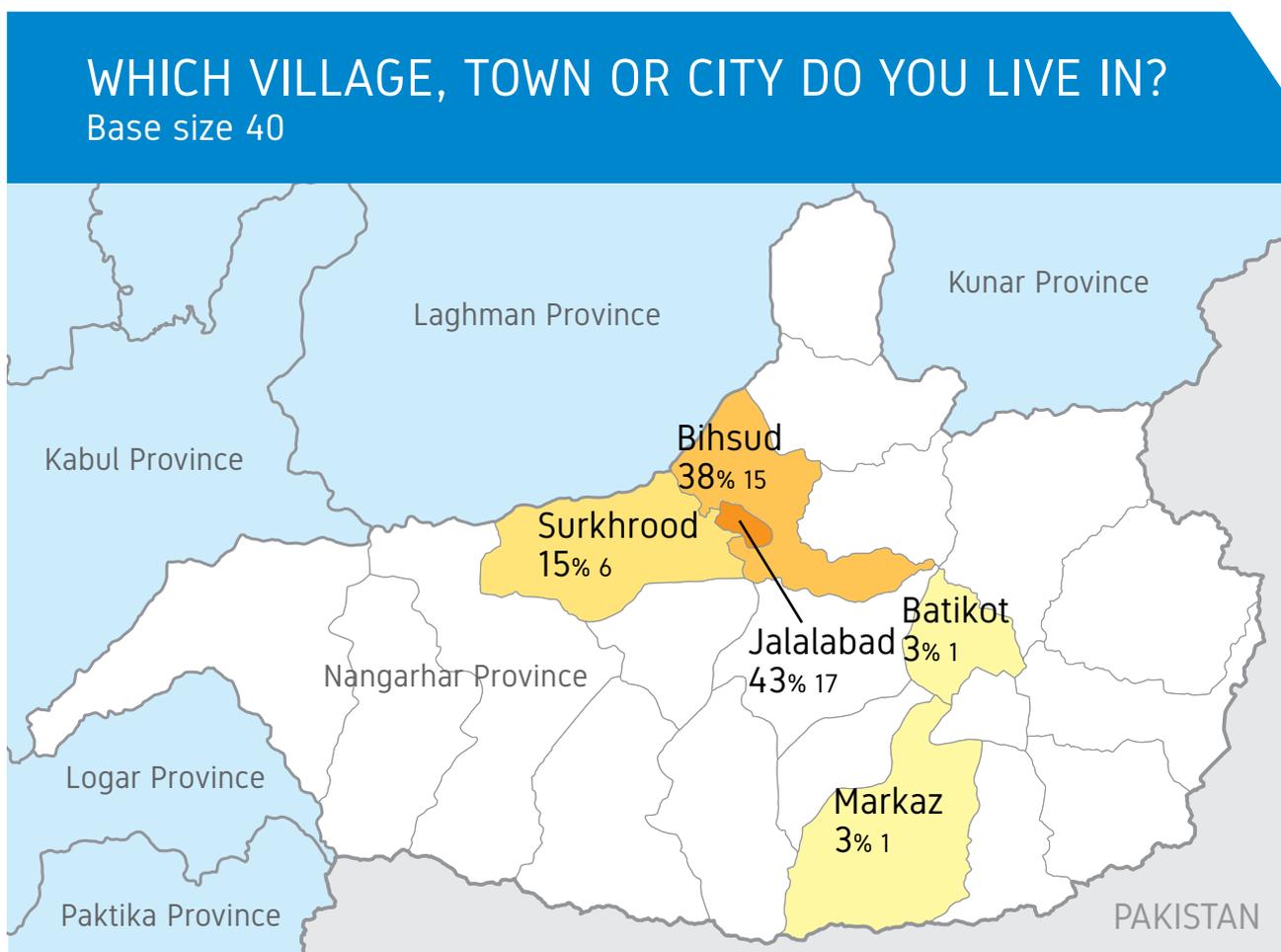
- **Respondents chose to migrate reluctantly and may be responsive to interventions that improve long-term economic opportunity.** Local policy solutions could prove effective in deterring individuals from departing via irregular means. Improving (fair access to) economic opportunities, including better jobs and better pay, may encourage some to remain. Future waves will be able to track how attitudes towards migration change as local economic conditions fluctuate.
- **All respondents had spoken with someone who had migrated before, highlighting the influence of the Afghan diaspora and returnees.** Many Afghans have networks that include individuals abroad as well as returnees, particularly as large numbers of Afghans have returned to their country in recent years from Pakistan and Iran. Information about migration options and methods is primarily disseminated through word of mouth from community members and relatives. As more Afghans return to communities in Nangarhar, many of them deportees or stranded en-route in Greece and the Balkans, it is likely that respondents will have more conversations with migrants who have returned in difficult circumstances. Future waves will be able to identify whether an increase in ‘bad’ migratory experiences changes perceptions of potential migrants.
- **As respondents either implement their migration plans or abandon them, future research waves will capture the reasons why and the role of Afghan and international policies in shaping decisions.** Future waves will shed more light on the dynamics of social networks, the profiles and roles of smugglers, and the reality of the journey versus respondents’ expectations.

<sup>37</sup> Readers can register for updates on future waves of this study at [www.seefar.org](http://www.seefar.org).

## ANNEX 1 - METHODOLOGY

A total of 40 face-to-face and telephone surveys were conducted in August 2016 in Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan, with migrants purposively sampled for their intention to migrate onwards to Europe within 12 months. Respondents were identified using a snowball sampling technique through referral of other migrants within the same target group.

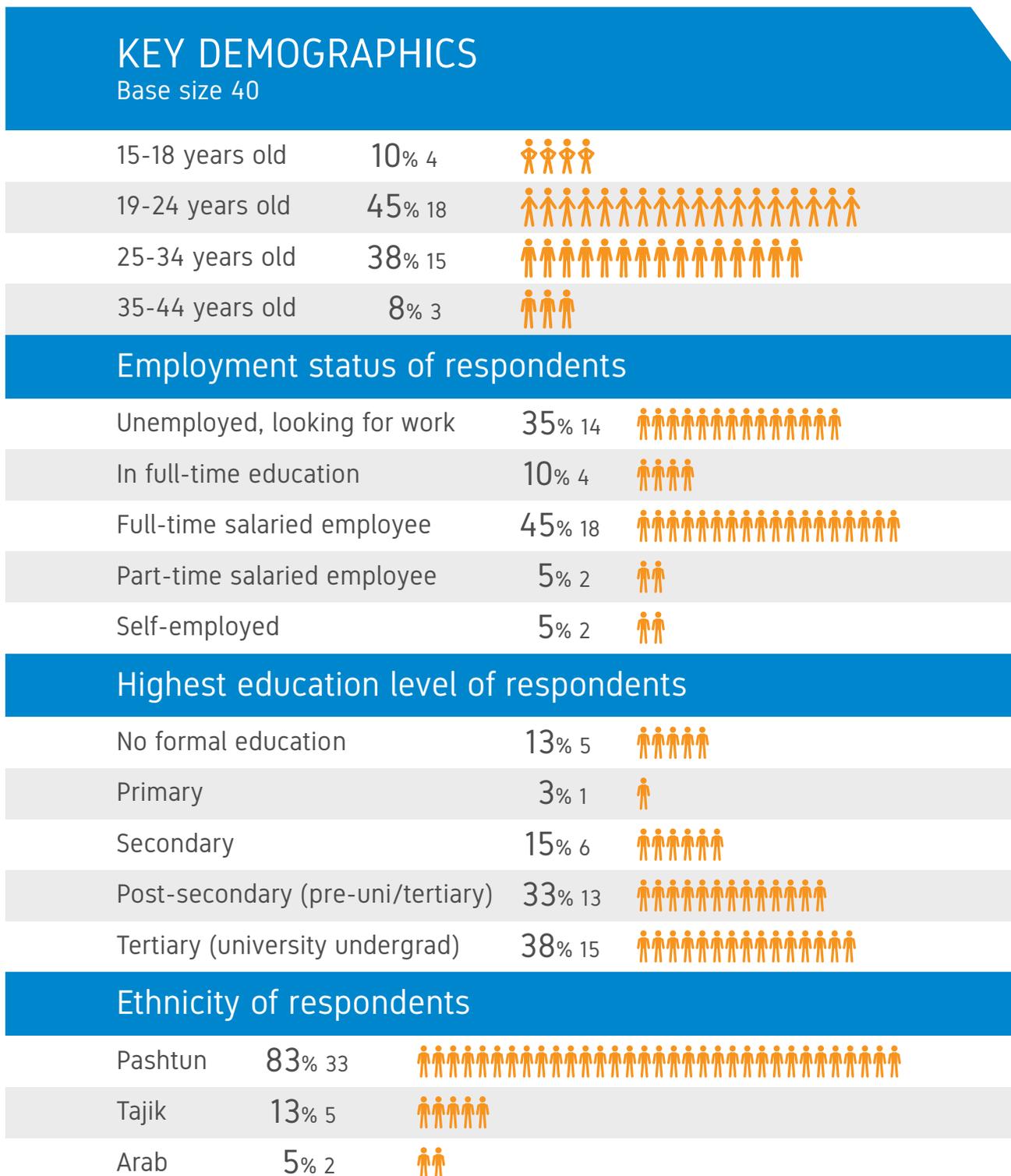
Figure 11: Villages where respondents live in (%)



## ANNEX 2 - DEMOGRAPHICS

The majority of the respondents were born in the same province. The respondents were all young men, almost half between 19 and 24-years-old (figure 13).

Figure 12: Key respondents' demographics (#, %)



Reluctant Journeys  
Why Afghans migrate irregularly to Europe



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