



Global Migration POLICY BRIEF #2

Rocks and Hard Places: Where Will All The Afghans Go?

Adam Rodriques and Alessandro Monsutti,
Graduate Institute of International and
Development Studies, Geneva

On just about every level — governmental, military, civilian, local, international, and many others — the discourse surrounding the situation in Afghanistan remains focused on military security: who is shooting at whom, when and where, and with what results. Occasionally, other facets of security creep into the discussion: human security, perhaps, in the context of how Afghans mobilize social ties in order to cope with their country's present and future. In the winter, environmental security might be mentioned briefly after a reporter visits the lethally cold refugee camps in and around Kabul. Even in these cases, though, the discussion quickly shifts back to military security.

Completely neglected, we argue, is the concept of *demographic security*. By “demographic security,” we mean threats to the lives and livelihoods of a population that stem from the most basic characteristics of that population — namely, how many people, who they are, and where they live. The thrust of our argument is simple: even if the questions of military security in Afghanistan are solved — itself an unlikely proposition in the immediate future — the lives of ordinary Afghans will improve little, considering the

enormous and essentially intractable demographic predicament facing the country. And since demographics change on a generational, rather than political, time scale, any solutions to the demographic concerns outlined below will be slow in coming.

The military security facet of the situation in Afghanistan has been given much focus while another dimension has been completely neglected: the demographic security dimension.

- Demographic security is understood as threats to the lives and livelihoods of a population that stem from the most basic characteristics of that population – namely, how many people, who they are and where they live.

This policy brief argues that even if the questions of military security in Afghanistan are solved, the lives of ordinary Afghans will improve little, considering the enormous and essentially intractable demographic predicament facing the country.

It is hard to understand why the population crisis facing Afghanistan has received so little attention. The country, as every researcher can recite by heart, has not conducted a census since the 1970s, but most estimates put the current population between 25 and 35 million people. Life for these millions of people is not easy. Death is always lurking for young Afghans (an infant mortality rate of 121.63 per 100,000 live births in 2012, highest in the world), old Afghans (life expectancy at birth: 49.72 years, fifth-lowest in the world), and every Afghan in between (overall death rate: 14.59 per 1,000 people per year, seventh-highest in the world). Despite very impressive recent growth largely fed by foreign aid and investment, Afghanistan's per-capita gross domestic product (GDP) is the fifth-lowest in the world, at US\$1'000. Official unemployment is 35 %, good for 182nd out of 222 countries, although underemployment is much higher than that (CIA World Factbook, 2012).



Ghazni Province, a school under construction where teaching already takes place. October 1995 (Photo courtesy of A. Monsutti)

These last two numbers are unlikely to improve in the near future; in fact, they will probably get worse. Thanks to the world's 13th-highest birth rate (39.3 births per 1,000 people per year), the median age in Afghanistan is a mere 17.9 years old, with a staggering 43.6 % of the population under the age of 14 and 64.8 % under 24 (CIA World Factbook, 2012). Unemployment is an enormous problem in Afghanistan today, and *half of the country's population is still in grade school*. These children are getting better

educations than their parents did, but as the international presence begins to wind down, it is far from clear how they will be able to use that education productively. The potential impacts of this demographic time bomb will be discussed later on in this policy brief.

It would be one thing if Afghanistan's demographic predicament afflicted different areas of the country to different degrees — if so, internal migration could perhaps serve as a means to ameliorate the situation. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Rural and urban Afghans alike face different, but equally imposing, sets of demographic challenges. Starting in the countryside, the overwhelming majority of the population (78 % of all Afghans, according to the CIA World Factbook) works in agriculture. Initially, this might not seem like a problem. Afghanistan is not a small country, being almost the same

size as Germany and Poland combined. However, only 12.13 % of its land area is arable, and only 5 % is irrigated (CIA World Factbook, 2012). As a result, says development expert and Afghanistan scholar Chris Johnson, when calculated on the basis of people per square kilometre of cultivable land, many regions of rural Afghanistan have a greater density than that of Bangladesh (Johnson 2000).

Making matters worse for rural Afghans, what little good farmland there is does not yield much produce. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, Afghan farmers harvested an average of 1.660 metric

tonnes of wheat per hectare of land in 2011; by comparison, average wheat yield was 2.469 MT/ha in Iran, 2.718 in Pakistan, and 6.818 in the United States (World Bank 2011). Despite the fact that over three-quarters of its population works in agriculture, Afghanistan imported some US\$830m of produce in 2007, a figure that has probably risen since then thanks to severe droughts across much of the country. The one crop that carries the potential for real profitability, opium, is outlawed and (at

least in some parts of the country) stigmatized.

Despite the difficulty of subsistence farming, let alone producing enough to sell anything for a profit, many rural Afghans simply do not have better options. In 2011, even after ten years of heavy international investment in the country's education infrastructure, the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) estimated the literacy rate for Afghans over the age of 15 at a mere 39 %, and an even more alarming 13 % for women (UNICEF 2011). Linkages between rural villages and (comparatively) urban areas are generally quite poor throughout the country, with the result that Afghan villagers often find themselves forced to choose between living with family and earning a reasonable income. In addition, the poor quality of the transportation infrastructure makes it difficult, if not impossible, for farmers to transport fruits and vegetables to profitable city markets before they spoil.

Given this rather bleak picture of life in rural Afghanistan, it should not be surprising that Afghans have been moving *en masse* to the cities. Such a trend is by no means a recent development, but has become spectacularly pronounced after the massive wave of repatriation following the fall of the Taliban in late 2001. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Afghanistan urban population increased by an average of 5.4 % per year from 2005-2010, the fourth-highest rate in the world. Admittedly, the baseline for these increases was rather low, and as a result the urban share of Afghanistan's population in 2011 was still only 25 % (174th in the world) (World Bank 2011). Regardless of the absolute numbers, though, urbanization at the rate that Afghanistan has been experiencing represents a crucial challenge for policy-makers, urban planners, and ordinary people.

By just about every indication, it is a challenge that Afghanistan is not equipped to meet. This paper will focus on the situation in Kabul in order to illustrate this point, since it is by far the country's largest city. Since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, Kabul has been a magnet for internal migration, thanks in no small part to the attraction of jobs in, and salaries from, international organizations. Habibzai, Habibzai, and Sun estimate that Kabul's population more than doubled in the span of 11 years, ballooning from 1.78 million people in 1999 to 3.79 million

in 2010 (Habibzai, Habibzai, and Sun 2010, 5; hereafter referred to as HHS). Kabul's mayor, Muhammad Yunus Nawandish, estimated in 2012 that the city's population had grown to five million inhabitants (Author's interview, 2012; see also Watanabe 2010). In a 2010 report, Oxfam put the city's population at six million people, which would represent roughly 20 % of all people in the country (Vidal 2010). If we accept the HHS study's conservative population figure, which is much more in line with generally-accepted figures than the Oxfam estimate, Kabul city in 2010 had a population density of 26'900 people/km², roughly three times the density of New York City. Moreover, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that approximately 70% of Kabul city consists of informal settlements, which have developed organically, outside of any conscious attempts at urban planning. UNHCR further concludes that 60-80% of the residents in these settlements are returnees (Author's interview, 2012).¹

Despite possessing more wealth and better infrastructure than any other Afghan city, Kabul has proven simply unable to cope with the demands of its soaring population. Many of the reasons for this stem directly from the city's physical and geographical characteristics. A 2011 report found that only 20% of the city's population had access to potable water, largely because most of the remaining 80% live in the unplanned settlements mentioned above, which are unconnected to municipal infrastructure (Gulf News 2011). The mountains which bisect the city center severely limit the possibilities for development of transportation infrastructure, since building major thoroughfares under or over the mountains could be extremely costly. Kabul sits in a bowl-like depression, which traps air pollution and minimizes winds that could clear it (see below). Finally, lurking in the background, is the Chaman Fault, an active tectonic boundary that passes within a geologic hair's breadth of downtown Kabul. Eighty years ago, slippage along the Chaman Fault produced the catastrophic 1935 Quetta earthquake, which killed as many as 50'000 people in what is today the capital of Pakistan's Baluchistan Province.²

What makes these physical characteristics into threats to demographic security is Kabul's booming population. According to the United Nations Integrated Regional

Information Network (IRIN), there were 1'224'000 vehicles in Kabul in 2010, with as many as 8,000 new vehicles being registered every month—all trying to use a street grid “designed for 25,000-35,000 cars” (Habibzai, Habibzai, and Sun 2010, 9). The emissions from these vehicles, many of which are in poor condition and/or were built before the advent of modern emissions technology, mix with the smoke from Afghanistan’s ubiquitous *bukharis*, or wood-burning heaters, to create a truly noxious atmosphere. In 2009, an IRIN report cited Afghanistan’s National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) as saying that the concentration of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) on an average day in Kabul was 52 parts per million (ppm), almost one thousand times greater than the United States Environmental Protection Agency’s maximum acceptable level of NO₂ (IRIN News 2009). Nitrogen dioxide is not only harmful in itself, having been linked to respiratory diseases in children as well as adults, but it is also “a good indicator of traffic-related air pollution and an important source of a range of more toxic pollutants” (World Health Organization 2003, 45). Kabul’s location at the bottom of a geologic bowl ensures that the air above the capital is rarely, if ever, clear.



Shatu Pass. At first glance, rural Afghanistan may appear almost empty; but the demographic pressure on cultivable land is extremely high. September 2004 (Photo courtesy of A. Monsutti).

Afghanistan’s farmland is crowded, unproductive, and subject to extreme weather including crippling droughts and floods from rivers swollen by melting snow. The country’s cities are choking figuratively as well as literally, as their populations swell far beyond sustainable levels

thanks to internal migration. And, as mentioned above, the size of the labor force will just about double over the next 10-15 years. There is thus no possible short-to-medium-term future for Afghanistan that does not involve massive emigration. The country simply cannot support its population, and shows no signs of developing the capacity to do so any time soon. Geography and demography, just like conflict and persecution, can force people to migrate, as the world will witness over the next two decades in Afghanistan.

When considering how to respond to this impending wave of migration, the international community would do well to keep in mind that this is not an unprecedented confluence of circumstances. Europe, for instance, faced a population challenge in the 18th and 19th centuries, driven by factors including huge advances in medical care and a surplus of labor caused by the mechanization of the Industrial Revolution. How did Europe cope with its crisis? By emigration: thousands of Europeans sailed off (or were forced to sail off) to start up cities and colonies in Africa, the Americas, and Australia. Such migrations were

necessary in Europe two centuries ago, and they are going to be necessary — in fact, they already are necessary — in modern Afghanistan. Even in the unlikely hypothesis that the Afghan conflict will find a peaceful *denouement* after the US and NATO pullout in 2014, the country faces structural problems that will not find a quick solution. The range of demographic challenges — rural as well as urban — which have anything particularly to do with the ongoing war or with religious, ethnic, or tribal strife, raises the prospects of new displacements. Unfortunately for the Afghans, their options may seem significantly more limited today than they were during the anti-Soviet jihad. The strategic context

has changed and neither Pakistan nor Iran seem possible host countries for Afghan refugees anymore. An extremely worrying situation whose policy significance cannot be exaggerated!



Kabul, an overpopulated city on a tectonic boundary. February 2011 (Photo courtesy of A. Monsutti).

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Notes

¹ These figures were confirmed by the Mayor of Kabul in March 2012.

² Quetta in 1935 was far less densely populated than Kabul in 2013, so an earthquake of similar magnitude in Kabul would likely kill far more people than the 1935 Quetta earthquake did.

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Biography of authors

Adam Rodriques

Adam Rodriques is an associate consultant at FSG Social Impact Advisors, a global consulting firm that works with foundations, businesses, non-profits, and governments seeking to drive social change around the world. Between 2010 and 2012, he spent 12 months in Afghanistan with The Liaison Office, an Afghan-run development research organization, and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. His work in Afghanistan included an evaluation of a nascent local policing initiative and an exposé of torture and mistreatment of Afghan detainees by the Afghan security forces. Adam holds a BA (with distinction) in Political Science from Yale University and an MA in International Relations/Political Science from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, where he currently resides.

Alessandro Monsutti

Alessandro Monsutti is a Professor in Anthropology and Sociology at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, where he has been a member of the faculty since 2010. He has conducted ethnographic research since the mid-1990s in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran to study the modes of solidarity and cooperation mobilized in a situation of conflict and forced migration. Alessandro has also extensively studied Afghan diaspora networks in Western countries, particularly through the lenses of social networks and economic strategies. The holder of a PhD in social anthropology from the University of Neuchâtel and a past grantee of the MacArthur Foundation (2004-2006), Alessandro is also a Research Associate at the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford and a member of the Steering Committee of the Global Migration Centre.

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GLOBAL MIGRATION CENTRE

Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies
Maison de la paix, Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2
CP 136, 1211 Geneva 21 Switzerland
globalmigration@graduateinstitute.ch
www.graduateinstitute.ch/global-migration