

# POLICY BRIEF



## Drivers of Urban Transition in Afghanistan and the Country's Urban Future

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## List of Acronyms

AGE	Anti-Government Elements
AGO	Attorney General Office
AILA	Afghanistan Independent Land Authority
ALCS	Afghan Living Condition Survey
ALP	Afghan Local Police
ANDMA	Afghanistan's National Disaster Management Authority
ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
CRIDA	Capital Region Independent Development Authority
CSO	Central Statistics Organization
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
MUDH	Ministry of Urban Development and Housing
NPP	National Priority Program
PGM	Pro-Government Militia
SDES	Socio-Demographic and Economic Survey
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
VOA	Voice of America

## Key Points

- Afghanistan is among the fastest urbanizing countries in the world, which is induced by fragile security situation, poor economic conditions, lack of basic services and public utilities in the rural areas and also by social preferences.
- Persistent wars and conflicts have been prevailing in the country during the last four decades. Afghan urban centers are seen as more secure than rural areas since their majority have been controlled by the central government, protecting them against insurgent attacks.
- The sectoral distribution of employment differs markedly between urban and rural areas, with agriculture more prominent in rural areas and services more prominent in towns and cities. Agriculture, the main employment generating sector in rural Afghanistan, is highly vulnerable to climatic and weather related shocks beside dominance of low productivity and disguised unemployment.
- The urban-rural gap in access to basic services has prevailed in different ranges in Afghanistan, thus differences have acted as a push factor for rural-urban migration in Afghanistan. People move to cities in search of benefiting urban services, health care, educational opportunities and higher standard of living.
- In Afghanistan, service delivery and infrastructure development has not kept pace with the country's rapid urban transition thus Afghan cities have grown haphazardly, informally, with limited access to affordable and quality basic services. Particularly the rapid urban growth has caused the rise of urban slums, climate change, air pollution and traffic congestion in big cities of Afghanistan.
- Managing the increasing trend of urbanization in Afghanistan requires comprehensive and long term urban development initiatives. The initiatives need to cover urban and rural locations equally to decrease the trend of urban transition on the one hand and on the other, shelter provision and urban management has to be implemented equally.

## Introduction

Urbanization, inevitably, offers opportunities for social development and economic growth. However, meeting the expectations of a fast-growing urban population for a secure and healthy environment to live and work presents significant challenges.

Over half (54%) of the global population currently resides in urban areas, which is nearly double the proportion (30%) since 1950; however, the absolute number of those living in urban areas has actually increased more than 5-folds, from an estimated 750 million in 1950 to more than 3.9 billion people in 2016.<sup>1</sup> This upward trend of urbanization is expected to continue, driven by increases in urban populations across Africa and Asia.

Afghanistan is among the fastest urbanizing countries in the world which is induced by fragile security situation, poor economic conditions, lack of basic services and public utilities in the rural areas and social preferences. Afghan urban centers are seen as more secure than rural areas and the majority of them have been controlled by the government throughout the history, protecting them against insurgent attacks.

Afghanistan's rural-urban migration has also been affected by internally displaced people and massive return of refugees and migrants mostly from Pakistan and Iran.

Although the current urban population is lower than the south Asian regional average of 32%, however, Afghanistan's urbanization rate is among the highest in the region. Its urban population is growing at 5 percent annually, is more than twice of the regional average.<sup>2</sup> If this pace continues, in the next 40 years 15 million people will be added to Afghanistan's urban population and in 2060 an estimated fifty percent of Afghanistan's population will be residing in cities.

Service delivery and infrastructural development have not kept pace with urban growth, that has caused the emergence of serious issues such as the rise of urban slums, degradation of environmental resources, traffic congestion and air pollution in big cities of Afghanistan. This paper discusses the main contributors and drivers of tremendous urban transition in Afghanistan.

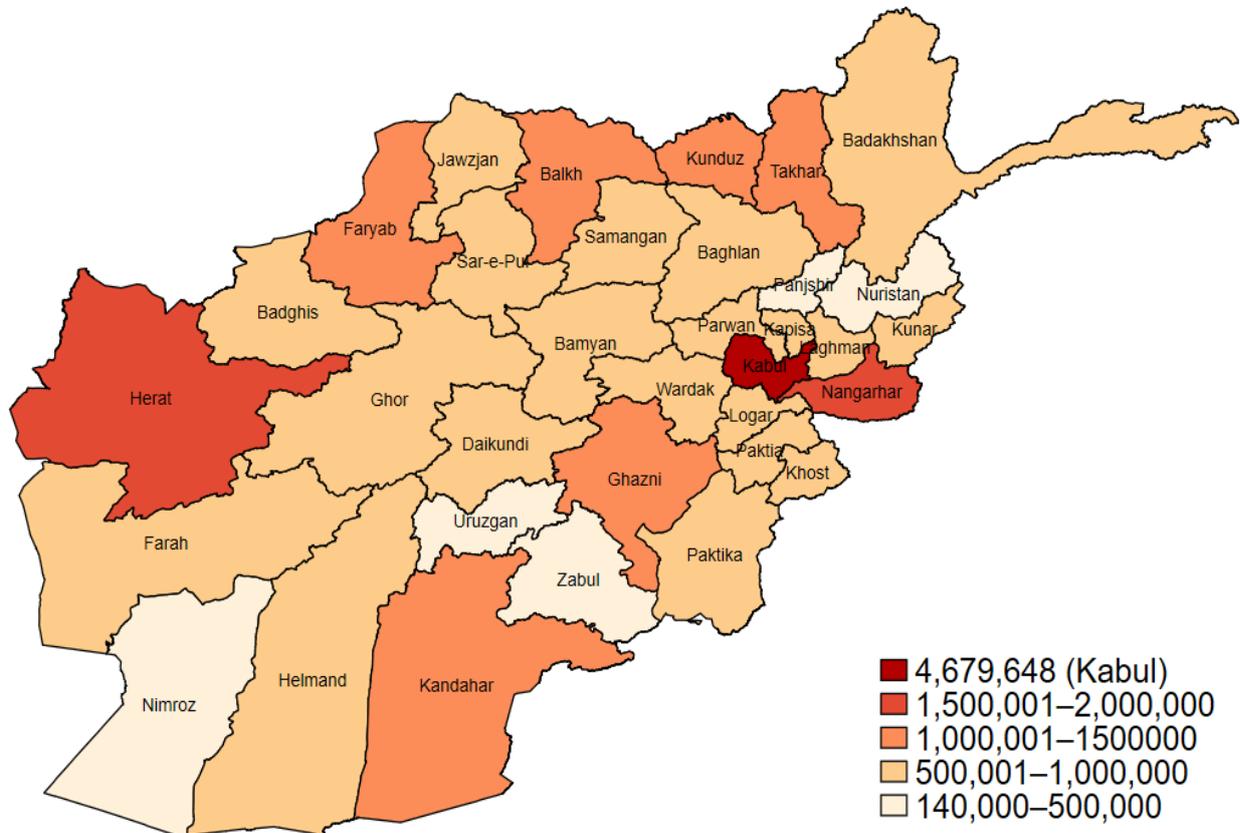
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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 'Country Urbanization Profiles', June 2017, p. 1. [https://www.unicef.org/health/files/Urban\\_profile\\_discussion\\_paper\\_vJune28.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/health/files/Urban_profile_discussion_paper_vJune28.pdf). (accessed 6 September 2017).

<sup>2</sup> The World Bank, 'Leveraging Urbanization in Afghanistan', June 2017, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/publication/leveraging-urbanization-afghanistan>. (accessed 10 September 2018).

## An Overview of Urbanization in Afghanistan

Figure 1. Total Estimated Population by Province 2018 (Total Number of Individuals), Central Statistics Organization



Afghanistan is still a predominately rural society with only an estimated 25 percent of the population living in cities. Yet, this is changing fast. In 1950, only 1 out of every 20 Afghans lived in cities whereas in 2014, one out of every four-five inhabitants lived in cities. If urbanization continues in this pace by 2060 one out of every two inhabitants – 50% of the population will live in cities.

Since 2001, the urban population of Afghanistan has increased from an estimated 20 percent to 27 percent of the total. In absolute numbers this represents an increase in urban population from 4.6 million in 2002 to 8.2 million in 2017.<sup>3</sup>

The urban transition in Afghanistan is impacted by three groups of migrants, volunteer rural-urban migrants, forced migrants or Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and exile migrants returning from the neighboring countries.

- Afghans move voluntarily to the cities from villages, in order to avail themselves of the job opportunities and gain better education since Afghanistan's history is characterized by a structural urban-rural divide. Urban centers have been hubs for administration,

<sup>3</sup> UNHABITAT, 'Afghanistan's Urban Future', <https://unhabitat.org/afghanistans-urban-future/> (accessed 20 September 2018).

market-driven methods of production, taxation, education, judiciary and reforms. This helped to create resentment among the rural population, which did not benefit from these developments. After the intervention of the international community and establishment of new government in Afghanistan in 2002, there was an influx of immigrants from villages into big cities such as Kabul, Herat and Balkh.

- Internally displaced persons (IDPs) or those who are forced to flee their home but remain within the country's borders,<sup>4</sup> are a large group of migrants that add to the urban population of Afghanistan. Since Afghan urban centers are seen as more secure than rural areas and the majority of them have been under control of the government, thus providing protection against insurgent attacks. According to the latest United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) data, about 2.9 million Afghans are "internally displaced", 22 percent of whom fled their homes in 2016 alone.<sup>5</sup> Estimates suggest that, on average, for every security incident (casualty) happening in a district 9 - 10 further individuals are forced into the pool of internally displaced Afghans.<sup>6</sup> According to the ALCS 2013-14, 48.1 percent of IDP households were living in urban centers.
- The massive return of refugees and migrants from Pakistan and Iran is another group contributing to the growth of urban population in Afghanistan. Since 2002, almost 6 million exile refugees returned from the neighboring countries. In 2016 alone, about 250 thousand undocumented migrants and 370 thousand registered refugees returned from Pakistan, and an additional 460 thousand undocumented migrants returned from Iran.<sup>7</sup> According to the ALCS 2013-14, 46.6 percent of returnee households from exile were living in urban centers at the time of the survey, against a national urban population rate of 24.1 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Afghanistan's urbanization is fostered by forced migration due to the protracted conflict as opposed to voluntary migration from rural areas and return of Afghan refugees from Pakistan and Iran since 2000.

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR, 'IDP Definition,' <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/250553/idp-definition> (accessed 10 December 2018).

<sup>5</sup> UNOCHA, '2018 Humanitarian need overview: Afghanistan.' p. 11. [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) (accessed 25 September 2018).

<sup>6</sup> The World Bank, 'Afghanistan Poverty Status Update', October 2015, <http://moec.gov.af/Content/files/Poverty%20Status%20Update%20Report%20-%20final%20english%203.pdf> (accessed 29 September 2018).

<sup>7</sup> UNHABITAT, '2015 AFGHANISTAN COUNTRY REPORT FOR HABITAT III', p. 15. <http://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/Afghanistan-Country-Report-Habitat-III-1.pdf> (accessed 20 September 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Central Statistics Organization of Afghanistan (CSO), 'Afghanistan's Living Conditions Survey 2016-17', June 2017, <https://washdata.org/sites/default/files/documents/reports/2018-07/Afghanistan%20ALCS%202016-17%20Analysis%20report.pdf> (accessed 10 September 2018).

Figure 2. Urban Transition in Afghanistan<sup>9</sup>

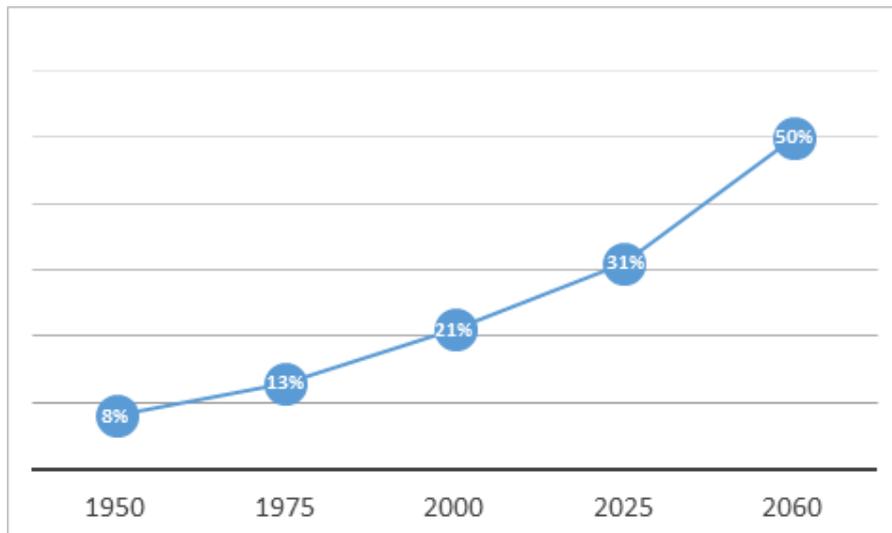
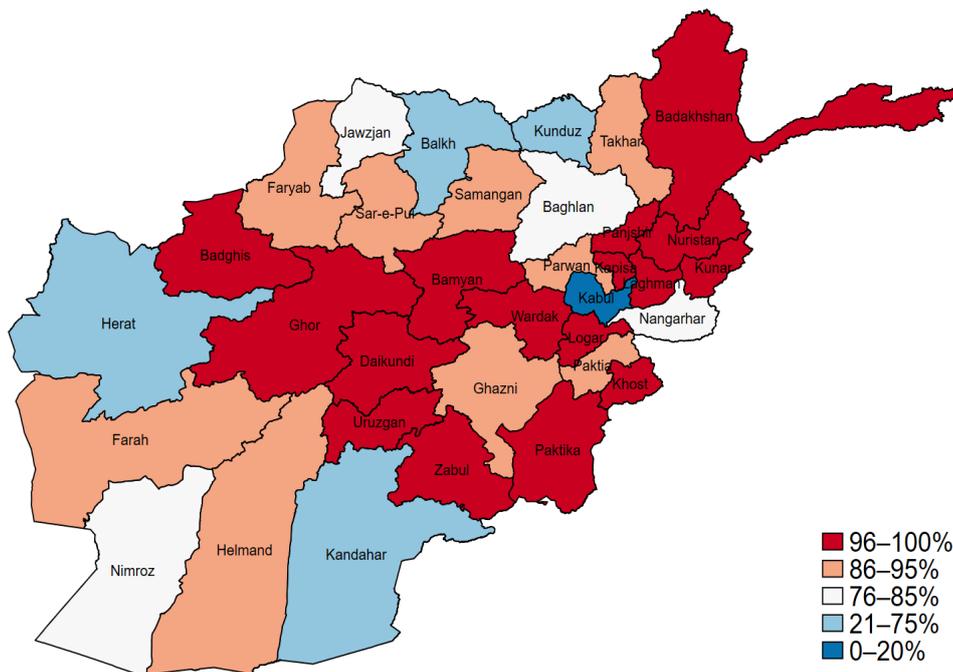


Figure 3. Proportion of Rural Population by Province 2017-18, Central Statistics Organization



Majority of rural-urban migrants tends to move to big cities such as Kabul, Herat, Qandahar and Balkh. While the current population of these cities are more than the urban infrastructure and prevailing capacity of these cities.

For instance, in Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan and a primate city accounting for over 50 percent of the urban population, the population has increased from 1.5 million in

<sup>9</sup> UNHABITAT, 'Afghanistan's Urban Future:', <https://unhabitat.org/afghanistans-urban-future/> (accessed 20 September 2018).

2001 to 4.9 million in 2018.<sup>10</sup> The infrastructure and facilities in Kabul city are designed for 700 thousand residents, while currently there resides more than 6 million people. The population of Kabul, which has increased dramatically from 1.5 million in 2001 to more than 6 million in 2017, marks Kabul as the fifth fastest growing city in the world where an estimated 70 percent of its residents live in informal and illegal settlements. As a result of uncontrolled urbanization, slums have emerged as common informal urban habitats in big cities of Afghanistan that suffer from insufficient housing, lack of hygiene and services. For instance, according to the report by UNHABITAT in 2017, only 32 percent of IDPs who settled in slums have access to electricity compared to 82 percent of urban population.<sup>11</sup> The Afghan Living Condition Survey 2016-17 reveals that 72.4 percent of the country's urban population lives in slums, informal or inadequate housing settlements.<sup>12</sup>

## Main Drivers

In Afghanistan, the economic push and pull factors (differences in wage and employment) of rural-urban migration are compounded by violence and insecurity, both security and economic considerations have pulled economic migrants and displaced populations towards urban centers, and particularly towards the capital city Kabul. Afghans move to the cities that are considered more secure, since historically big cities are controlled by the central government, while during the long history of conflicts rural areas have been home for anti-government elements.

The sectoral distribution of employment differs markedly between urban and rural areas, with agriculture more prominent in rural areas and services more prominent in cities. Informality and labor under-utilization are prevalent in the primary sector where the majority of rural residents are engaged with. Thus rural residents tend to move to cities to avail them better job opportunities.

The urban-rural gap in access to basic services has acted as a push factor for rural-urban migration in Afghanistan, people move to cities in search of benefiting urban services, health care, educational opportunities and higher standards of living.

Thus, from the rural perspective, there have been three important factors that have contributed to tremendous urban transition in Afghanistan. They are: 1. Rural insecurity, 2. Rural unemployment, 3. Economic drivers, including the lack of services in rural areas. I will address each of them below.

<sup>10</sup> EASO, 'EASO Country of Origin Information Report Afghanistan – Security Situation', p. 3, November 2016, [https://coi.easo.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/Afghanistan\\_security\\_report.pdf](https://coi.easo.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/Afghanistan_security_report.pdf) (accessed 29 September 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Central Statistics Organization of Afghanistan (CSO), 'Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2016–17', June 2017, <https://washdata.org/sites/default/files/documents/reports/2018-07/Afghanistan%20ALCS%202016-17%20Analysis%20report.pdf> (accessed 10 September 2018).

## 1. Rural Insecurity

Persistent wars and conflicts have been prevailing in the country during the last four decades. Afghan urban centers are seen as more secure than rural areas since their majority have been controlled by the central government, protecting them against insurgent attacks. That is the main reason why the major cities like Kabul, Herat and Balkh attract a large share of the IDPs. While in rural areas, where the majority of people live, Taliban, as well as other anti-government element (AGE) groups, maintain their power base and government power is more decentralized than in major cities.

The main security problems in big cities are high-profile attacks, targeted killings and kidnappings, while the security situation in rural areas, is more complicated. The Taliban, as well as other AGE groups, maintain their power base in rural areas and civilians are victims caught in cross-fire, aerial operations and land-mines or Improvised Explosive Device (IED) explosions. They also suffer attacks from Afghan local police (ALP) and pro-government militia (PGM).<sup>13</sup> Thus, insecurity and fragility of the security situation in rural Afghanistan stands to be one of the prominent push factors for Afghan's rural urban migration. People move to the cities, escaping from war and violence in rural areas where cities historically during the four decades of conflicts have remained comparatively stable. According to a Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report, as of January 2018 the Afghan government has control or influence only over 56% of its territory and according to the report the majority of the areas under control or influence of insurgents are rural areas.<sup>14</sup>

In 2017, 93% of displaced Afghans fled their homes due to conflict, in heavily conflict affected districts, the threat of repeated or intensified fighting has prompted many people to flee their homes in search of safer ground – typically urban – where access to services can be secured as well.<sup>15</sup> The displacement trend across Afghanistan's regions are changing with the variation in the geography of insecurity in the country. In 2012 and 2013, about one in three displaced individuals originated in the southwest region. In 2014 and 2015 an increasing number of IDPs originated from the northern, northeastern, and eastern provinces.<sup>16</sup>

This was when the northern region of the country was comparatively secure. Security threats and conflicts have risen in that region after 2014 and onwards with the emergence of Taliban and Islamic State militias in the northern and northeastern provinces of the country. The overall security situation deteriorated during 2015 since ANSF had to act independently without sufficient international support. Direct armed clashes and attacks intensified in the northern provinces of Baghlan, Faryab, Kunduz, Nangahar, Kunar as well as in Helmand and Uruzgan.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> EASO, 'EASO Country of Origin Information Report Afghanistan – Security Situation', p. 3, November 2016, [https://coi.easo.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/Afghanistan\\_security\\_report.pdf](https://coi.easo.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/Afghanistan_security_report.pdf) (accessed 29 September 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), 'Quarterly Report 2018', April 2018, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-04-30qr-section3-security.pdf> (accessed 28 September 2018).

<sup>15</sup> UNOCHA, '2018 Humanitarian need overview: Afghanistan,' p. 11, [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) (accessed 25 September 2018).

<sup>16</sup> The World Bank, 'Afghanistan Poverty Status Update: Risk in Progress', 2017 <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/publication/afghanistan-poverty-status-update-report-2017> (accessed 28 September 2018).

<sup>17</sup> EASO, 'EASO Country of Origin Information Report Afghanistan – Security Situation', November 2016, p. 26. [https://coi.easo.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/Afghanistan\\_security\\_report.pdf](https://coi.easo.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/Afghanistan_security_report.pdf) (accessed 29 September 2018).

The correlation between the security condition, and the number of IDPs during 2015-16 can be observed in the following maps on ISIS activity, security incidents per province and the number of IDPs per province of origin.

Figure 4. Islamic State Activity 2014-16<sup>18</sup>

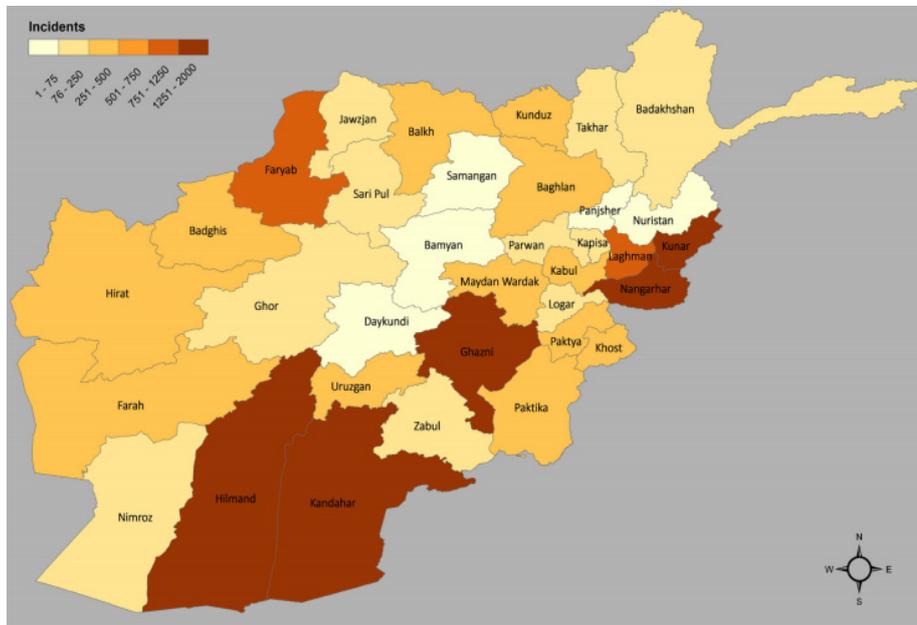
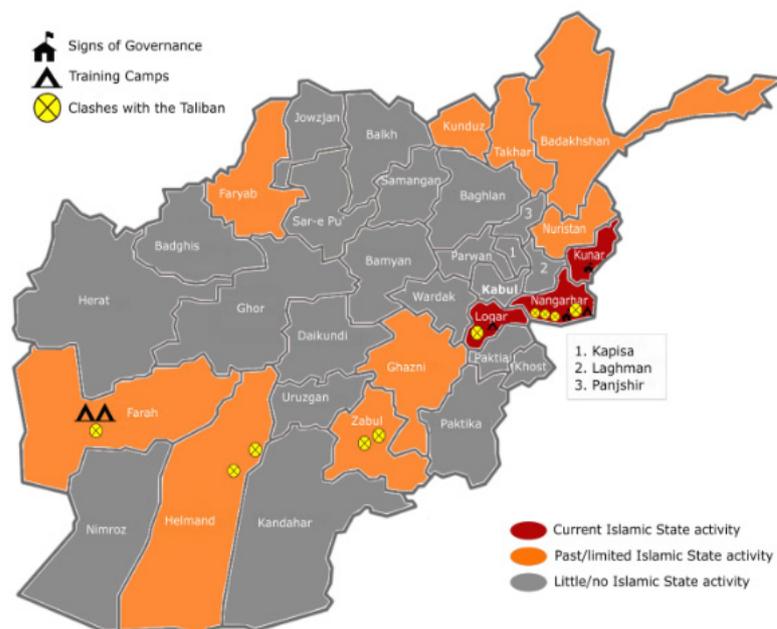


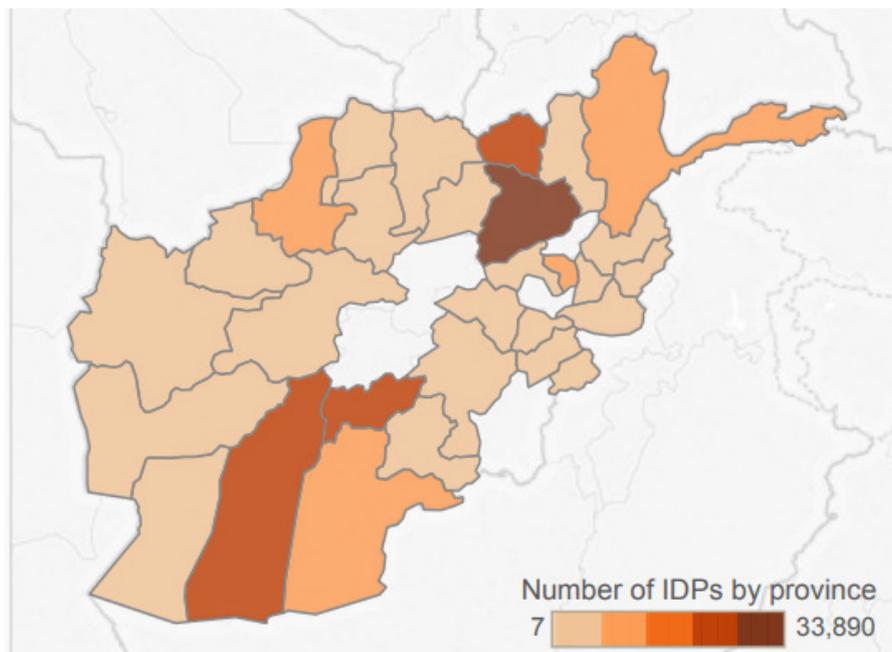
Figure 5. Security Incidents Per Province 2015-16<sup>19</sup>



<sup>18</sup> Middle East Institute, 'The Islamic State in Afghanistan', May 2016, [https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PF12\\_McNallyAmiral\\_ISISAfghan\\_web.pdf](https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PF12_McNallyAmiral_ISISAfghan_web.pdf) (accessed 28 September 2018).

<sup>19</sup> EASO, 'EASO Country of Origin Information Report Afghanistan – Security Situation', November 2016, p. 36. [https://coi.easo.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/Afghanistan\\_security\\_report.pdf](https://coi.easo.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/Afghanistan_security_report.pdf) (accessed 29 September 2018).

Figure 6. Number of IDPs by Province of Origin 2016<sup>20</sup>



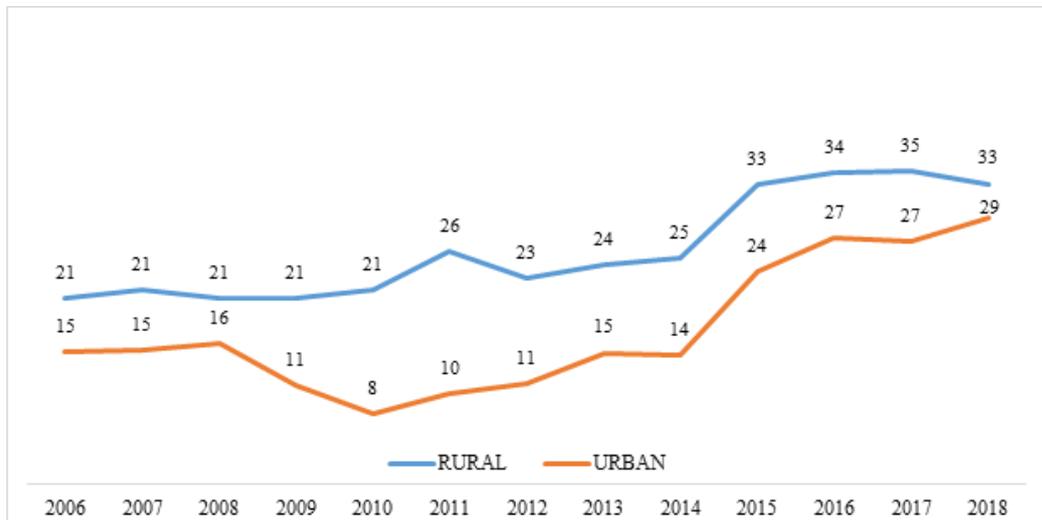
The Asia Foundation's annual survey of the Afghan<sup>21</sup> people, a repeated cross sectional study of more than 112,000 Afghan respondents from all 34 provinces of the country since 2004, shows that the percentage of respondents who reported insecurity and crime related issues as the biggest problem in their local area is higher in rural areas compared to respondents who reported it in the urban areas since 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 34.

<sup>21</sup> The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit, international development organization. A survey of the Afghan people is the Asia Foundation's annual public opinion survey in Afghanistan. The longest-running barometer of Afghan opinion, the Survey has gathered the view of more than 112,000 Afghans since 2004, and provides a longitudinal portrait of evolving public perception of security, the economy, governance and government services, elections, media, women's issues, and migration. <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/afghanistan-in-2018-a-survey-of-the-afghan-people/>

**Question:** What is the biggest problem in your local area? (percentage of insecurity and crime related responses)

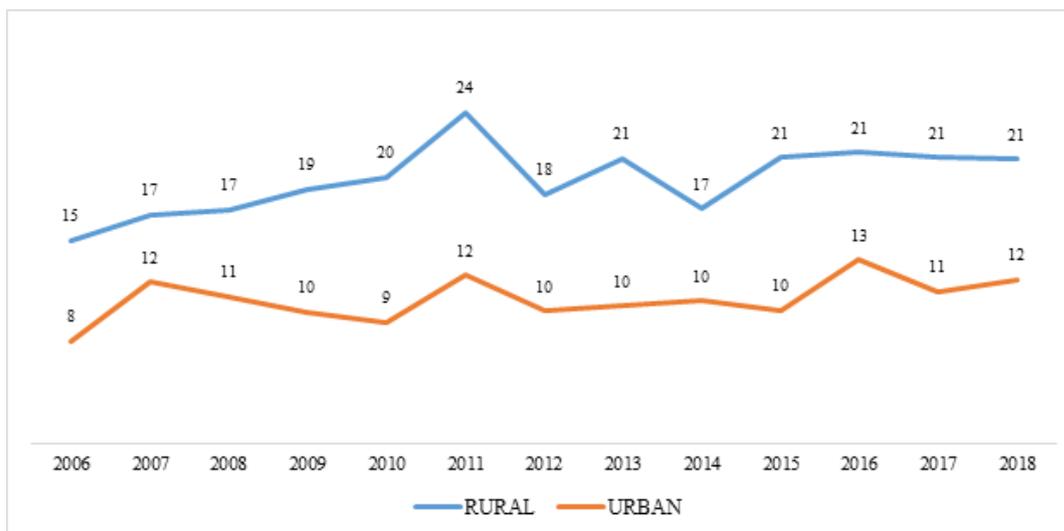
Figure 7. Biggest Problem in Local Area: Insecurity/Crime<sup>22</sup>



Moreover, according to the same survey, the experience of crime or violence has been higher in rural than urban areas. For instance, in 2011, 24 percent of rural respondents reported that they themselves or their family members have experienced crime or violence in the past one year, while the percentage is almost half in case of urban residents.

**Question:** Have you or has anyone in your family been a victim of violence or of some criminal act in your home or community in the past year (percentage of “yes” responses)?

Figure 8. Experience of Crime or Violence<sup>23</sup>



<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

## 2. Rural Unemployment and Other Economic Drivers

Afghanistan is predominantly rural and characterized by substantial differences in well-being between the urban and rural areas. Rural areas accommodate a large majority of the Afghan population and the highest concentration of poverty: four out of every five poor Afghans live in rural areas.<sup>24</sup>

Despite service sector-led growth during the last decades, agriculture remains the primary employment generating sector in Afghanistan. According to the Afghanistan Poverty Status Update, approximately forty percent of the Afghan labor force works in the agricultural sector, 31 percent in services, and ten percent in construction. The public sector is the second largest source of employment in urban areas (16 percent), followed in roughly equal shares by employment in construction, manufacturing, health and education. Despite the expansion of service delivery in rural areas, public employment and employment in health and education together represent less than ten percent of rural jobs.<sup>25</sup>

Agriculture in Afghanistan that nearly twenty million people rely on is highly vulnerable to climatic and weather related shocks. For instance, as a result of chronic drought, lack of rain and snowfall in 20 of the country's 34 provinces<sup>26</sup> the sector suffered a 45 percent fall in agricultural output as the drought has bitten.<sup>27</sup> In 2018, a total of 275,000 people have been displaced by drought in western Afghanistan - 52,000 more than the number uprooted by conflict this year - with over two million threatened by the effects of water shortages.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, employment in the country also has seasonal fluctuations, with different patterns for urban and rural populations. Employment conditions in rural areas are directly related to the farming season and show higher rates of not-gainfully employed persons in the low seasons of winter (December-March) 30 percent and 28 percent in (early) spring against the urban rate of 17 and 21 percent, respectively.<sup>29</sup>

The perception of unemployment as the biggest problem in local areas has shown an increasing trend in the period after 2012 according to the Survey of Afghan people. Economic growth contracted severely between 2012 and 2014 due to declining international spending, worsening conflict, and overall uncertainty stemming from the political and security transition. As a result, the percentage of people living under the poverty line increased from 35.8 percent in 2011-12 to 39.1 percent in 2013-14. With this 1.3 million additional

<sup>24</sup> The World Bank, 'Afghanistan Poverty Status Update', October 2015, p. 15, <http://moec.gov.af/Content/files/Poverty%20Status%20Update%20Report%20-%20final%20english%203.pdf> (accessed 29 September 2018).

<sup>25</sup> The World Bank, 'Afghanistan Poverty Status Update', October 2015, p. 35, <http://moec.gov.af/Content/files/Poverty%20Status%20Update%20Report%20-%20final%20english%203.pdf> (accessed 29 September 2018).

<sup>26</sup> Constable, *Pamela*, 'In western Afghanistan, villagers are fleeing not just war but drought,' The Washington Post, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/in-western-afghanistan-villagers-are-fleeing-not-just-war-but-drought/2018/09/24/0caa6b8a-bc39-11e8-8243-f3ae9c99658a\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.be82a72804a7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-western-afghanistan-villagers-are-fleeing-not-just-war-but-drought/2018/09/24/0caa6b8a-bc39-11e8-8243-f3ae9c99658a_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.be82a72804a7) (accessed 10 December 2018).

<sup>27</sup> VOA, 'UN: More Afghans Displaced by Drought Than Conflict,' <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-more-afghans-displaced-by-drought-than-conflict/4568060.html> (accessed 1 December 2018).

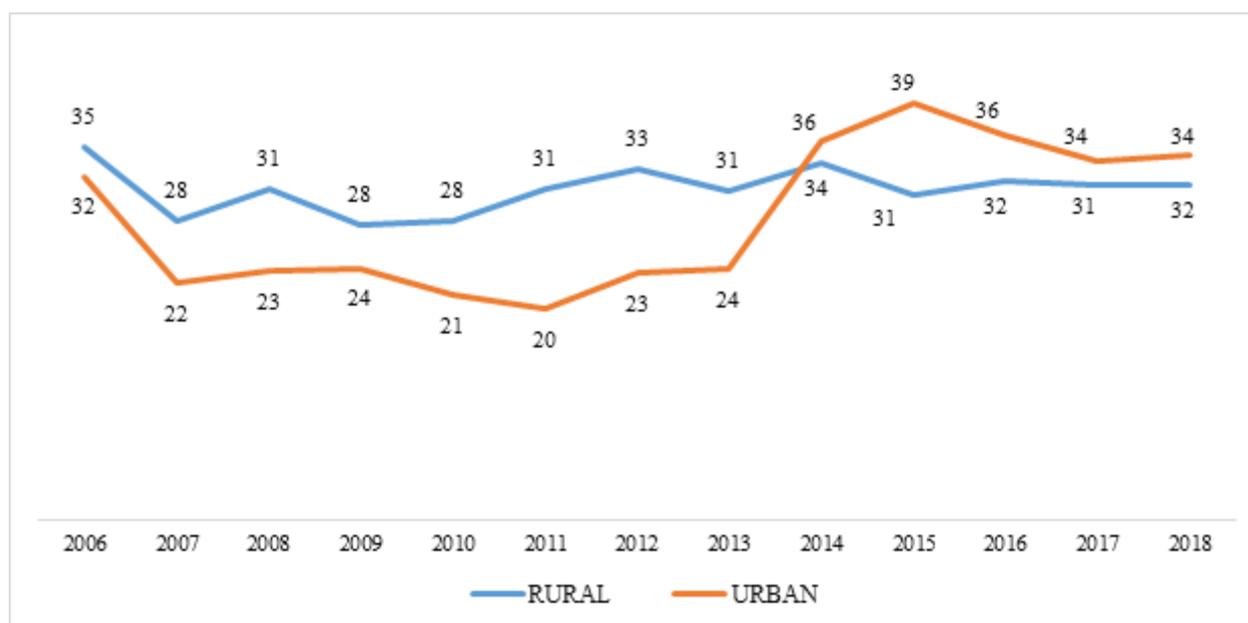
<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> CSO, 'Labor Force Characteristics,' <http://cso.gov.af/Content/files/Chapter4%20LABOUR%20FORCE%20CHARACTERISTICS.pdf> (accessed 28 November 2018).

Afghans fell into poverty.<sup>30</sup> The increase in poverty was particularly severe in areas that had benefited most from international spending during the pre-transition phase, notably rural areas. On the other hand, the perception of unemployment as the biggest problem locally has not shown variation in this period, since predominantly rural residents are engaged in agricultural activities and have not been dependent on international spending.

**Question:** *What is the biggest problem in your local area?*  
(percentage of lack of employment opportunities related responses)

Figure 9. *Biggest Problem in Local Area: Unemployment*<sup>31</sup>



However, the fact that equal unemployment rate in rural and urban areas does not necessarily depict equal standards of living or income level, since the majority of rural residents are engaged in agricultural activities where due to lack of modernization and reforms, low productivity and prevalence of disguised unemployment is dominant.

A joint study by the World Bank and the Ministry of Economy of Afghanistan has found that labor underutilization is prevalent in rural areas. According to this study, about 46 percent of the labor force in rural areas in Afghanistan is either unemployed or underemployed, compared to thirty percent in urban areas.<sup>32</sup> The poverty status update of the World Bank, indicates that urban underemployment is 23.4 percent and rural underemployment is 42.4 percent, while the same report indicates almost the same level of unemployment in rural and urban Afghanistan.

<sup>30</sup> The World Bank, 'Afghanistan Poverty Status Update', October 2015, p. 15, <http://moec.gov.af/Content/files/Poverty%20Status%20Update%20Report%20-%20final%20english%203.pdf> (accessed 29 September 2018).

<sup>31</sup> Author's elaboration based on The Asia Foundation's Survey of Afghan People data. <https://asiafoundation.org/where-we-work/afghanistan/survey/download-data-form/>

<sup>32</sup> The World Bank, 'Afghanistan Poverty Status Update', October 2015, <http://moec.gov.af/Content/files/Poverty%20Status%20Update%20Report%20-%20final%20english%203.pdf> (accessed 29 September 2018).

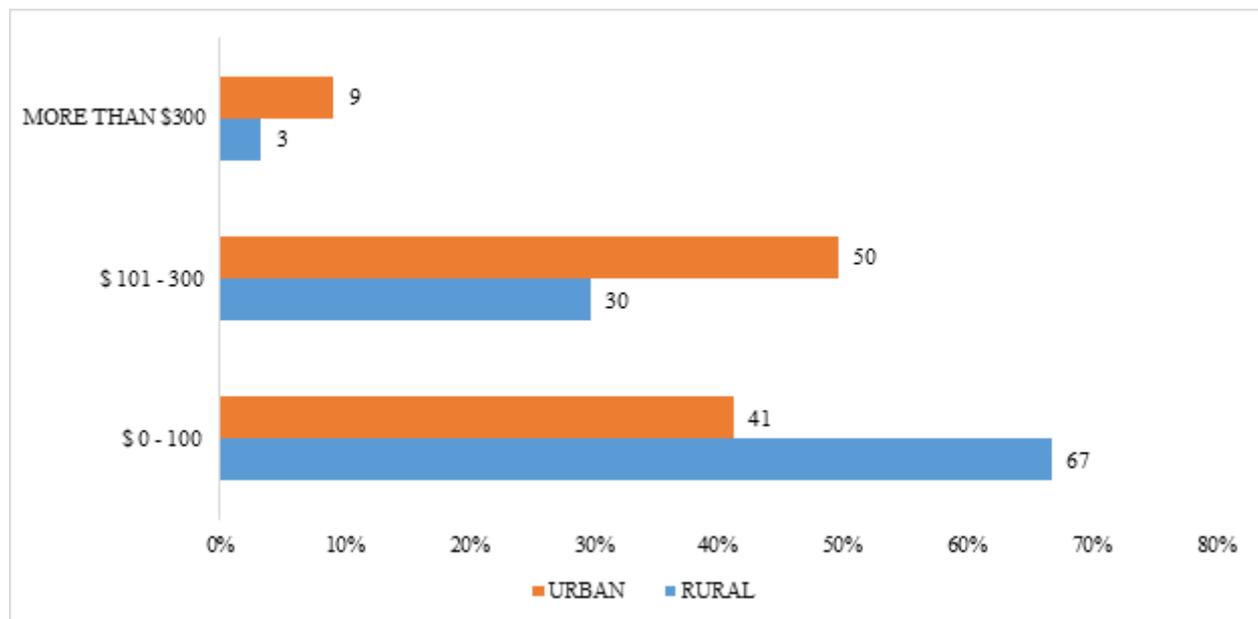
## 2.1 Households' Average Monthly Income (2018)

Due to the predominance of the primary sector and the prevalence of underemployment and low productivity in rural Afghanistan, the level of income is generally higher in urban areas compared to rural areas of the country. This difference is found in the Survey of Afghan People as well. In 2018, approximately 67 percent of the rural population's monthly income fell between \$ 0-100, while only 41% of the urban population's monthly income fell in this category.

On the other hand, 50 percent of urban population's monthly income fell between the category of \$ 100-300, while only 30 percent of rural population's monthly income fell in this category, 9 percent of urban respondent's reported their monthly income more than \$300 while only 3 percent of rural respondent's income fell in this category.

**Question:** For statistical purposes only, can you estimate your average monthly household income (percentage of responses)?

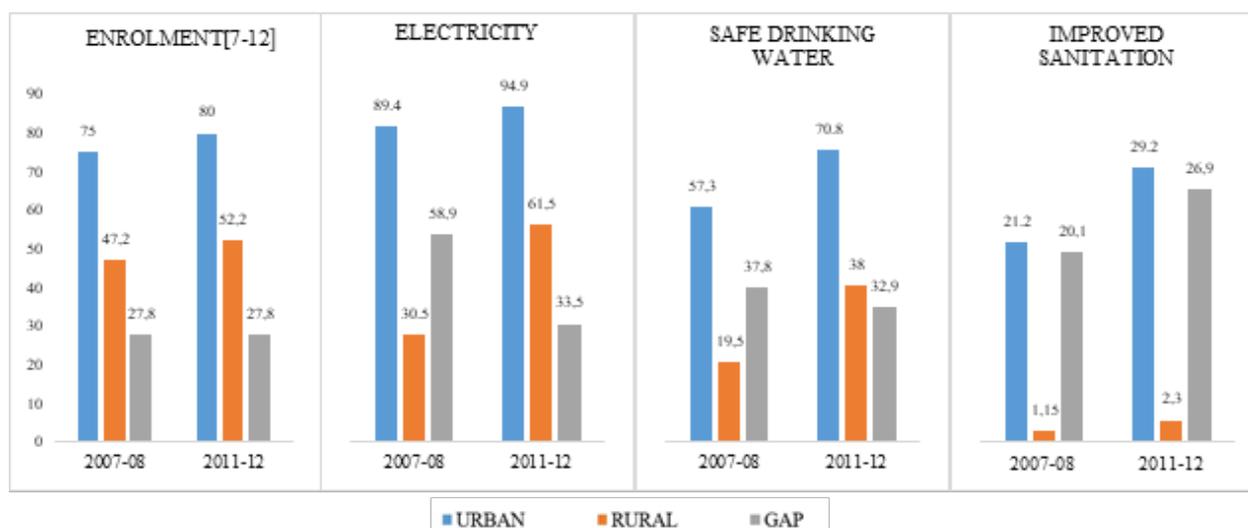
Figure 10. Household's Average Monthly Income<sup>33</sup>



## 3. Lack of Services in Rural Afghanistan

The urban-rural gap in access to basic services has prevailed in different ranges in Afghanistan. Such differences have acted as push factor for rural-urban migration in Afghanistan. People move to cities in search of benefiting urban services, health services, educational opportunities and higher standard of living.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

Figure 11. Trends in enrolment and access to basic services: Rural vs Urban<sup>34</sup>

### 3.1 Lack of Educational Opportunities

Afghanistan's education system has been devastated by four decades of sustained conflict. In the poorest and remote areas of the country, enrolment levels vary extensively and girls still lack equal access. According to the report of the World Bank, during 2007–12 school enrolment has been higher in urban areas than in rural areas. The gap between urban and rural areas has prevailed in access to basic services, such as electricity, safe drinking water and improved sanitation.

According to UNICEF, an estimated 3.7 million children are out-of-school in Afghanistan, 60 percent of them are girls.<sup>35</sup> Low girl enrolment can be explained in part by a lack of female teachers, shortage of schools and insufficient transportation especially in rural schools. Geographical barriers, especially in mountainous areas, also make it hard for children to reach the classroom. Once children do make it, they often receive lower quality of education because only 48 percent of their teachers have the minimum academic qualifications.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, once students' progress beyond primary education, there is a dearth of educational opportunities, particularly for children living in rural areas.<sup>37</sup> The findings of the Survey of Afghan People show that lack of educational opportunities like professional teachers, schools and vocational trainings have been far more severe problem in rural areas compared to urban regions.

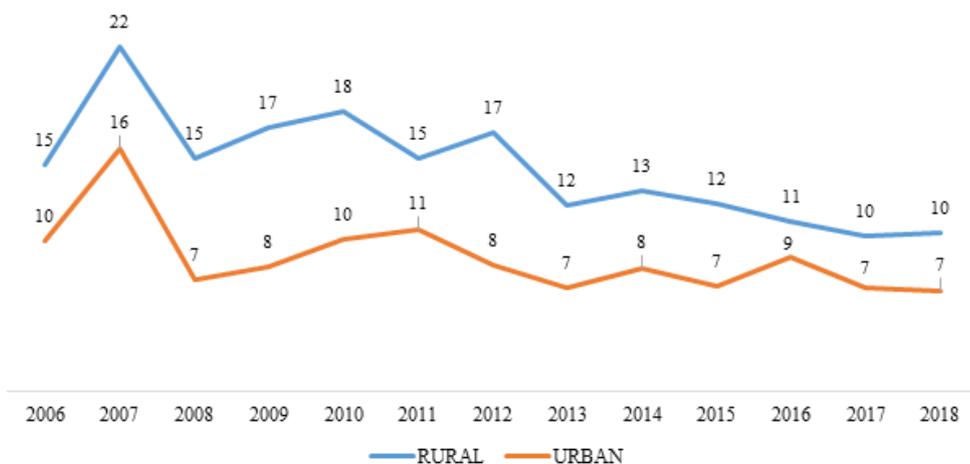
**Question:** *What is the biggest problem in your local area?*  
(Percentage of lack of educational opportunities related responses)

<sup>34</sup> The World Bank, 'Afghanistan Poverty Status Update', October 2015, p. 26. <http://moec.gov.af/Content/files/Pov>

<sup>35</sup> UNICEF Afghanistan, 'Education: Providing quality for all,' <https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/education> (accessed 09 December 2018).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> ReliefWeb, 'Providing alternative educational opportunities in rural Afghanistan,' <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/providing-alternative-educational-opportunities-rural-afghanistan> (accessed 08 December 2018).

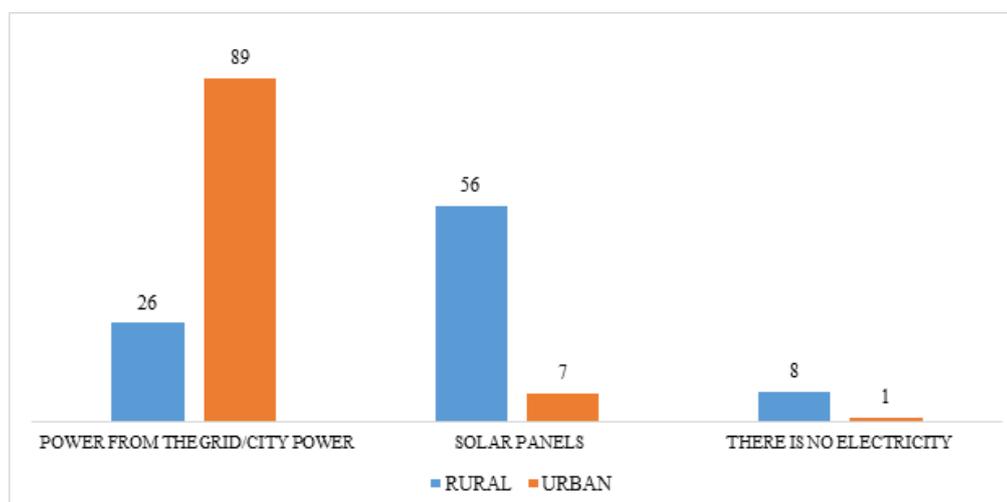
Figure 12. Lack of Educational Opportunities<sup>38</sup>

### 3.2 Electricity

Rural areas suffer lack of utilities, like electricity. The Asia Foundation's Survey of Afghan people shows that there is a remarkable gap in the access to electricity as a problem in local and urban areas.

More of rural resident's regard the lack of electricity as a major problem in their locality compared to urban population. Moreover, a World Bank report also points out the gap in access to electricity in rural and urban regions. According to this report, the gap between urban and rural areas in terms of access to electricity was 60 percent during 2007-8. Though this gap tended to close to some extent in the following years. However, the gap still exists between various regions.

**Question:** What is the main source of electricity supply in this household (percentage of responses)?

Figure 13. Main Source of Electricity<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Author's elaboration based on The Asia Foundation's Survey of Afghan People data. <https://asiafoundation.org/where-we-work/afghanistan/survey/download-data-form/>

<sup>39</sup> Authors elaboration based on The Asia Foundation's Survey of Afghan People data. <https://asiafoundation.org/where-we-work/afghanistan/survey/download-data-form/>

According to the Survey of Afghan People in 2018, urban and rural respondents differ significantly in their sources of electricity. Respondents in urban areas are more likely to rely on power from the grid (89.2 percent), while respondents in rural areas are more likely to rely on solar panels (56.0 percent). Rural Afghans are also more likely than urban residents to say there is no electricity in their area (7.7 percent vs. 1.2 percent).

In urban centers electricity is used for lighting, heating, cooling, and for operating appliances like computers, electronics and machinery while in rural Afghanistan solar panels are used mostly for lighting purposes only.

### 3.3 Access to Healthcare

Healthcare facilities, such as hospitals, clinics and professional doctors are limited in rural Afghanistan. According to the report by Save the Children International in remote and rural Afghanistan for every ten thousand residents only 6-7 trained health care workers are available, which is less than international standards. Standards set by the World Health Organization suggest at least 23 trained health workers for ten thousand residents.<sup>40</sup> Although the situation has improved in recent years, still in remote areas of the country due to insecurity, mountainous location and transportation problems provision of healthcare facilities has remained challenging.<sup>41</sup>

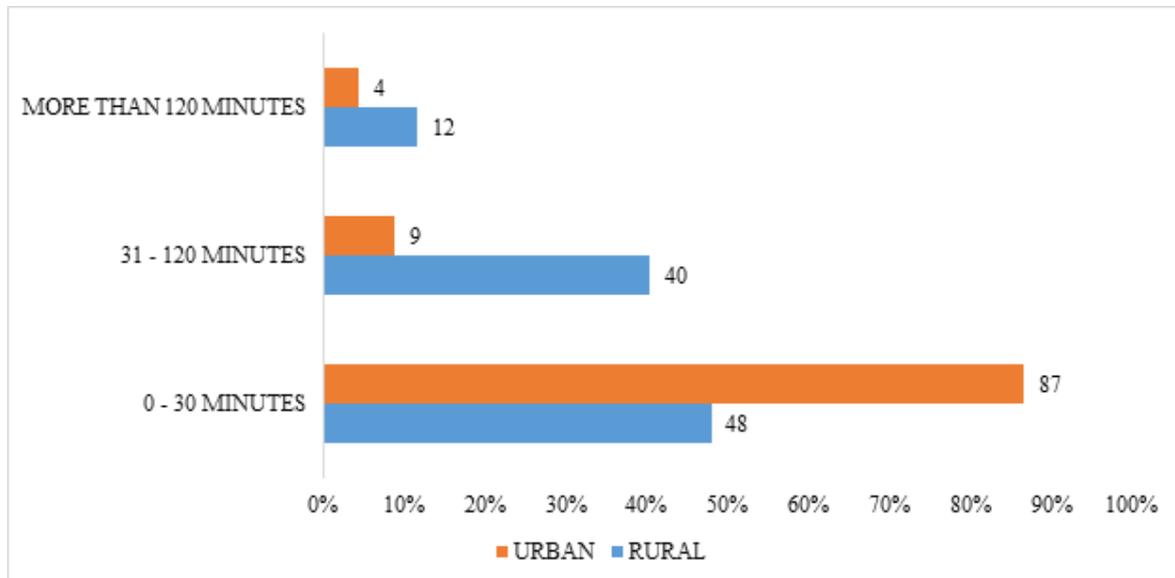
The survey of Afghan people in 2014 asked about the distance of nearest healthcare facilities and it shows that distance of nearest hospitals and healthcare facilities are understandably higher in rural areas. According to the survey, the proportion of rural respondents where nearest hospital or clinic is located between 1-30 minutes is only 48 percent compared to 87 percent of urban respondents. Forty percent of rural respondents fall under the category where it takes 31-60 minutes to reach nearest hospitals compared to only 9 percent of urban respondents. 12 percent of rural respondents say it takes more than 120 minutes whereas 4 percent of city dwellers say it takes more than 120 minutes to reach the nearest healthcare providing centers.

<sup>40</sup> VOA, 'هزاران نوزاد افغان در نخستین روز زندگی می میرد,' <https://www.darivoa.com/a/afghanistan-mother-and-health-condition/1859055.html> (accessed 1 December 2018).

<sup>41</sup> VOA, 'only 50 percent of afghan women have access to pregnancy related health services,' <https://www.darivoa.com/a/only-50-percent-of-afghan-women-have-access-to-pregnancy-related-health-services-/4081367.html> (accessed 4 December 2018).

**Question:** How many minutes would it take to reach the nearest working clinic or hospital from your home (percentage of responses)?

Figure 14. Distance from Nearest Hospital or Healthcare Center <sup>42</sup>



## Challenges of Urbanization in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, service delivery and infrastructure development has not kept pace with the country's rapid urban transition and this caused problems on the labor and housing markets and also led to rising crime. Afghan cities have grown haphazardly, informally, with limited access to affordable and quality basic services.

The strategic objective for urban development of the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) 2008-2013 was to "greatly improve the management of urban areas through a devolution of authority and responsibilities to municipalities in a way that improves urban infrastructure and services, reduces urban poverty and allows urban residents to live safe, healthy and productive lives and cities to grow and prosper."<sup>43</sup>

The urban sector in Afghanistan is guided by a range of activities that to varying degrees reflect the government's intention for urban development and management. The urban development central office that started functioning during 1989 was expanded to Ministry of Urban Development and Housing (MUDH) in 2005. It is responsible for not only developing policies of urban development, but also running the implementation and research process as well.<sup>44</sup> Led by MUDH, Deputy Ministry for Municipalities, the Afghanistan Independent Land Authority (AILA) and municipalities, the Urban National Priority Program is developed

<sup>42</sup> Author's elaboration based on The Asia Foundation's Survey of Afghan People data. <https://asiafoundation.org/where-we-work/afghanistan/survey/download-data-form/>

<sup>43</sup> UNHABITAT, 'State of Afghan Cities 2015,' p. 30. <https://unhabitat.org/books/soac2015/> (accessed 10 December 2018).

<sup>44</sup> Ministry of Urban Development and Housing, 'A brief History of MUDH,' <http://mudh.gov.af/395/history>, (accessed 20 December 2018).

to strengthen urban governance, ensure adequate housing and access to basic services and harness the urban economy and infrastructure.<sup>45</sup> According to the Ministry of Finance's National Priority Programs report<sup>46</sup>, the action plan and costing for Urban Development NPP have been prepared by MUDH and is being reviewed by the government to formulate realistic budget in coordination with donors.

However, the responsible authorities for urban development in Afghanistan has been regarded of being corrupt and unsuccessful in planning and implementation of urban development projects and spending developmental budget.<sup>47</sup> In December 2018, the minister for Urban Development and Housing was summoned by the Afghan parliament for failing to spend 70 percent of its developmental budget.<sup>48</sup>

In 2016, six officials of MUDH were suspended on corruption charges and the investigation was handed over to the Attorney General's Office (AGO), the individuals were accused of large scale corruption that include taking bribes in exchange for signatures on new housing projects, doling out apartments to high ranking government officials and their relatives and constructing sub-standard apartments in order to pocket ministry funds.<sup>49</sup>

In 2009, the mayor of Kabul was sentenced to four years in jail on corruption charges<sup>50</sup> and in 2018 the latest Kabul mayor was convicted of corruption by the parliament audit commission and requested to refer the case to the AGO,<sup>51</sup> subsequently in the following months the Kabul mayor resigned from his position.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, in order to create safe urban environment and tackle the problems caused by ever faster population growth in the capital of Afghanistan considering the concentrated economic activities & services provision, the Afghan Government established the Capital Region Independent Development Authority (CRIDA) as an independent budgetary unit in 2016.<sup>53</sup> According to this authority, the capital region of Afghanistan includes Kabul and surrounding provinces, and not only develops projects in Kabul city but also paves

<sup>45</sup> Ministry of Finance, 'National Priority Programs', p.11. <http://policymof.gov.af/home/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/JCMB-National-Priority-Programs-1.pdf> (accessed 9 January 2019).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Radio Azadi, 'وزارت شهر سازی 68 درصد بودجه انکشافی اش را مصرف کرده است', <https://da.azadiradio.com/a/24489034.html> (accessed 22 December 2018).

<sup>48</sup> Tolonews, 'MPs Summon Govt Ministers Over Development Budget,' 24 December 2018, <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/budget/mps-summon-govt-ministers-over-development-budget> (accessed 24 December 2018).

<sup>49</sup> Tolonews, 'Ghani Suspends Six Officials From Ministry of Urban Development on Corruption Charges,' 29 May 2015, <http://prod.tolonews.com/afghanistan/ghani-suspends-six-officials-ministry-urban-development-corruption-charges> (accessed 8 January 2019).

<sup>50</sup> Financial Times, 'Kabul Mayor Convicted For Corruption,' 8 December 2009, <https://www.ft.com/content/678a75c6-e368-11de-8d36-00144feab49a> (accessed 8 January 2019).

<sup>51</sup> 'Acting Mayor of Kabul to be Referred to AGO Over Corruption Charges,' Ariana News, 5 August 2018, <https://ariananews.af/acting-mayor-of-kabul-to-be-referred-to-ago-over-corruption-charges/> (accessed 8 January 2019).

<sup>52</sup> 'Kabul Mayor Abdullah Habibzai Resigns', The Khama Press News Agency, 29 August 2018, <http://www.khama.com/kabul-mayor-abdullah-habibzai-resigns-05850/> (accessed 9 January 2019)

<sup>53</sup> Capital Region Independent Development Authority, 'About CRIDA,' <http://www.crida.gov.af/> (accessed 24 December 2018).

the way for the development of the Capital Region<sup>54</sup> that includes Kabul and four other surrounding provinces applying a broader vision. However, the efforts seem to have little or no impact in mitigating the urban population pressure in big cities, especially in Kabul.

Thus, due to insufficient national policy and regulations to guide urban development, limited realistic and grounded spatial plans, and weak municipal governance it has not been possible to ensure equitable service delivery and effective management of the inevitable urbanization transition facing the country. Particularly the rapid urban growth has caused the emergence of the following problems in big cities:

## Rise of Urban Slums

The majority of rural displaced population tend to move to big cities such as Kabul, Herat, Qandahar and Balkh. While the current population of these cities is already higher than the urban infrastructure and prevailing capacity of service delivery. For instance, the infrastructure and facilities in Kabul is designed for 700 thousand residents, where its population has increased to nearly 5 million in 2016, in other words more than 50 percent of Afghanistan's urban population reside in the capital, Kabul.<sup>55</sup>

Lack of prioritization of urban planning, lack of budget for the urban sector and urban management, and inefficiency of the government have caused the growth of informal settlements in big cities that are densely populated areas lacking proper housing, hygiene, sanitation and urban services. For instance, 80 percent of the population of Kabul is now living in informal areas, which account for 69 percent of the entire city.<sup>56</sup> Herat, a city in western Afghanistan, is the current destination for a large number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) leaving conflict and drought affected areas in northern Herat Province, Badghis Province and Ghor Province where lack of basic needs and availability of food are the main concerns among them.<sup>57</sup> The majority (86 percent) of the urban housing stock in Afghanistan can be classified as 'slum'.<sup>58</sup> For instance, according to the report by UNHABITAT in 2017, only 32 percent of IDPs that settled in slums have access to electricity compared to 82 percent of urban population.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>54</sup> The capital region of Afghanistan comprises the Kabul, Wardak, Logar, Kapisa and Parwan Provinces. The total area of the capital region is 7,735 km<sup>2</sup>. In order to create safe urban environment and tackle the problems caused by ever increasing population growth in the capital of Afghanistan Dehsabz-Barikab City Development Authority (DCDA) has been promoted to Capital Region Independent Development Authority (CRIDA) as per the Presidential Decree No. 44 dated 23rd June 2016 and based on Cabinet Resolution No. 3 dated 30th April 2016 of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. <http://www.crida.gov.af/>

<sup>55</sup> 'Kabul – the fifth fastest growing city in the world – is bursting at the seams,' The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/dec/11/kabul-afghanistan-fifth-fastest-growing-city-world-rapid-urbanisation> (accessed 20 November 2018).

<sup>56</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 'Country Urbanization Profiles: June 2017, p. 17, [https://www.unicef.org/health/files/Urban\\_profile\\_discussion\\_paper\\_vJune28.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/health/files/Urban_profile_discussion_paper_vJune28.pdf) (accessed 6 September 2018).

<sup>57</sup> European Commission COPERNICUS, 'Humanitarian crisis in Herat, Afghanistan,' <https://emergency.copernicus.eu/mapping/list-of-components/EMSR296> (accessed 8 November 2018).

<sup>58</sup> UNHABITAT, 'State of Afghan Cities 2015,' page 86 <https://unhabitat.org/books/soac2015/> (accessed December 10, 2018) as per the UN-Habitat definition: lacking one or more of the following basic elements of adequate housing: (i) access to a safe water source, (ii) improved sanitation, (iii) durable, structurally sound housing materials, (iv) adequate living space (v) security of tenure.

<sup>59</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 'Country Urbanization Profiles: June 2017', p. 17. [https://www.unicef.org/health/files/Urban\\_profile\\_discussion\\_paper\\_vJune28.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/health/files/Urban_profile_discussion_paper_vJune28.pdf). (accessed 6 September 2018).

## Climate Change

Recent climate change modelling for Afghanistan projects a temperature increase of at least 1.1 degrees by 2050.<sup>60</sup> Among the cities that may see the highest increase in temperature are Pul-i- Khumri, Taloqan and Aybak. In addition to possible water shortages, such increases may affect patterns of precipitation and result in flooding and landslides or heat-waves.

Afghanistan's National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA) in June 2018 warned that underground water reserves in Kabul will dry up within the next ten years amidst increasing demand and use of water in the capital city.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, according to the World Resource Institute report on depletion of surface water, Afghanistan will face extremely high water stress by 2040. This is highly likely because demand for water is to surge in the next few decades due to rapidly growing populations that will drive increased consumption by people, farms, companies and peoples' movement to cities that will further strain supplies.<sup>62</sup>

## Air Pollution

It is estimated that 60 percent of the urban population in Afghan cities is exposed to elevated concentrations of particulates, nitrous oxides and sulphur dioxide as a result of vehicle and generator emissions, as well as domestic heating and uncontrolled emissions from brick kilns and other sources.<sup>63</sup> The operation of small-scale industry and workshops in crowded residential areas further affects air quality, as does the loss of open green spaces in many areas while public green space accounts for less than 2 percent of land in all three major Afghan cities.<sup>64</sup> It is generally the poorest members of the urban population that bear the brunt of continuing environmental degradation, which might affect their ability to subsist in the city.

## Traffic Congestion

While there have been significant investments in urban roads, this has done little to reduce congestion in the absence of effective controls on the registration of new vehicles. Kabul currently has only one mode of public transportation as a system, which is The Millie Bus Service (National Bus Service). The first and foremost cause of traffic congestion is the insufficiency of transportation infrastructure such as railways, expressways, subways, streets, parking lots, terminals, stations, stops, sidewalks, traffic lights, traffic monitoring devices, and traffic signs. The rate of vehicles newly entering the city is greater than the growth of

<sup>60</sup> UNHABITAT, '2015 AFGHANISTAN COUNTRY REPORT FOR HABITAT III', p. 15, <http://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/Afghanistan-Country-Report-Habitat-III-1.pdf> (accessed 20 September 2018).

<sup>61</sup> Tolonews, 'The ANDMA statistics show Kabul has 213,000 wells and that the city uses 32 billion cubic meters of water every year,' 13 July 2018, <http://prod.tolonews.com/afghanistan/kabul%E2%80%99s-underground-water-dry-within-years-official> (accessed 20 September 2018).

<sup>62</sup> A. Maddocks, R. Samuel Young and P. Reig, 'Ranking the World's Most Water-Stressed Countries in 2040,' <https://www.wri.org/blog/2015/08/ranking-world-s-most-water-stressed-countries-2040> (accessed 1 December 2018).

<sup>63</sup> UNHABITAT, '2015 AFGHANISTAN COUNTRY REPORT FOR HABITAT III', p. 17, <http://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/Afghanistan-Country-Report-Habitat-III-1.pdf> (accessed 20 September 2018).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

newly constructed transportation infrastructure.<sup>65</sup> Added to this, the closure of vital routes through the center of major cities (Kabul is but one example) for reasons of security and the poor management of traffic has contributed to traffic congestion in many cases.

## Conclusion

Afghanistan is one of the fastest urbanizing countries in the world where the main drivers of this trend are the economic factors compounded by insecurity and violence in rural areas. Its history is characterized by a structural urban-rural divide. Urban centers have been hubs for administration, market-driven methods of production, taxation, education, judiciary and reforms. Afghan urban centers are seen as more secure than rural areas and the majority of them have been controlled by the government throughout the country's history, protecting them against insurgent attacks.

The country's rural-urban migration has been affected by groups searching for home in the cities, namely repatriating refugees, IDPs and volunteer migrants.

From the rural perspective three important factors, rural insecurity, rural unemployment and lack of services in rural areas are the main drivers of urban expansion in the country. Insecurity and fragility of the security situation in rural Afghanistan stands to be one of the prominent push factors for Afghan's rural-urban migration. People move to the cities, escaping from war and violence in rural areas where cities historically during the four decades of conflicts have remained comparatively peaceful.

The sectoral distribution of employment differs markedly between urban and rural areas, with agriculture more prominent in rural areas and services more prominent in cities. Informality and labor under-utilization are prevalent in rural areas. Underemployment and low income generation, informality and labor underutilization in rural areas have all put forward an economic push factor to rural-urban migration in Afghanistan. The urban-rural gap in access to basic services have prevailed to different extent in Afghanistan. Such differences in access to basic services have acted as a push factor for rural-urban migration in Afghanistan. People move to cities in search of benefiting urban services, health services, educational opportunities and higher standards of living.

Infrastructure development and service delivery has not kept pace with the country's rapid urban transition. This has caused the rise in urban slums, air pollution, traffic congestion, climate changes that pose serious threat to sustainability of resources in urban areas.

## Policy Recommendations

Managing the increasing trend of urbanization in Afghanistan requires comprehensive and long term urban development initiatives. They need to equally cover urban and rural locations to decrease the trend of urban transition.

<sup>65</sup> Sadaat, Sayed Abdul Rahman and Nsenda Lukumwena, 'Traffic Congestion Problem and Possible Solution in Kabul City,' World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology, International Journal of Transport and Vehicle Engineering, 2018, p. 132, <https://waset.org/publications/10008829/traffic-congestion-problem-and-possible-solution-in-kabul-city> (accessed 1 November 2018).

- In order to slow down the pressure of rural-urban migration, educational facilities need to be expanded in the rural areas such as schools, vocational training institutions, as well as basic services such as healthcare, electricity provision, sanitation and hygiene measures should be provided in rural Afghanistan.
- Since agriculture is the main income generating sector in rural Afghanistan, thus agricultural development programs such as improvised irrigation system, modern cultivation and farming techniques and tools need to be provided by the central government to slow down the pace of economic migration.
- There is more than enough land in cities to accommodate all urban population growth for the coming decade. Comprehensive housing projects should be expanded in Kabul and other big cities of Afghanistan to provide adequate standards of living to residents in informal settlements.
- Sustainable and effective sanitation solutions need improved infrastructure at the municipal level and also household level interventions to improve health and reduce negative environmental impact.
- In order to manage severe traffic congestion, the government and municipalities should develop plans to upgrade public transportation networks, improve traffic management and improve pedestrian safety through improving roads and sidewalks.
- To tackle food and water security for the growing urban population, and promoting sustainable growth of cities that upgrades rather than degrades urban and rural ecosystems, strategic and comprehensive urban planning is needed.
- Fostering inclusive, safe and prosperous cities requires stronger urban institutions and municipal governance, the agencies responsible for urban development such as MUDH, CRIDA and municipalities should be strengthened in terms of capacity and operational ability.
- Improved coordination between municipalities responsible for urban governance and the agencies responsible for environment, agriculture and water supply should be promoted to increase food and water security as well as the conservation of natural resources.
- Proper measures need to be taken to ensure sustainability of water resources since growing cities might in the future compete for water resources with planned extractive industries, which may in turn affect agricultural production in adjoining cities.
- Integrated policies to improve the lives of both urban and rural dwellers are needed, strengthening the linkages between urban and rural areas and building on their existing economic, social and environmental ties.
- To ensure that the benefits of urbanization are shared and that no one is left behind, policies to manage urban growth need to ensure access to infrastructure and social services for all, focusing on the needs of the urban poor and other vulnerable groups for housing, education, health care, decent work and a safe environment.

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