

Knowing Kabul

A potential powerhouse of social and economic development

Discussion Paper #10, March 2015

This paper examines the specific urban development challenges and opportunities facing the city of Kabul. It first presents the main findings from the State of Afghan Cities 2014/15 Programme land use and housing analysis. It shows the dominance of agriculture, vacant plots, and institutional land uses, and high-density irregular and hillside housing, which characterise the urban form of the city. The paper concludes by recommending six strategic directions to harness Kabul as a driver of social and economic development in the coming decade.

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Everyone knows Kabul

Kabul is special. It is the nation's capital city and its economic and financial heart. It is the epicenter of international support to Afghan reconstruction and state building, and is arguably one of the most progressive locales for Afghan women, girls and youth. Traffic jams are common; houses seem to persistently defy gravity and climb the hillsides that ring the city; and the city seems to expand day-by-day, sprawling ever outwards and upwards.

It was not always this way. In the 1940s Kabul was tiny, with an estimated population of 120,000 and land area only 3% of its current size. By the 1960s the city population had tripled to more than 380,000 and grown in land area by 13 times. Between 1970 and the 1990s Kabul city ebbed and flowed with the socio-political fluctuations, and by 2000 the city population was estimated at 1.7 million.

Since 2002 Kabul has witnessed a significant expansion. Afghans have come to Kabul from other provinces and returned from abroad in search of the improved social and economic opportunities the city is believed to provide. Superior access to and quality of education, healthcare, jobs and livelihoods, opportunities for enterprise, and relative security have 'pulled' people to Kabul. There are also 'push' factors that have motivated Afghan men, women and youth to migrate to Kabul, most notably insecurity and a lack of sustainable livelihoods in rural areas. Kabul's municipal boundary was also expanded to incorporate previously rural towns and villages, thus enveloping them within the urban fabric and bringing them under the jurisdiction of the Kabul Municipality.¹

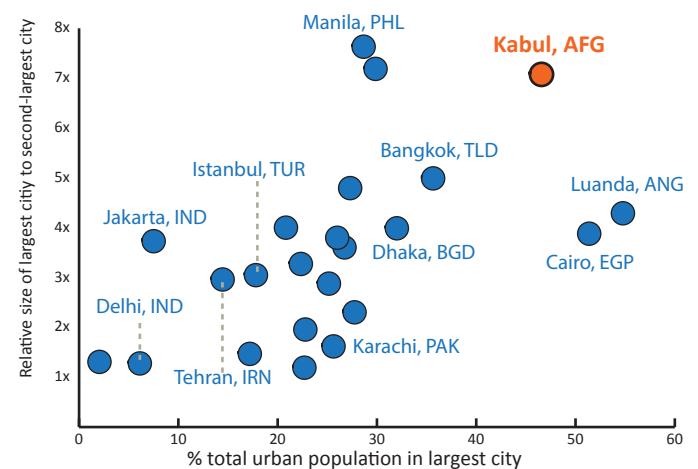
In this sense Kabul is not special. This mirrors the urbanisation process almost every other country in the world has undergone – or is currently undergoing – over the last century to predominately urban societies. Rather than a 'problem to be solved', urbanisation is a positive trend that has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, and, though the agglomeration economies cities can provide, has contributed to economic growth and job creation.

The scale of the city: findings from SoAC

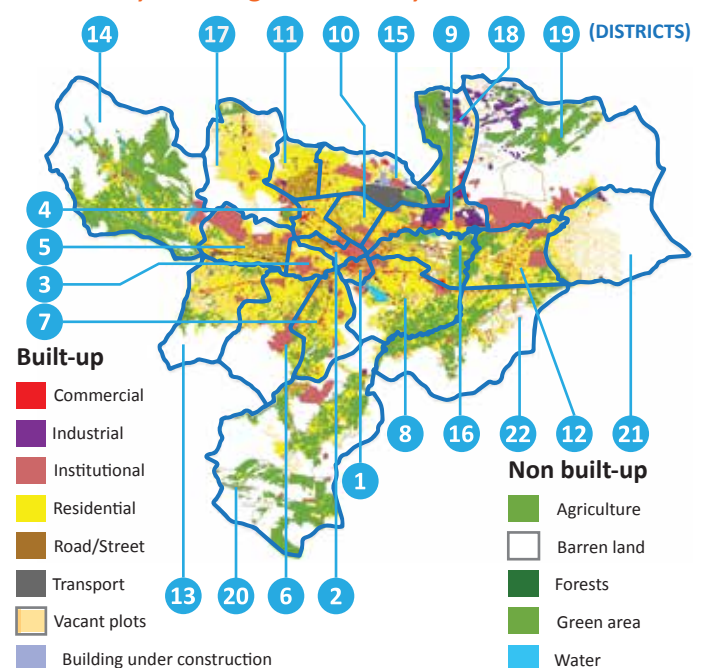
This paper presents emerging findings from the State of Afghan Cities 2014/15 Programme (SoAC) analysis of Kabul City to highlight some key characteristics and challenges facing the city.²

Kabul: a primate city

Kabul is one of the clearest cases of a 'primate city' in the world. It has an estimated 50% of the total Afghan urban population, and is roughly seven times larger than the next largest cities in the country (Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif and Kandahar). In terms of primacy ratio and percentage of total urban population Kabul even dwarfs globally-recognised primate cities such as Dhaka, Bangladesh; Bangkok, Thailand; and Istanbul, Turkey^{3,4}



Kabul City existing land use by district



1. Kabul city is divided into 22 city Districts (*Nahias*). Kabul Municipality is led by a Mayor (directly appointed by, and reporting to H.E. The President) and three Deputy Mayors. 'New Kabul' (*Dih Shabz*) has the mandate for planning and implementation of the 'New Kabul' plan.

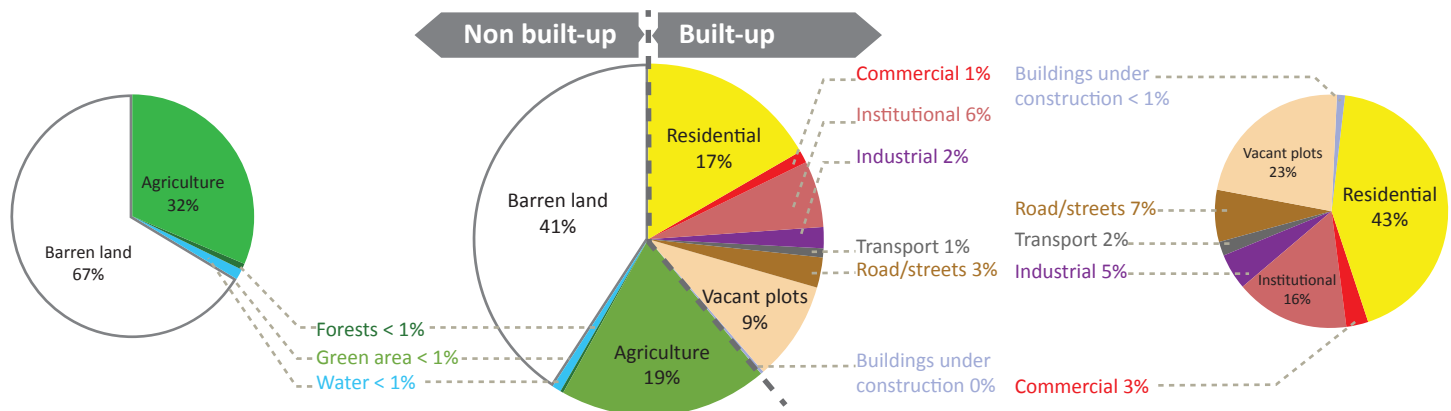
2. See Discussion Paper #9 for a detailed overview of the State of Afghan Cities (SoAC) methodology. In essence, it is based on interpreting up-to-date, high-resolution satellite images and undertaking field surveys in all districts (*Nahias*) to understand the existing land use and dwelling characteristics of all 34 Provincial Capitals.

3. UNDESA (2014) World Urbanization Prospects; 2014 revision.

4. Furthermore, many of these countries have a more proportional urban hierarchy: a 'systems of cities'. For example, India has a network of similarly-sized large cities, such as Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta, Hyderabad, which are linked with medium and smaller cities. This helps promote balanced development and reduces pressure on primate cities to supply services, housing, land, etc., for such an overwhelming number of people. The graph shows select cities for comparative purposes.

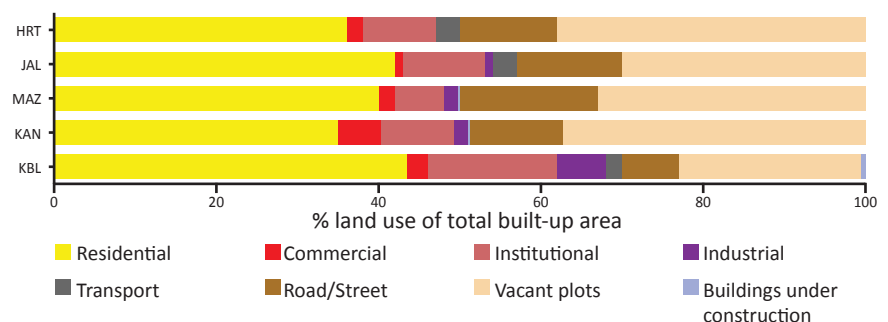
Existing land use of Kabul City

Notable findings regarding the existing land use of Kabul include: (i) only 39% of Kabul City is built-up area; (ii) 16% of the built up land is for institutional use; (iii) there is a similar percentage of land used for agriculture as there is for residential (19% and 17% of total land area respectively); and (iv) vacant plots account for significant percentage of land area (23% built-up area).



Comparing major Afghan cities

Kabul, Herat, Jalalabad, Mazar, and Kandahar have similar built-up land use.⁵ Most notably, on average 40% of land is residential and 27% vacant residential plots (a surprisingly high percentage compared with global norms). Kabul differs in that it has more land used for institutional and industrial activities than the other cities – on average twice as much – which is reinforces its typology as a political, financial and industrial hub.



Dwellings in Kabul

The majority of the dwelling stock in Kabul is detached houses. One-quarter (26%) are in a regular urban form, nearly half (48%) irregular urban form; and 16% on hillsides. Based purely on urban form (i.e. not land tenure arrangements), this corresponds to the prevailing anecdote that “around 70% of housing in the city is informal” (48% irregular plus 16% hillsides). Notably, the majority of housing is irregular but in a suitable location and can therefore be upgraded in-place by 'micro-surgery' for improving streets, housing and infrastructure improvements.⁶

Dwelling typology		% total	Number of units
Detached houses 90%		26 % Regular	101,730
		48 % Irregular	190,220
		16 % Hillside	64,620
Apartments 8 %		6 % Apartments	22,818
		2 % Apartments mixed-use	8,031
IDP camps 2 %		0.8 % Durable ⁷	8,677
		1.2 % Non-durable	

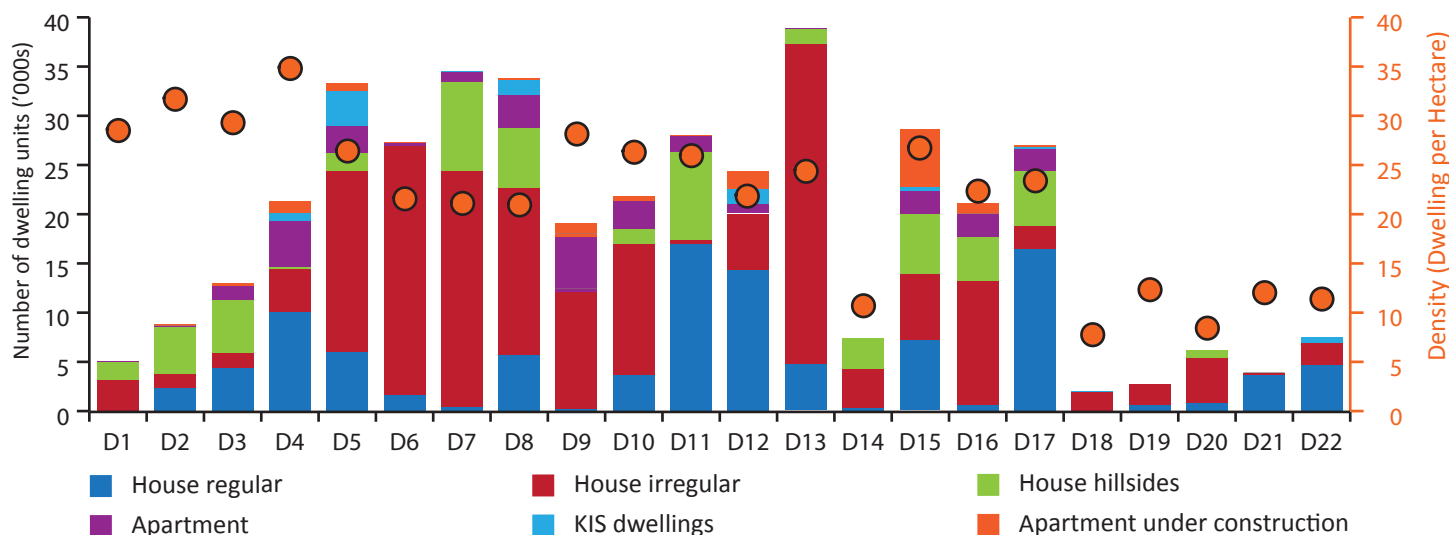
5. SoAC data for these cities.

6. See: UN-Habitat (2014) Urban Solidarity; Discussion Paper #2
<http://unhabitat.org/urban-solidarity-community-led-neighbourhood-upgrading-by-people-for-people/>

7. Durable is classified as a solid (mud) structure that has some degree of permanency and can provide some degree of protection from climatic conditions. Non-durable structures offer little climatic protection (e.g. tents, tarpaulins). Data from Kabul Informal Settlement Taskforce PDM assessment (March 2015).

Dwellings by district and density

The graph below shows the number of dwellings in each city district (Nahia) and the average residential density. District 5, for example, has a diversified housing stock, a high number of dwellings (25,570 houses and 3,134 apartments), and high density (26 dwellings per hectare). In contrast, District 13 is almost wholly irregular housing (32,996 irregular and 572 hillside) and has a lower density (24 dwellings per hectare). Overall, the inner city districts have much higher densities than the peripheral districts (D14, and 18-22).



Apartments are coming!

The 'lag' of the construction boom will be felt for a while yet with implications on land and housing prices in the capital. There is an enormous number of apartments currently under construction, equivalent to 49% of the current apartment stock. A flood in an already depressed market?

Current apartment stock:
30,849 units

Apartments currently under construction:
15,196 units

Pockets of extreme poverty

Over 40,000 Afghans live in the precarious "Kabul Informal Settlements" (KIS), under threat of eviction, and with limited access to basic services.⁸ The SoAC analysis has found they live in extreme high densities:

Over
three times the density
of other houses

Vacant plots – making best use of valuable urban land?

23% of total built up land area is vacant plots – a significant percentage.¹⁰ For every two occupied plots there is one unoccupied plot. Land area of vacant plots = 9,391ha; Land area of occupied residential plots¹¹ = 16,806ha. Nearly half (42%) of vacant plots are in Districts 17 and 21 (see map).¹³

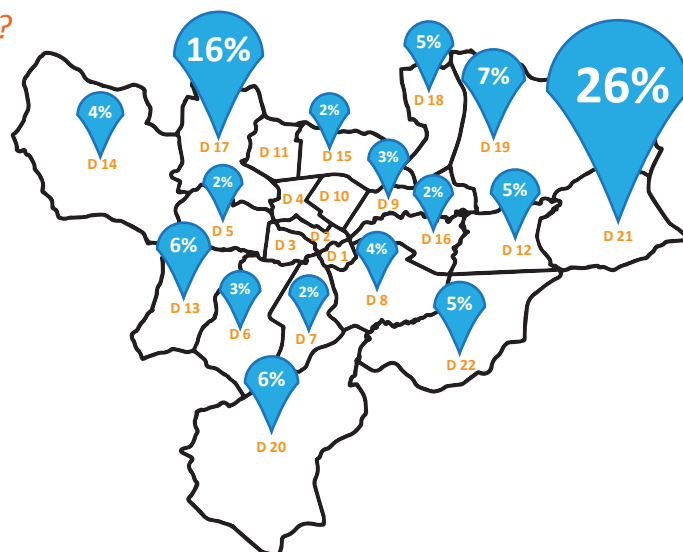
This equates to over

200,000+ vacant plots

enough to house

over 1.5 million additional people¹²

without using any more land, simply by making better use of the vacant plots.



8. See: Paper #1 <http://unhabitat.org/afghanistans-urban-future/>

9. Density of other houses - 21 houses per hectare Density of KIS - 72 houses per hectare

10. Not including barren land, which could also be used for housing construction/urban development. "Vacant plots" is where the land has been marked into roads and plots, and often a boundary wall is built around the perimeter of the plot. See Paper #9.

11. Apartments and KIS excluded; this is only detached dwellings.

12. Assuming an average plot size of 400m², and an average HH size of 7.5 (NRVA urban average).

13. Districts with values less than 1 % not included in map.

14. See: UN-Habitat (2014) Urban Solidarity; Discussion Paper #2 <http://unhabitat.org/urban-solidarity-community-led-neighbourhood-upgrading-by-people-for-people/>

15. See: UN-Habitat (2015) Managing Land, Mobilising Revenue; Discussion Paper #3 unhabitat.org/managing-land-mobilising-revenue-strengthening-municipal-finance-and-administration-through-property-registration-and-taxation/

Ways forward

Many of the 'ways forward' from the previous discussion papers are directly relevant for Kabul. For example, engaging communities and citizens in urban upgrading and development (Paper #2); raising local revenues through improved *safayi* system (Paper #3); undertake and implement urban action planning in advance of growth (Paper #4); upgrading informal settlements (Paper #5); and addressing urban environment issues (Paper #6). However, a strategic response is needed to avoid 'tinkering at the edges'. Drawing from over four decades of global experience, including two decades in Afghanistan, UN-Habitat recommends the following six strategic areas of intervention:

	Don't	Do
1	Don't focus only on Kabul City, the challenges and opportunities are also beyond the city boundary	1A: Develop a National Urban Policy and Spatial Plan , to promote the development of a 'system of cities'; Promote the growth of secondary cities to reduce pressure on Kabul. 1B: Kabul Metropolitan Region (city region) development – improved governance, management and planning of the city with neighboring provinces; 1C: Improve coordination between relevant institutions (e.g. Ministry of Urban Development, Kabul Municipality, AUWSSC, and line departments) for improved service delivery, urban monitoring, and strategic planning.
2	Don't focus on large-scale apartment programmes, they are not affordable for the vast majority	2A: Expand incremental neighbourhood upgrading (e.g. Kabul Solidarity Programme) of irregular and hillside areas, with people's participation and contribution (at least 25 %); ¹⁴ 2B: Infill and densification as part of better urban planning and design, and innovative housing models, to achieve suitable densities; 2C: Review and pass the Informal Settlements Upgrading Policy .
3	Don't promote low-density expansion, it's expensive to service and is environmentally problematic	3A: Make better use of existing land , especially vacant plots; 3B: Implement incentives to stimulate more efficient use of land (e.g. tax (<i>Safayi</i>) vacant plots, and land readjustment/value capture mechanisms); 3C: Recognise and protect agricultural land and water systems through development and enforcement of <i>nahia detailed plans</i> and city-region growth trajectories/boundaries.
4	Don't focus on land titling, it's a driver of conflict, and is time consuming and expensive	4A: Recognise the continuum of land rights and adopt an incremental approach to improved land management building on existing experiences; 4B: Implement citywide property registration to improve de-facto tenure security (see: Paper 3); ¹⁵ 4C: Use land to increase municipal revenues for service delivery (e.g. <i>Safayi</i> , estimated at least 27 million USD per year; tax vacant land plots in line with 3B)
5	Don't neglect the significant infrastructure deficiencies that constrain development	5A: Address mobility challenges through (i) improved traffic <i>management</i> ; (ii) promotion of transit-orientated development; (iii) expansion of 'public/shared' transport options; 5B: Address the major challenges with the water infrastructure (protection of existing groundwater reserves and promote above-ground solutions); 5C: Strategic planning to guide infrastructure investments that can stimulate Local Economic Development (LED).
6	Don't forget the population is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50 % women; • 50 % children; • 25 % youth; • 33 % living in absolute poverty; • 40,000 in the KIS 	6A: Improve citizen engagement and participation (e.g. Municipal Advisory Board), to lay the foundations for municipal elections; 6B: Adopt a pro-poor approach, recognising the economic constraints of households which therefore requires incremental housing and tenure solutions ; 6C: Implement gender sensitive approaches (e.g. in transport planning, governance); 6D: Focus on 'job-rich' approaches that can stimulate local demand and enterprise; 6E: Implement a durable solution for the Kabul Informal Settlements (KIS) in line with the National IDP Policy and to avoid the need for continued 'winterisation' assistance.



The State of Afghan Cities 2014/15 Programme is a one-year initiative 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.

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