

Afghanistan's Urban Future

Discussion Paper #1

This paper provides an overview of the significant urbanisation transition facing Afghanistan. It shows that while urbanisation presents considerable challenges, it also offers immense opportunities to harness urban development as a driver of economic growth, poverty reduction and peace-building.

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Expanding cities

Afghanistan is undergoing the most powerful wave of urbanisation in its history. Cities and towns are expanding at rapid rates due to rural-urban migration, the influx of IDPs and returnees and the expansion of the urban built up area to incorporate surrounding towns and villages.

Afghanistan is still a predominately rural society with only an estimated 24% of the population living in cities.¹ Yet this is changing fast. In 1950, only 1 out of every 20 Afghans lived in cities. In 2014, 1 out of every four lives in cities, and by 2060 1 out of every 2 – 50% of the population – will live in cities.

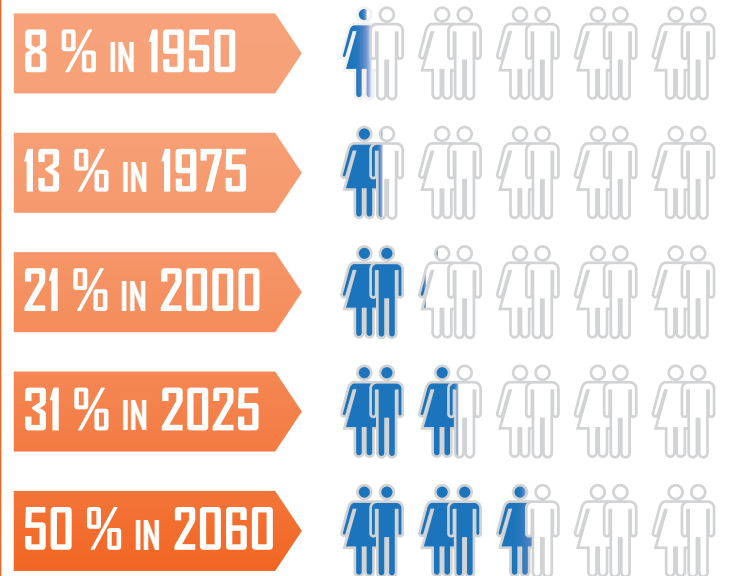
Although accurate and reliable data on urbanisation is not currently available, estimates indicate that Afghan cities are growing at a rapid rate of around 4% per year, one of the highest rates of urbanization in the world. Within the next 35 years the country's urban population is projected to triple to 24 million.² It is estimated that although the natural population growth rate will slowly decline over the next 35 years³, Afghanistan's urban population is expected to grow at an average of 3.14% up to 2050⁴ – still one of the fastest rates in the world. In absolute numbers this equates to at least 320,000 additional urban dwellers every year (43,800 households).

Since 2001, the urban population of Afghanistan has increased from an estimated 20% to 24% of the total population. In absolute numbers this represents an increase from 4.6 million in 2002 to 7.1 million in 2012.⁵

Kabul has experienced dramatic expansion over the past decade. The population has increased by almost 10% per year.⁶ As the nation's capital, Kabul has the highest percentage of urban population in the country – 57% of total urban population resides in Kabul.⁷ Other large cities which have populations over 100,000 include Herat, Kandahar, Mazar-e-Sharif; Jalalabad; Kunduz and Pol-i-Khumri. In total there are 33 Provincial Municipalities and approximately 150 District Municipalities, most of which have also experience rapid growth.

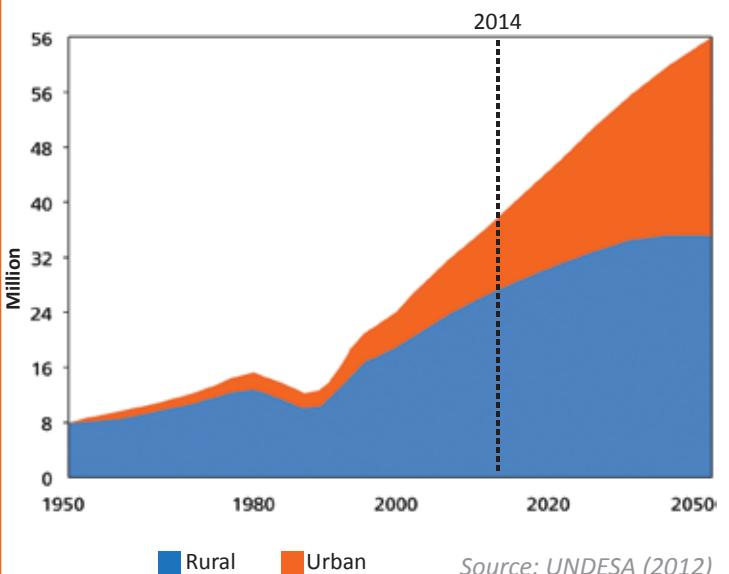
Urban transition

Like almost all other countries in the world, the number of city dwellers in Afghanistan is increasing. By 2060 50% of all Afghans will live in cities



Millions of new city dwellers

In absolute numbers the urban future is immense as cities will grow by an extra 16 million people by 2050



1. UNDESA, (2014), World Urbanization Prospects. United Nations, New York.
2. *ibid.*
3. *ibid.*
4. *ibid.*
5. *ibid.*

6. World Bank (2014), World Development Indicators; <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/views/reports/tableview.aspx>.
7. *ibid.*

Searching for a home in the city

The largest cities have attracted considerable numbers of IDPs, returnees and economic migrants. While exact data is not available, it appears that a considerable proportion of Afghans returning back to the country have settled in urban areas, particularly Kabul and five other major cities. Around 5.7 million Afghans have returned since 2001.⁸ Among them, 3.8 million have returned from Pakistan, while 1.6 million have returned from Iran. In 2002 alone, 1.8 million refugees returned to Afghanistan.⁹

It is estimated that “49 percent of households that reported to have returned from displacement are located in urban areas. Compared to the national distribution of households – 24 percent urban and 76 percent rural – this figure is twice as high. This supports the idea that towns and cities, and mainly Kabul, disproportionately absorb households that have a displacement history.”¹⁰

In addition the last decade has witnessed considerable rural to urban migration with people moving because of insecurity in rural areas and in search of employment and education opportunities.¹¹ Although data on this migration is not routinely collected or available, evidence does indicate that many families choose to move to cities not only on account of better security, but in search of better employment, livelihood opportunities and services.

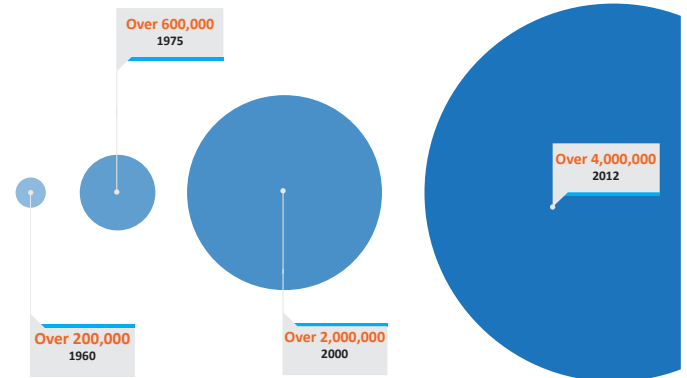
The urbanisation of poverty

Decision-makers and those in power frequently assume that poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion are features of rural areas, not of cities. This is, however, not the case. Behind the compound walls, inside the houses perched on steep hillsides, and under tents we can easily find the 'hidden poverty' of Afghan cities. It is estimated that 28% of the total urban population lives under the poverty line, equating to approximately 2.2 million people.¹²

These urban Afghans are denied their human right to adequate shelter, are excluded from social services, and live under constant fear of eviction. Social safety nets, access to land, and subsistence living of rural areas are not features in cities where the cash economy reigns and enormous market pressures shape the availability of access to services. The urban poor rely on casual day labour which is inherently irregular and vulnerable to exploitation. Food insecurity is higher in urban areas than in rural areas, and has increased over the last few years.¹³

Kabul boom

More than any other city in the country, Kabul has experienced enormous pressure as millions of Afghans have migrated to the city over the past decade.



Source: World Bank (2014)

“49 percent of households that reported to have returned from displacement are located in urban areas.”¹⁰



Kabul City

8. UNHCR (2014), UNHCR Global Reports 2001 – 2014, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c4b8.html>
 9. UNHCR (2014), Volrep and border monitoring monthly update, http://www.unhcr.af/UploadDocs/DocumentLibrary/VolRep_Border_Monitoring_Monthly_Update_Sep_2014_635499983527049635.pdf
 10. Central Statistics Organization (2014), National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2011-12. Afghanistan Living Condition Survey. Kabul, CSO. pp-27.

11. Popal, A.B. (2014), Municipalities in Afghanistan, Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG).
 12. World Bank, (2014), World Development Indicators; <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/views/reports/tableview.aspx>.
 13. Central Statistics Organization (2014), National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2011-12. Afghanistan Living Condition Survey. Kabul, CSO. pp-27.

For example, in 2007–08 there were 27% people in urban areas that were food insecure; in 2011-12 it has increased to 34%.¹⁴

Afghan cities: the neglected realm

Since 2001, Afghanistan, supported by the international community, has made significant advances re-building after decades of war. Urban development, however, has been given comparatively less attention and resources than other sectors. As a result cities have been growing haphazardly in a vacuum of adequate urban planning, governance, management and service delivery. Adequate attention to, and support for, sustainable urbanization is long overdue, particularly given the certain 'urban future' facing the country.

The inevitable and irreversible urbanization process in Afghanistan poses both challenges and opportunities. Ensuring access to land, adequate housing, and services for another 16 million people by 2050 is an immense challenge, yet there are also opportunities to use urbanization as a driver of economic growth, peacebuilding and poverty reduction efforts.

Cities as drivers of development

Urbanization is not simply a demographic or spatial phenomenon. Rather, it is a force which, if effectively steered, can help Afghanistan overcome some of its major challenges, including poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, fragility and conflict.¹⁵

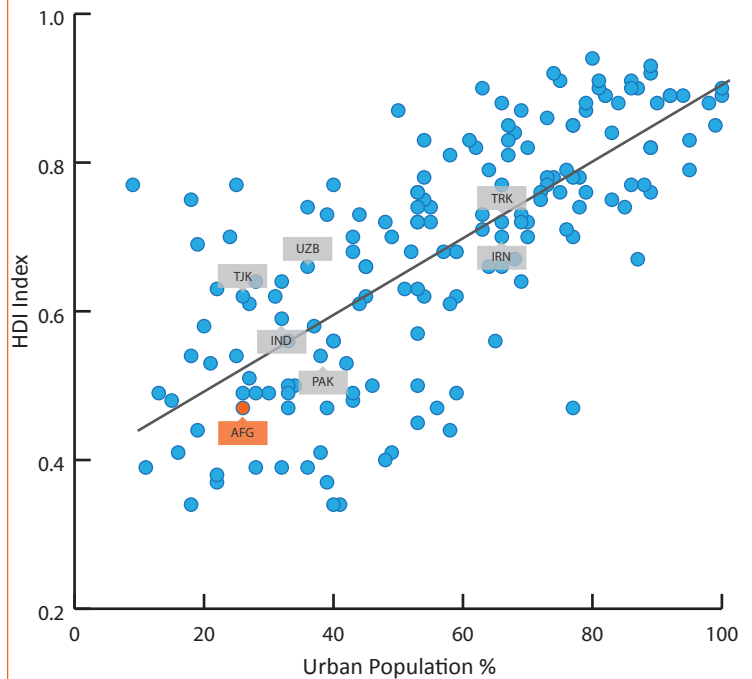
Evidence shows that no country has ever achieved sustained economic growth, rapid social development and gender equality without urbanizing. The transition from low- to middle-income country status is almost always accompanied by a transition from a predominantly rural to a predominantly urban economy. Urbanization is a force that has changed ways of thinking and acting, ways of using space, lifestyles, governing and solving disputes, social and economic relations, and consumption and production patterns. It has been a driving force behind profound social, cultural and political change, including state building.¹⁶

The transformative force of urbanization has far reaching implications for Afghanistan beyond demographic change. Urbanization includes rural-urban migration, proportional increases in the urban population, and the spatial expansion of cities. Urbanization is related to consumption and production patterns, as well as to levels

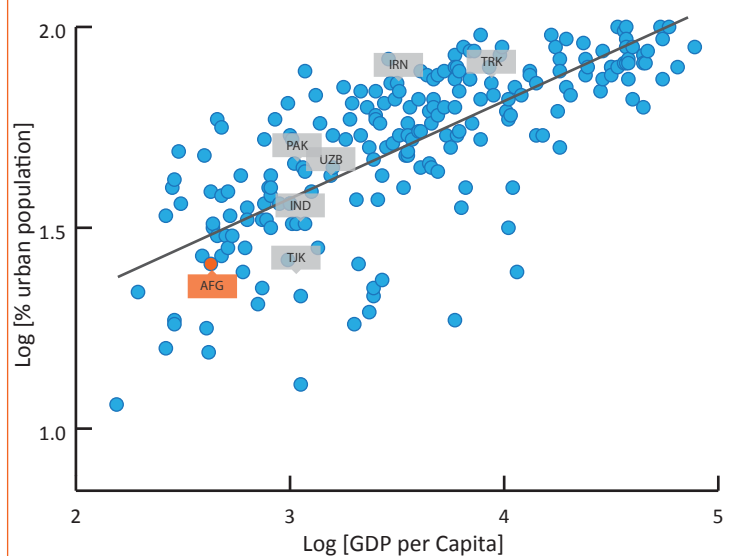
Cities are drivers of development

If managed properly cities can be engines of economic and social development. Evidence shows that no country has achieved sustained economic growth, rapid social development and gender equality without urbanizing.

Human Development Index(HDI) Score vs. % Urban Population



GDP per Capita vs. % Urban Population



- | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------|
| AFG: Afghanistan | TAJ: Tajikistan |
| IRN: Iran | TRK: Turkey |
| IND: India | UZB: Uzbekistan |
| PAK: Pakistan | |

14. Central Statistics Organization (2014), National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2011-12. Afghanistan Living Condition Survey. Kabul, CSO. pp-27.

15. United Nations (2014), Urbanization and Sustainable Development: Towards a New United Nations Urban Agenda. CEB high-level panel on Programmes. 10 Oct 2014. CEB/2014/HLCP-28/CRP.5

16. UN-Habitat (2012) State of the World's Cities Report 2012-2013: The Prosperity of Cities; Earthscan-Routledge, London.

and rates of urban socio-economic activities, growth and development. Furthermore, it refers to cognitive processes: the changing of mindsets in ways that profoundly influence social development and innovation.

In many societies, urbanization has been the locus of much of their creativity and inventive spirit, and the bulk of their economic activity. It is estimated that urban areas account

for about 70% of the world's gross domestic product and a similar percentage of new job creation. Thus, urbanization has generated economic growth and prosperity, as well as the demand for inclusion and protection for many, including in post-conflict and transition contexts. In short, urbanization is a powerful driver of development.

Ways forward

- Raise awareness and build consensus on urbanization in Afghanistan for the need for a new urban agenda
- At the national level develop a National Urban Policy and spatial strategy to help guide the urbanization transition over the coming three decades, and harness the urbanization process for economic growth, poverty alleviation and peace and stability
- Promote decentralization and strengthen sub-national governance, particularly municipal governance, enhancing capacities for service delivery in cities
- Increase the involvement of communities and citizens through a participatory urban development process
- Improve data and monitoring of urbanization to guide policy and planning. Key data is lacking, which consistently proves to be a significant obstacle for urban planning and policy making
- Recognize and promote pro-poor urban development that facilitates the socio-economic inclusion of the poor, vulnerable, migrants, returnees and IDPs – groups that constitute a large proportion of the nation's urban population
- Improve the coordination of urban development efforts and scale-up support to make the best use of resources and ensure complementarity of interventions aligned to government priorities



Kandahar City



Charikar City



The State of Afghan Cities 2014/15 Programme is a one-year programme supported by the Government of Australia and implemented in conjunction with the Government of Afghanistan, that aims to improve knowledge and information on urbanization in Afghanistan by undertaking a detailed review of all 34 provincial capitals. A detailed State of Afghan Cities 2014/15 Report will be published mid-2015.

Contact: info@unhabitat-afg.org - www.unhabitat.org

