

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: The FCDO's approach to displaced people, HC 525

Tuesday 4 March 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 4 March 2025.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Noah Law; Alice Macdonald; Brian Mathew; James Naish; Sam Rushworth; David Taylor.

Questions 1 - 22

Witnesses

[I](#): Fatimah, Community World Service Asia; Zohal, Community World Service Asia; and Belinda, Centre Olame.

[II](#): Katy Nembe Katonda, Deputy Country Representative, Democratic Republic of Congo, CAFOD; and Tinebeb Berhane, Country Director Ethiopia, ActionAid.

Examination of witnesses

This evidence session includes sensitive content that some readers may find upsetting.

Witnesses: Fatimah, Zohal and Belinda.

Q1 Chair: We are now starting our session of the International Development Committee on displaced people, something that has received a lot of attention in recent weeks, months and years and we thought it was important to hear from people who have had the misfortune of experiencing that at first hand. We are joined by two women today, Fatimah and Zohal. Could both of you introduce yourselves and tell us a little bit about your journey, what drove you to be displaced from your home and then what happened after that? Could I start with you, Zohal, please?

Zohal: Yes, I am really honoured today that I can talk here of my experience—my own journey of what happened to me. I do not want to take up your time too much. I am Zohal. I am 24 years old. I studied at Kabul Polytechnic University before the Taliban came; I had a good life with my family and relatives, and I had a dream that one day I could work and keep my family and people—especially women—strong, instead of thinking we were weak.

I have a good friend by the name of Sohila who unfortunately passed away in a Kabul bomb blast. I promised myself that, “No problem. It is what happened, and I will follow after your dreams. They are not only my dreams. Your dreams and my dreams are the same.” Unfortunately, the circumstances changed. I had never thought, “Oh, my God, one day I will leave Afghanistan, and these things will happen to me”. All my relatives, like my uncle, my father, my brother, and me, were working for the Government. I had recently started a new job at the geology and mines Ministry in Afghanistan. For four months I worked there, and, beside university, I taught different courses as an English instructor and also different subject in courses and in school.

Unfortunately, when the Taliban came everything was banned for us, including university and work. I remember the day when I was in the office and the Taliban came with their guns. They asked us why the women were there. They especially looked at me, “Why are you here in this style?” I said, “My clothes are okay. What is the problem?” They said, “You cannot come here any more”.

However, I did not give up. I joined different demonstrations against them. I remember the last demonstration when the Taliban arrested us. We were in jail for four hours. They took us, 25,000, and fingerprinted and photographed us. Then they broke our phones and released us. They said, “You should never participate in any other demonstration against the Taliban”.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

So we moved to another province. They hit my brother as well, and my father, and they arrested my uncle and my aunty who worked for an NGO, and me. It was really heartbreaking. We moved to another province, Ghazni. There I helped girls; I taught them secretly. But, unfortunately, the Taliban found me again, and they arrested us and also forced marriage happened to me. The whole situation was not suitable for us, so we decided to come to Pakistan.

Why did I choose Pakistan? Because it was near, and we could get a visa. My mum sold her gold, everything—the car and the house. We decided to come to Pakistan, and we got into a very hard situation with the visa. When we arrived at the Torkham border it was closed, so we went to another border, Spin Boldak, into Baluchistan. That is another way to enter Pakistan.

After four nights and days we crossed the border. My small brother did not have a visa, which was really challenging. Finally, we crossed the border and came to Quetta in Baluchistan. There everything was closed, and I decided to come to Islamabad. I thought that in Islamabad I might find a good job for myself, because I knew English, Pashto and Persian as well—these three languages—and a little bit of Urdu.

Unfortunately, when I came to Islamabad I thought, “Oh, my God, people are looking at us as if we are criminals”. Everything was difficult for us, especially the language barrier. My grandmother was sick, and I went with her to hospital. They treated us not like humans. That happened to us. We went for support and help but no one helped us, especially me. I tried to find a job for myself but I wasn’t able to. They told me, “You are an Afghan, and we can’t hire Afghan people”.

After a lot of challenges, I found a job on a course where there were also Afghans. We started to help refugees, without much salary. We helped them with their language and some things like that. But unfortunately, in 2023 and the new year of 2024—I really remember the January day—the Pakistani police came and arrested Afghan refugees. They deported my brother and father. It happened that all my family left Pakistan, and I was the only one here.

I thought to myself, “Maybe I can live my life here”. I faced real challenges: insecurity, anxiety and pressure. I even applied for a scholarship, but unfortunately some of them wanted money and I did not have enough money to go there. I tried to live my life here. I lost my job again because this year the police have been coming and—trust me—they are coming with really rude behaviour and with dirty shoes to our house.

In this house that I am speaking from, I am with my cousin. She was taking a bath here, but unfortunately the police came with their dirty shoes and told me, “Open the bathroom. We want to check to see whether there is anyone here or not.” I said, “Trust me, she is my cousin—I’ve told her to please talk very loudly so the police can hear you.”



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Now I have a valid visa and my passport, but after 24 March it is going to end. I don't know what to do. Now I really miss my hopes and my dreams as well—I am still a little bit hopeful that finally we can get help, with scholarships or any other thing. I miss my family. I don't know where my family are, but they are in Afghanistan. I have no friends or family here to help stop my tears.

Another problem is that I am not safe in this place. Every day they are coming to our house. I said, "We are in Ramadan, we have to fast. Here is our valid visa, here is our passport—here is everything." But again they did not accept it. Yesterday they came to our house. My cousin's visa had expired so she hid on the roof.

They are still coming and looking everywhere and shouting a lot, "You are refugees—you have to leave Pakistan". I said, "Okay. We are paying rent. It is very expensive for groceries and everything, but why are you treating us this way? You are not treating animals the way you are treating us." It is like this in the street too. I went out for about one hour to somewhere where I bought some bread or something like that. They asked, "Oh, Afghans, you are still here. How is it possible that you can work without a passport and without a visa?" Then I said, "I have everything and really I don't know what to do".

It is not only about me. I have taught small children English. Their mothers called me and said, "Teacher, what should we do? We are not in Islamabad now. We are in another place, and we need someone to teach us." I said, "Really, I don't know what to do". Later I requested that something happen for these refugees. I am still hopeful, even for myself. I don't have any dream or anything, but—inshallah—maybe I will hear something good from you. Thank you so much for this chance to give my story. It is too much—but I want to give Fatimah a chance to speak as well. Thank you so much.

Chair: Zohal, your story is too much for one woman.

Zohal: That is just a little bit of it—just a small part. The others I did not want to say because it may be heartbreaking again; that is why I am skipping some of them. I am also teaching girls online but for free. What I can do is what I can do. Otherwise, I would not know what to do.

Chair: Can I say thank you for what you are doing? What you are doing is more than most of us are able to do without all of the pressures that you have on you. You are a remarkable woman—very, very strong, and very brave—and I admire you enormously.

Zohal: Thank you so much.

Chair: I am shocked and disappointed to hear about the daily harassment that you are getting.

Zohal: Yes. My students are being arrested, and the girls are calling me, "Teacher, we can't see you any more. You are very kind." I did not realise



HOUSE OF COMMONS

how they behaved with them in the camp. They collected refugees and put them in the camp and then expelled them to Afghanistan with their really bad behaviour. That is what is going on here.

Now they are coming every day with these stresses. There are stresses here and in Afghanistan, and we really don't know what to do. Sometimes I think, "Why am I here?"

Chair: You say that they come every day.

Zohal: Yes.

Chair: By "they" do you mean the Pakistan police or the immigration people or social workers, or is it your neighbours? Who is it that is coming every day?

Zohal: They are the police who are coming every day to our houses. I said to them, "It is my passport. It is my valid visa. What is wrong with you?" They said, "It's because the Government ordered that we have to go to Afghan refugees".

Chair: Okay. Thank you. We will come back to you with some more questions.

Zohal: The police are coming every day.

Q2 **Chair:** Fatimah, I wonder if you could introduce yourself. Thank you very much for joining us today.

Fatimah: Sure.

Chair: Is your situation similar or different? How have you come to be in the situation you are in now?

Fatimah: Okay. Thank you, and good afternoon to all of you. It is a privilege to have this platform to speak to you, not just as an individual but as someone who has been displaced, as someone who has witnessed, and lived with the consequences of, conflict and oppression. I want to talk about who I am and what I did.

I am Fatimah. I am 30 years old, and I have a bachelor's degree in computer science from Kabul University. I have worked with national and international organisations in Afghanistan. Throughout my career I have been involved in advocacy and human rights.

Before the Taliban, life was totally different. After work, I used to gather with my friends in cafés and we were always talking about our dreams, our ambitions, our rights and the bright future that we believed in. We were hopeful and we had plans. We felt like we were building something meaningful. When the Taliban took over the government everything changed. My dreams were shattered in an instant, and my friends were forced to flee like me and were displaced like me.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

When the Taliban came, there were reports of arrests and disappearances in the media and those associated with foreign organisations were at great risk. Staying was no longer an option for me, with the background my family and I had. With little time, we decided to flee to another province, to Bamyan, and we hid from the Taliban. After a while, the landlord of our house sent a video saying, "The Taliban are searching for you". Our landlord confirmed our worst fears that the Taliban had come looking for us and we had to leave Afghanistan immediately.

This led us to Iran. We decided to go to Iran. I had recently married my husband, and I sold everything—my jewellery, the things in my house—and put all my savings into going to Iran. We decided that if we went to Iran, we would find a way to go to Cyprus because we heard that UNHCR is in Cyprus, and we can seek asylum. We paid all my savings there, and unfortunately when I got to the airport in Iran, they didn't allow me to go to Cyprus or take my flight because they said, "Because you are Afghan with an Afghan passport you are not allowed to go to Cyprus because you would have transit through Turkey and maybe you will escape from Turkey". All my dreams were shattered. I struggled for two months in Iran. I had no visa. I came back to Afghanistan. I stayed for four days and again decided to flee to Pakistan because there was no option for me to stay in Afghanistan. I crossed the border at Torkham and I have been living in Pakistan for about three years.

I face many challenges, like the language barrier and financial issues, finding a house and the healthcare problems. When I saw the challenges that people have, and I observed them, my friends and I decided to create a people's council where we help Afghan women who have fled from Afghanistan because of forced marriage. We came here and we try to help them. We try to provide a shelter for them. We provide language and skill classes for them. I understand that need. It is very hard for me and for them as well, so we created this people's council for them.

In those two years I raised my voice for Afghan women in Afghanistan and Pakistan. I tried to show the situation of Afghan women in Pakistan and Afghanistan. All the time, my friends and I have participated in demonstrations. We have justice-seeking movements. We tried to raise our voice and say that the world should not recognise the Taliban and they should recognise gender apartheid. I struggle all the time to raise awareness to help them, because I understand the pain of displaced people.

The three things that I have seen, which many people suffer from, are: financial problems; healthcare and mental health issues, like depression and anxiety; and that people do not have valid documents and are deported from Pakistan. Recently my family suffered this. My sister was a journalist in Afghanistan and an organisation evacuated them to Pakistan. She has lived in Islamabad for more than three years and got severe depression. We went to many hospitals in Pakistan and at the end of the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

examination and laboratory tests, they said that she had severe depression and she fainted suddenly.

This is one of the stories that has happened to my family and the other one is the recent deportations from Pakistan. The people don't have anything to live on but because they cannot go back to Afghanistan. They try to stay in Pakistan because this is the one option that they have. Every day the police arrest them, whether they have a valid visa or not.

Four days ago, the police came to my mum's house, and they wanted to arrest two of my sisters who had fled from Afghanistan to Pakistan. They don't have any options. The police wanted to arrest them, and they gave many excuses not to be arrested. Shockingly, the police said, "If you want I will give you an allowance of one day. You can stay and I will not deport you for one day, but you have to go with me on a date and have dinner with us."

Finally, at 1 o'clock at night, my family shifted to a hostel. They were in a hostel for four days, afraid to go outside. After that they shifted to a rural area and left Islamabad. This is not the story of just my family. This is the story of all refugees. They suffer this situation.

Q3 Chair: That is an horrific story, but it does echo what Zohal was saying. I have deep admiration for you for being able to speak out about it and surviving it. You talked about gender apartheid. It does seem as though women and girls particularly are facing the brunt of this. Both of you spoke about forced marriage and about the threats and intimidation of being women and girls on your own. Do you think that I am right to make that assumption? Is that what you are seeing on the ground, Fatimah?

Fatimah: Sorry, can you say that again?

Chair: Do you think there is gender apartheid when it comes to—Zohal, you are nodding. What do you think? Do you think women and girls have it particularly badly if they are displaced?

Zohal indicated assent

Q4 Chair: Yes, for sure.

Let me bring Belinda in at this point. Belinda, we have been hearing from Zohal and Fatimah how they came to be displaced. I know that you are, unfortunately, in a similar situation. Could you tell us when the displacement first happened, did you get help and support? Did you have access to healthcare? Were you consulted on what you needed? Please introduce yourself a little bit and tell us whether, when you first got displaced, you got the help and support that you needed.

Belinda: I am Belinda. I am 22 years old, a university student in Bukavu, in the Republic of Congo. A few weeks ago, Bukavu, South Kivu, was attacked by the rebels of M23. They entered South Kivu around Nyabibwe; because I come from Kalehe, I was scared. I live in Bukavu at



the hostel, the university campus, and everyone was running home. Everyone was getting back home, so I tried as well to go home and find a safe place to stay. But then on my way back home, I met [*Inaudible*] who are working alongside the Congolese army. It was such a painful moment, and it is still such a painful experience. I don't know whether I will ever forgive or forget what I went through.

Chair: Belinda, I am just so deeply, deeply sorry for what you have experienced. No one should ever have to go through that. I really admire you for being able to come here and share your story.

What we are doing in the inquiry is looking at what happens when people are displaced from their homes and whether or not what the UK does is able to help secure justice in any way, so what you are doing by telling your story is extremely helpful for us. Thank you. No, you will never forget but hopefully you can find a way to go forward. Thank you very much for sharing your testimony. We really appreciate it.

Could I bring in some of my colleagues? Brian, I think you have a question that you want Zohal to answer.

Q5 **Brian Mathew:** Yes. It was really a question about how welcoming the local people were in the community into which you were displaced.

Zohal: Yes. At first when I came here, I realised maybe they are really good, but some of them are just annoying us. The place that I am in is a little bit far from the centre, so when we are crossing the road they are just coming and saying, "Oh, Afghans, you are still here. Do you have visas? Do you have passports?" When we are going to a bazaar or any other places, first, they are calling us Chinese people. I said, "No, we are not Chinese; we are Afghan". Then they are saying, "How can you live here? You have to go" and saying everything like that.

One shopkeeper is here, and he is saying, "Why are the police doing this?" and asking if we are afraid of the police but, trust me, we are really annoyed by others a lot.

Brian Mathew: Right—the same question to Fatimah.

Fatimah: In truth, the local people before the deportations from Pakistan were quite good, but it is different in different areas. In rural areas, the treatment of Afghan refugees is not good. In Islamabad—the city—the people who are educated were a little good, but recently when the police arrested Afghans the locals were looking badly at us and when the police came to arrest Afghans, the local people tried to show the other houses of Afghans, and they reported them.

One thing that happened in my family is that four days ago the police came. It was two males and one female, and there was one local man who came with them. They wanted to arrest two of my sisters, and they allowed just one day, "If you renew your visa extension you can stay; otherwise, tomorrow we will come and arrest you". My sisters were afraid



HOUSE OF COMMONS

of that situation, so they decided to come to my home. At 11 o'clock at night, the other guy—the local man—followed my sisters, and they are very afraid. That is why they relocated to a hostel. We shifted them to a hostel at 1 o'clock at night.

Even the landlords of the houses report them, the shopkeepers and the local people. They mistreat the Afghans.

Q6 **Brian Mathew:** Right. Is Belinda still with us? She is not. Could I go on and ask about any programmes that are there to help you and how that is working to enable you to integrate into the local community? Are there any programmes to help you? I will start again with you, Zohal.

Zohal: Yes. Actually, I tried to call the UNHCR and other offices, but unfortunately they directly tell us, "We are not able to help Afghan refugees." I remember the last day that I went for a job, in a restaurant, and there was a person talking Persian. I went there and I asked him, "You are talking Persian? Are you working in some place with communities? Can you help Afghan refugees or offer any assistance to them?" They avoided me. They said, "No, I am not working for Afghans and I am not speaking Persian". Unfortunately, no one here nowadays is helping. They are scared of helping Afghans in programmes. Of course, they are not running anything yet.

Q7 **Noah Law:** We have heard a bit about the support that has come through in the form of direct cash transfers—cash assistance. Could you tell us a bit more about the benefits of that support that you have received?

Chair: Have either of you had direct cash transfers as a way of support?

Zohal: Pardon me, ma'am. What did you say, sorry?

Chair: Have either of you received support in the way of cash transfers, or food parcels? Have you received any support?

Zohal: I am saying about cash, of course—who will help us? I am searching Google a lot to find any camps or communities. When I texted them, they say, "You are Afghan people, and you are here. You have to go back to your country. You have to build your country." I said, "How can I go back, especially as I am a girl?" Then they said, "Okay, no problem. You can go and marry. That's life."

I want to tell you something. The first month that the police came to our house, they told me, "Why are you without a male in your house?" I said, "I don't have a husband, so I am still single because I am searching still for my studies. My brother, my father and my uncle are in Afghanistan. They are not here. Your guys have deported them." They said, "How is it possible? We will come again and check your house. Why is this house without a male?" It was really heartbreaking.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sometimes, as Fatimah mentioned, it is related to the area. When I sometimes go shopping and want to buy something, wearing very long clothes, they tell me, "You are not with husband? How is it possible you are still single?" So no one is helping us—not food, not cash or anything. I am trying a lot but, unfortunately, we could not be helped by anyone, any communities, any organisation or anything.

Chair: Fatimah, have you had experience of cash transfer or food parcels or any support on the ground?

Fatimah: Individually, I haven't received any cash assistance or any support from any organisation but I have seen some of the Afghan refugees who are living in Islamabad receive some cash assistance from some organisation or some kind of other support, like some tailoring class, beautician classes that they—it is some vocational training classes supported by charities. They can join these kind of classes. Some organisations like IOM, UNHCR, or some other organisations like INSPIRE which are working under the UNHCR, provide some benefits or cash assistance for some Afghan refugees. But I tried to call them and said, "I need cash assistance. I am living in a bad situation." They said, "Do you have a husband?" "Yes, I have a husband." My husband has been unemployed for the three years that we have been living in Pakistan. They said, "Okay, we just can help those who are female family-headed. We can just help those families, but because you have a husband, we cannot provide any service for you."

Zohal: When I called them, they were saying "Girls are alone here, so how can we can provide to all of them? We cannot access all of them." They are always telling me, "You have to wait." Still I am waiting, but now they are not answering our calls. The last time that I had to call for them, they said, "You have to wait." Still I am waiting.

Chair: Not good. Belinda is on the call again—hello, Belinda.

Belinda: I wanted to talk about the support that we receive here in Congo currently. We receive support from mostly the Christian organisations. They took me to the hospital and they have been so helpful, but then other organisations are not showing up. Accommodation has been a very big issue for us. The fact that we do not have anywhere to stay or to live puts us again in a lot of insecure conditions. But churches in parishes all over here have been helpful. We have been sleeping in them, but then the conditions are not what we would wish to have. It is very hard to get water and food. Medication is an issue. Accommodation is an issue. In the process, more girls are being raped. Even young boys are being raped. We do not know where we are heading. It is just so painful.

Chair: Belinda, it sounds like hell that you are living in and I don't know how you have the strength to talk to us, but thank you very much for doing so. I am really glad that the Church is stepping up.



Belinda: If I can add something: because of the insecure situation—because of what we are going through and the conditions we are living in—I even lost my mum last Monday because she had a heart attack and that is how she passed on. The pain is too much; it is too much to bear.

Chair: It is too much for anyone to bear and I am just so sorry for what you are experiencing now. Thank you all very, very much for coming and talking to us. I feel guilty that we have asked you to explain something that is so personal and powerful and something that you are still living through. I am really grateful for what you have told us, and we will make sure that we treasure that and use your very powerful words to try to make a difference going forward.

I would also to say to people that might have been watching this, I understand that it has been difficult for you to watch but, unfortunately, this is what people around the globe are dealing with right now so I think we have to air that. Again, sorry for people who might have found that a disturbing session.

Thank you to the three of you. You are amazing, powerful women and I have so much admiration for you. I am so grateful that you came and gave us information today. Thank you all very much. We will use your words wisely. Thank you very much and goodbye.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Katy Nembe Katonda and Tinebeb Berhane.

Chair: We will bring in our next panel, please. We are fortunate to have two witnesses. We have Katy coming up on screen. Katy, could you put your camera on if you have bandwidth? Would you like to introduce yourself and the organisation that you work for, please?

Katy Nembe Katonda: Thank you very much, my name is Katy Nembe, I work for CAFOD and I am the deputy country representative for CAFOD DRC. I am based in Goma.

Chair: Thank you very much. Tinebeb, could you do the same, introduce yourself and tell us where you are and who you are working for?

Tinebeb Berhane: Hello, my name is Tinebeb Berhane. I am the country director for ActionAid Ethiopia. I am based in Addis Ababa.

Q8 **Chair:** Thank you both very much for being here. I am not sure how much you heard of our previous witnesses explaining their experiences. It was pretty tough for us to hear, but nothing compared to what it is for them to bear daily. Thank you both for all that you are doing in country to try to support particularly women and girls.

Tinebeb, I will start with you. What percentages of people are you working with, do you think, who are displaced by conflict and climate change?



Tinebeb Berhane: Thank you very much for having me. Working in the humanitarian sector in general in my country has become one of the big programmes for many organisations who have not been in the humanitarian sector. My organisation has been, especially for the last five or six years. We are experiencing a growing humanitarian crisis induced by climate, as well as in our internal conflict where we have millions of displaced persons. Usually it ranges from 50% up to 70%. Many other like-minded organisations doing a lot in responding to the humanitarian crisis in general, because we have millions of IDPs, and also refugees coming from neighbouring countries.

As you know, there is the crisis in Sudan, and we already have refugees from Eritrea and other neighbouring countries. On top of that, the internal conflict and the protracted climate crisis is affecting communities, and the number is increasing a lot more from moment to moment. According to the UNOCHA data for 2024, we had 4 million internally displaced persons. My organisation has been supporting these communities. Since 2018, we supported 800,000 affected communities, most of them women and girls.

Q9 **Chair:** From your personal experience of working in this area, do you think that 50% has always roughly been the number of people who are displaced, whether internally or across borders, as a consequence of conflict and climate, or has that changed in any way?

Tinebeb Berhane: In a given year, official data shows that we have 20 million on average who need food assistance and humanitarian assistance in the country. From that, at any given time there are 4 million internally displaced persons. It is difficult to say it is 50% IDPs, but this official number does not show that it is decreasing. It is increasing for many reasons—because of the ongoing situation in the country and also the neighbouring countries, but also the assistance is affected by the shortage of funds that come into the country. The recent development is also very challenging for this country.

Many organisations have increased the number of targets or right holders that they are supporting. The number has increased significantly because of this crisis that is going on in different communities.

Q10 **Brian Mathew:** A question to you, Katy: women and girls face additional difficulties with displacement. What steps do you take to ensure their safety?

Katy Nembe Katonda: Thank you very much for that question. Yes, women and girls are really the first ones to be affected by the displacement, since they are the ones who are carrying the burden of the displacement due to man-made and natural disasters as well. The impact of this is quite significant to women because women are the most vulnerable. They are the ones who are unable to defend themselves in such context—without forgetting elements related to violence and



protection, and to these women and girls who are significantly affected in the crisis.

Brian Mathew: What steps do you take to ensure their safety?

Katy Nembe Katonda: To ensure the safety of the women and girls in the displaced context, there are several measures that we take as CAFOD. First of all, I have to mention that CAFOD's way of working is community-based. We work with local partners and make sure that we equip the local partner with the capacity to respond best to the needs of the people who are displaced, including other people who are vulnerable. What I mean by that is that when we work with local partners, that means we work with people and organisations that are based in, and understand better the needs of, the community—meaning that they are there before the crisis, during the crisis and after the crisis. In that way, they understand better the dynamics of the crisis and the challenge, and they are able to come up with community-based solutions or the best solution to fulfil the needs of the women and the girls.

To answer your question on what we do to alleviate the challenge, we usually make sure that the community are well trained on safety and accessibility, that our programmes are well adapted, and that the safeguarding elements of the community are taken into account so that even our programmes do not do more harm to the community. This includes training that is provided to community-based groups and even the groups of the women who are displaced, so that they can become able to support themselves and bring in the group support, even if they move from one area to another.

First of all, we have to identify how best we penetrate the communities and get these women together, to understand better their problem and be able to train those who bring support but also train them to be able to support themselves. Even when we are not there, they need to be able to carry forward and replicate the message, the support to each other and to reach even more numbers compared to what we can reach.

Q11 **Brian Mathew:** How important is justice to displaced people who have suffered gender-based violence?

Katy Nembe Katonda: Justice is very, very important. I have to mention that within the full pack of support that is provided to women and girls that are affected by gender-based violence, justice is one of the key elements. But the challenge that is related to this—especially in conflict, in a sensitive and fragile context—is very, very significant. There is a circle of support that we definitely provide through our local system that we work with, starting from identifying the victim throughout the psychosocial support and then the referral mechanism to the medical support, and then the social integration and the judicial support, which is now what is key in restoring the dignity of the person. In many cases, in situations like in DRC, it is very difficult to reach up there because of the fragility of the context.



Whatever the case, we try as much as possible. We even try to bring in mobile clinics to provide judicial support to a victim of gender-based violence.

Q12 Brian Mathew: Thank you. Tinebeb, over to you now. How do you ensure that your staff are trained in gender-sensitive responses to displacement?

Tinebeb Berhane: My organisation is a gender justice, good governance organisation. At the centre of what we do is gender justice. In a very highly patriarchal society like ours, the gender element is not limited to stereotypes. Rather, it is all about power dynamics. Our staff are trained in gender transformative programming, where we see change from the individual to the collective, to the system and the culture, because that is what makes the full circle of the gender work in general.

It is supported by our strategic plan and also a gender transformative programming manual. We also have guidelines and appropriate tools to employ to check and balance our quality programming from the gender lens perspective. We have a programme framework, and we have a monitoring, evaluation and learning framework. Gender is embedded in the entire programme system. The training of the staff is a very essential element of capacity building but also ensuring quality of our programme in general.

Q13 Brian Mathew: Can you tell us how you include women and girls in the design of the support packages?

Tinebeb Berhane: That is a very good question. One of the principles of ActionAid's work is a human rights-based approach, and a participatory approach is a central element—a pillar—of our work. To give you an example, in IDP settings, for instance, when we support the displaced persons in that particular IDP camp, we have a signature—that we apply women and young people leadership. The women are organised from the camp, from the very beginning of the entire response process. They are the ones who will be leading, supported by us and the local government, to identify the right holders who need the assistance. They will watch the whole process—the response mechanism—and they also report.

As protection is also part of the central work that we do, we organise the women as a protection group so that they will report when they see any potential of gender-based violence during the response mechanism, but also reporting girls and women who face such challenge. The women leadership is our signature, our principle, and is also one of our accountability mechanisms. We start the work from that point, until the end of the work that we do up to the evaluation.

The participatory process includes the leadership, and when we design a particular response—whether it is cash, food or water—the need should come from the community itself. We are not there to prescribe what they need. Rather we start by having that discussion in a very participatory



way to tell us what they need, because we have very diverse community members in this country, so in one community what they eat is completely different from the other community and what they eat. We get the information about what exactly they want, and we design our response, our programme and our funding allocation based on the need of the community. That is what it looks like when it comes to participation.

Chair: What a better world it would be if all development worked on the same principles that you have just outlined. I will bring in James.

- Q14 **James Naish:** Katy, we want to turn our attention specifically to children. I think 30% of the world's population are children, but 40% of all forcibly displaced people are children. That has been growing over time. How do you ensure that you meet the growing need of displaced children to continue to receive an appropriate education?

Katy Nembe Katonda: Thank you very much for the question. What we do first of all in our programmes is make sure that we do a proper mapping of the problems in the community that we work with. Some of these key issues and key people that are affected are definitely children and young people. We make an intentional effort to target children who are at risk in this context to be able to bring them closer and repatriate them, particularly in this crisis and fragile context. We have a programme that is supporting children who are working in the mining areas. We try to target children who are affected by the crisis—maybe we call them ex-combatants—particularly those that are most affected, and try to bring them closer to reintegration.

We make sure that we get them out of danger first and, alongside that, ensure that at least the reunification and also the reintegration elements of these children is taken into account. It is a lot of work. It is a process to get these children from this risky area. We are talking about children who are affected by the conflict, children who are used as labour. It is a very difficult context to reconcile even these children with themselves first and be able to bring reparation to these children.

That means, first of all, that there is a psychosocial element for these children, and also an element of teaching them life skills—for example, welding, or rapid education to recuperate their social integration. We try to bring them a rapid education to give them literacy, and make sure that alongside that they learn life skills to give them the know-how to be able to live like normal people and have a better future.

- Q15 **James Naish:** What other broader services or support mechanisms are required for those children for them to be able to access those life skills as effectively as possible? Counselling might be an example. What other things need to be done to make sure that these children are able to access the broader skills and education offer?

Katy Nembe Katonda: The protection of these children is very key. We need to ask ourselves why these children find themselves in those



situations. Definitely one of the main causes is related to their protection. They are already living in very fragile, difficult context, in poverty and in a climate-affected area. The livelihood of the children is already at risk. Now, alongside that, there is the shock related to the crisis. We need to make sure that these children are protected—at least take them from this context and ensure their protection. Protection means ensuring that peace is taken into account when speaking about the reintegration of these children, and to be able to bring forward the psychosocial element.

Some of these children have been accused of being a witch and there are many stereotypes related to them. Some are ex-combatants and have found themselves in those situations not because they like it but because the situation in which they found themselves did not give them much chance to take the better option. The element of protection is key.

Q16 James Naish: Practically then for those children, what form does that protection take?

Katy Nembe Katonda: For these children, I will talk about what our programme does. We try to identify these children. For instance, for those coming from an uncontrolled group, we work with transit houses and transit committees that recuperate them from those groups. Then we put them in the transit centre where we can provide the psychosocial element and train them—we enable them to identify themselves as children, first of all, and to reconcile themselves with their past.

That is the whole psychosocial element before even taking any further step to speak about education. One of the first key things that needs to be taken into account is the effect of this crisis on these children. That is very significant.

Q17 James Naish: Before I switch across, I will ask you about direct cash assistance. Is that something that you are involved with, Katy? What do you see is working well and what are some of the challenges associated with that?

Katy Nembe Katonda: Yes, direct cash is the modality that is now being used, particularly in DRC in this context. We have identified that it enables the family to be able to respond best to different needs of the affected family—of the vulnerable family. It is unlike direct distribution, which is limited. Providing a pack of maize or something like that is just that, but cash is used for different needs of the household, meaning that it covers multidimensional areas of the needs of the family—of these people who are displaced.

One of the best methods that is now being used—we are also using it in this context—is the multi-purpose cash, which the family can use to buy food, charcoal or something that best suits the needs of the family. The research has also demonstrated that many times direct distribution has not been the best solution. The next day, what we have witnessed, for instance, in that context is the item being sold in the market. When the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

cash is there, the families are able to respond best to the needs that are quite pressing in the context.

- Q18 **James Naish:** Tinebeb, do you share that view? Where would you see cash working or maybe not working as effectively with these communities?

Tinebeb Berhane: In fact, it is the best modality, especially looking at it from the empowerment point of view, as we normally primarily target women in the response mechanism for ActionAid. It is very convenient for them because they will have 100% control over their money. It also covers many household issues. It fills a gap. Whatever they want, they will buy with it. It has a direct impact on the entire family. I can also talk about it from the perspective of minimising the risk of diversion. Normally when you provide other items, especially if it is not participatory and it is not what they want, communities tend to sell that to the market. That means there is a huge gap at the household level and this is not what they want.

When we provide cash, they buy what is necessary for the family. It is a most empowering mechanism that we use and it is the best modality in a given community, especially if the market is available. In that process, of course, it is important to keep in mind that safety has to be provided for the women and we have to invest more for them to become safe in accessing the cash. Usually we use a bank system, opening an account for each of them. We transfer money through their bank and we make an arrangement with the local banks for them to disburse this cash. It is not only a basic mechanism; it is also empowering, especially for the women.

- Q19 **James Naish:** ActionAid obviously does development work and humanitarian work. How is your time split between the two? Does that change depending on the types of groups that you are working with?

Tinebeb Berhane: When we do humanitarian response it is a bit different from doing long-term development work. The magnitude, the speed, the logistics, the human skill that you need is completely different from doing the development work. We strike the balance because we are also a development-oriented organisation and we also see resilience building in our humanitarian response mechanisms.

We try to balance, which means I have a team who are focusing on the humanitarian work; I also have a team who will be focusing on the development work. But, of course, for the management and for the leadership, whenever we have humanitarian response, that means we have to dedicate more time. It is a time-sensitive matter because we have to reach to the communities at the right time. Also, depending on the work that you do—for instance, food assistance—it involves logistics, which means we have to buy the food from the market and transport it to the communities. We have to do the distribution. It is a completely different kind of work.



As we cannot deal with the humanitarian response with normal long-term development work logistic support, we reviewed our internal policies and systems to accommodate the humanitarian response. It is fast, it is very deep, and the amount of time and energy it takes is huge. We try to balance but when we have a humanitarian response, that means the management have to take a tremendous amount of time to focus on that because of its sensitivity—its time sensitivity, and the fact that the process is very, very heavy in nature.

Q20 David Taylor: I want to ask about funding. It would be helpful to know how you are currently getting funding. Then I have a follow-up question about the bigger picture of what has happened in the US and the UK on aid spending.

Katy Nembe Katonda: I will start. First of all, we are working in a very protracted context of crisis, and funding is really a challenge. The funding cuts have a significant, huge impact on the lives of people around the globe, but also in a context such as DRC, which is already fragile.

We are talking about more than two or three decades of conflict, and talking about aid cuts now is definitely devastating. It has a devastating impact on the lives of the people, where poverty is already very rampant in the community, and there is the impact of climate change and conflict. Now, to add to that, the aid cuts are definitely heavy, and we are here to talk about the impact on the lives of the women and children. It is very difficult because many who depend on agriculture for their livelihood are definitely going to be significantly affected. Where are they going to get seeds or all those kind of elements? The basic needs are already fragile and adding the pressure of aid cuts is definitely going to have a significant impact. In the context of DRC, we can already feel that. For instance, with USAID, the impact is huge.

Tinebeb Berhane: We use diverse funding streams but it is very concerning that generally, globally, the ODA is completely changing. Where we have a compounded and protracted crisis, millions of people heavily depend on ODA assistance. We are seeing dwindling funding in general. That is a reality for my country as well.

Recently, because of the USAID stop work order, we are so afraid that it is going to be a disaster. In Ethiopia, more than 70% of the humanitarian support, and even development support, comes from that grant. Many organisations have already stopped the work, already made their staff redundant, terminated contracts—thousands of them, actually—and millions of population are dependent on this assistance.

It has never been close to 50%. Annually, we have a humanitarian plan with a funding gap. It has never reached even near 50%. It is always, always under. A significant amount comes from the USAID fund and also from other European countries. We are feeling that the gap created by this stop work order will never be filled by any other donors. It is going to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

be a catastrophe, to be honest, and we are very worried about what is happening.

I am also following up the announcement by the UK Government that adds fuel to our panic. We are panicking because the UK Government is a good donor for my country, and a good supporter of our work in general, both in development and humanitarian areas, and also supporting bilaterally the Government and UN agencies. Multilateralism is also compromised. Our international diplomacy is going to be compromised because it is all about our innocent people who need our support. This is where these cuts are really impacting.

These citizens actually know nothing about these global dynamics. What they know is that they are hungry, they are thirsty, and they are sexually violated. They need food, water, education, medical assistance and protection. That is heavily supported and provided by organisations like us and by our development partners in the global north. This is a situation on the ground and we do not know what to do, to be honest. We are very worried about what is going to happen next with all these crises that are happening globally.

Q21 James Naish: To follow up on that, we do not yet have clarity from the Government as to where the cuts will fall. We have heard them talk about essentially—although they have not used these words exactly—protecting aid spend to Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan, but that of course leaves countries like yours that are not being talked about in that way at the moment. You have made the point about the overall impact—particularly in Ethiopia, for example—of the support that our Government has been giving to UN agents and so on. For clarity, do either of your organisations in the Congo or Ethiopia currently receive UK aid? If so, could you talk briefly about the amounts and your worries in that regard, if makes sense?

Tinebeb Berhane: Yes. For ActionAid in Ethiopia we have a project on FGM that is supported by FCDO. It is a very good, strong programme that supports communities who are going through this issue of FGM in general. We are in the last year of FGM projects funded by FCDO. It is a good support, although we have been experiencing cuts now and then, but still we try to keep going. Even for this year, there were a significant number of cuts, so we have had to downsize our programme and downsize our support for these communities. It is women and girls who have taken part in this programming.

This is the real situation in the country and I know many other organisations also receive funding from FCDO. With the little that we have and given the cut that we are experiencing, this direction from the UK Government is also a bit shocking and disappointing, because we were expecting our allies other than USAID to step up and try their best to continue their commitment because we are experiencing a multidimensional crisis. That is what is really going on now for us.



Katy Nembe Katonda: Just as Tinebeb mentioned, in DRC as well many of our partners are receiving funding through the humanitarian funds which are funded by FCDO. The cuts—even if this has not been mentioned directly for DRC yet—will be putting more pressure on the access to funding for particularly these local organisations that do not have much flexibility. That is quite concerning because one of the elements that is key if you are talking about targeting and also localisation is the access for funding for the community-based organisations that are working in the community and with the community. Funding cuts will definitely leave very little flexibility for these organisations that already have pressure on access to funding.

Q22 **Chair:** I have a question for both of you, please. What might have stopped people from being displaced from their homes and what do you think will enable the people that you work with to go back to their homes? Tinebeb, I will ask you first.

Tinebeb Berhane: The most fundamental thing is to work on the peace-building initiatives because, for us, many have left their homes because of the internal conflict. Peace, co-existence, peace dialogue and negotiations with stakeholders is very critical. Until then, wherever they are, there must be a durable solution where communities—the IDPs especially—will have a dignified life wherever they are. Voluntary repatriation is also very critical.

For us, the most important thing is to have peace dialogue with various stakeholders. As a significant number of them are also displaced because of a climate-induced crisis, I think we need solidarity from our allies in the global north to stop the factors that are perpetuating all this in a climate crisis. We are experiencing drought, flood and what have you from year to year, and because of that the resources are dwindling. That is also becoming a source of conflict between communities themselves, because they are fighting over a meagre resources for their cattle and for everything.

I think it is multi-dimensional but it is about having a nexus approach. While we support with humanitarian assistance until there is a durable solution, we should also think about resilience building, which has a development element. We have to also work on the climate crisis issues. Solidarity is important globally, and peace building. For us, we need to have a quadruple nexus approach in place to help these communities, but the fundamental thing is that the peace and the climate issue has to be resolved.

Katy Nembe Katonda: I will also say that in the context of DRC I think peace is the key element. Peace is the key thing behind the displacement of the population in DRC. When you talk to these displaced people, they will tell you, "I have left my livelihood behind because of the crisis. I am able to work by myself and re-establish myself only if peace is there. I am willing to go back home if peace is assured."



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The elements of climate change are not really so much pressure for DRC, but peace is the thing. The triple nexus is the element, as my colleague has mentioned—working to establish peace to make sure that at least there is a transit. When need to talk about dialogue, leaving behind the element of fighting. People can talk. In the African context, dialogue is key. These things have to be accompanied in the international community, and even the UK itself has to be alongside that to accompany a peace process that is able to take people back to their community.

The repatriation process alongside this is really key—make sure that people are prepared to leave the camp, make sure that their home is ready to welcome them and think about how best they can re-establish themselves to rebuild their livelihood even after the crisis. I am sure if peace is established, community will be able to re-flourish, and that these people will regain their dignity, live a normal life and fulfil the need that is around them.

Chair: Katy, that is a wonderful point to end on. Peace, regaining dignity and leading a noble life is something I hope everybody on the planet is able to achieve. However, with 120-plus conflicts around the globe at the moment, that seems a very long way off. Off course, that is one of the things that development is really good at—empowering civil society, holding Governments to account and early intervention to prevent wars from happening.

Thank you both very much for all that you do on the ground, but also for giving us your time today. We really appreciate it.