Breaking the Rural - Urban Divide

Examining Afghanistan's city regions for improved rural-urban linkages

This discussion paper examines the enormous economic, social, environmental and security-related inter-linkages between major Afghan cities and their surrounding peri-urban areas. It advocates for a more nuanced understanding of urbanisation processes rather than an artificial 'rural'-'urban' binary, especially when formulating and implementing policy and programmes for the transformation decade (2015-2024).

Afghanistan's cities and peri-urban areas

For too long Afghanistan has been defined in terms of 'rural' and 'urban'. However, this is an artificial binary which is not very useful in reflecting the complex reality on the ground.

There are enormous inter-linkages between cities and their peri-urban and surrounding rural area. The State of Afghan Cities 2015 (SoAC) Report showed that there are enormous economic, social, environmental and security-related inter-linkages.[1,2] SoAC called for a more nuanced understanding of the spatial structure of Afghanistan, especially for the capital city Kabul and the regional hub cities of Herat, Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif and Jalalabad.

By uncovering and detailing the conditions and dynamics of these areas, these five city regions can be strengthened to stimulate local economic development, expand social services, and strengthen sub-national governance and legitimacy - all critical elements in the Transformation Decade (2015-2024) for Afghanistan to achieve 'Self-Reliance'.

> "We need to improve living conditions and service delivery in urban centers. Urbanization will need to be managed by reducing disparity between rural and urban areas.
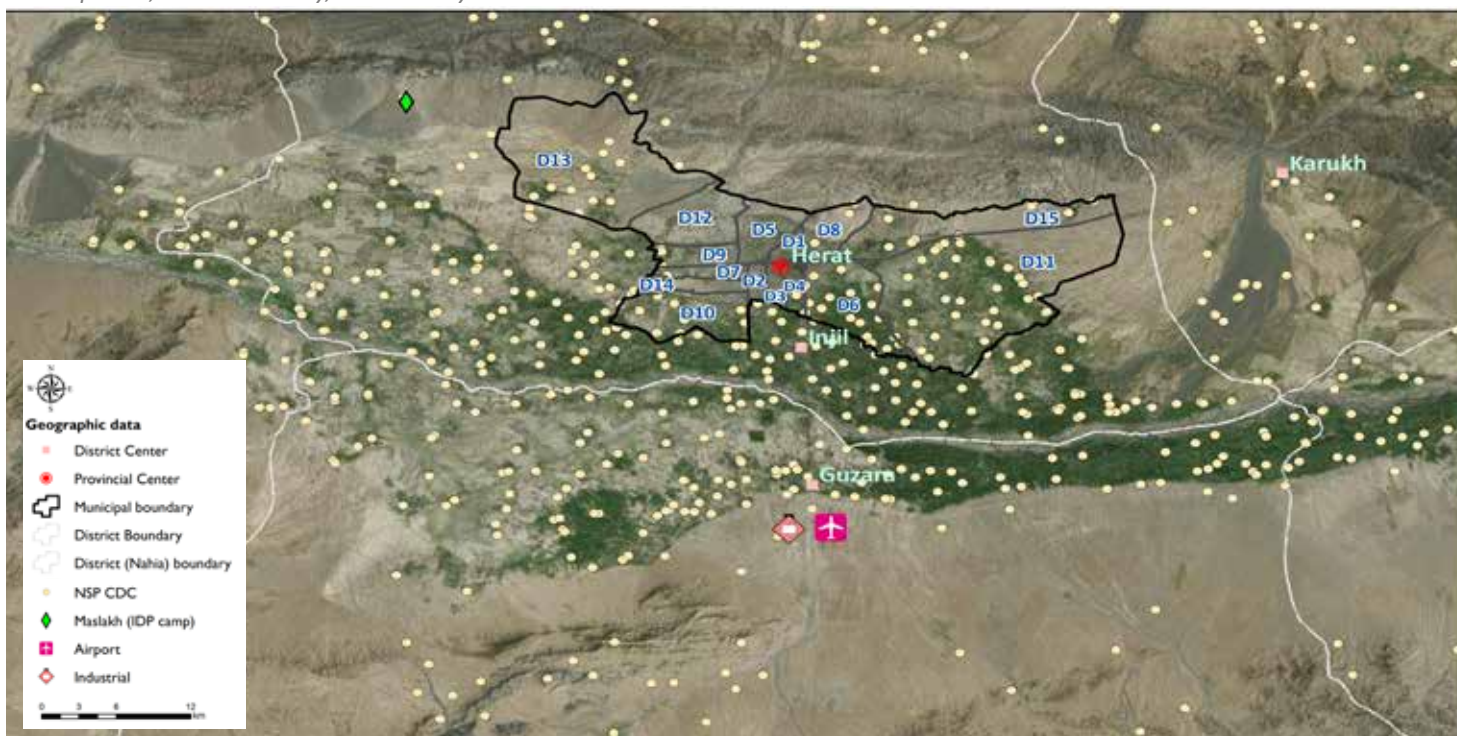>
> ...
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> Establishing metropolitan development authorities and funds will allow for coordinated development planning and professionalized management."
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> **Realising Self-Reliance (2014) National Unity Government of Afghanistan, p.12**

Herat City Region

This example from Herat shows the considerable inter-linkages between Herat city and its surrounding area. An estimated 720,000 people live within the peri-urban area of Herat city. What is the best way to harness this functional area for improved economic development, service delivery, and security and stabilisation?

[1]GoIRA (2015) The State of Afghan Cities 2015. GoIRA: Kabul. http://unhabitat.org/books/soac2015/

[2]UN-Habitat (2015) Afghan Cities for Life. Discussion Paper #6. http://unhabitat.org/afghan-cities-for-life-respecting-andprotecting-the-environment-for-healthy-and-livable-cities/

Defining 'city region'

The term 'city-region' describes a metropolitan area, hinterland, or conurbation that does not necessarily have shared administration but has economic, social and environmental interdependencies that make it operate as a distinctive entity or eco-system. The city-regions approach is not new. Since the 1950s urbanists, economists, land-use planners, and local and national authorities have recognized the value of harnessing the functional linkages that emerge around urban centers to promote social and economic development.[3]

In Afghanistan, a city region can be defined as 'an area surrounding a city that has daily functional economic, social and environmental interdependencies'. As the map on the previous page shows, the city region of Herat is an administratively, economically, socially and functionally complex zone. It has an estimated population of over 1.4 million people (800,000 within the municipal boundary and over 700,000 in the peri-urban area). More than 245 'rural' villages, Community Development Councils (CDCs) (yellow dots), scatter the vast agricultural plains bordering the city. [4]

Key economic infrastructure, such as the International Herat airport and the Herat Industrial Park, are located outside the municipal area. An estimated 30% of land is used for agriculture[5] both within and outside the municipal boundaries.[6] The IDP camp of 'Maslakh' is located outside the city boundary and is home to over 17,000 Afghan men, women, girls and boys, and is functionally connected for employment, livelihoods and access to basic social services to the central city.

The District Municipality of Injil, to the south of Herat City, is administratively separate (a District Municipality) yet for all intents and purposes it is part of the continuous built up fabric of the Provincial Capital. Furthermore, Herat and Injil Municipalities act as the key transit point and are therefore an important economic hub for the whole Western region of the country.

Why are city regions important?

Such is the richness and complexity of Afghanistan's city regions. This reality, however, is not adequately captured in official data, information or development and security discourse, nor reflected in national or provincial policies or plans. This is largely due to the fact that there is no comprehensive assessment or data of Afghanistan's city regions. However, from 2008 onwards MUDA has divided the country into 8 regions and undertaken detailed reports on the situation, including some city regional studies. This constrains development planning and budgeting, leads to small and disjointed infrastructure investments, increases local stakeholder competition for scarce resources, contributes to service delivery coverage and quality inequalities, and, perhaps most importantly, does not reduce inward rural-urban pressure or harness the economies of scale urbanisation can provide to contribute to economic development (Box 1).

Box 1: Why invest on city-regions in Afghanistan?

The economic case: city regions present huge potential to improve peri-urban agriculture yields, strengthen value chains, better link rural areas with urban manufacturing and export markets; harness the benefits agglomeration economies can provide; and increase local revenues from municipalities.

The governance case: the artificial 'rural-urban' divide creates major bottlenecks to local development, with enormous inefficiencies, duplication or gaps in coverage; reduces trust and coordination between stakeholders; constrains municipal revenue collection efforts; and limits capacity of government entities to act together minimize the negative effects of urbanisation (e.g. land grabbing, haphazard sprawl, informal settlements, etc.).

The social/human rights case: identifying IDPs and the socially marginalized that often live in makeshift camps in city regions lays foundations for improving their tenure security and shelter improvement; increased agricultural yields will improve food security for rural households; opportunity to stimulate more balanced spatial growth to reduce 'push' factors of rural households to cities.

The environmental case: properly managing city region resources to avoid the depletion of precious natural resources; ensure equitable sharing of resources between cities and their surrounding settlements, and within them; and better manage solid waste which is too often taken to the city limit and simply dumped with enormous negative effects on the peri-urban environment.

The spatial /urban planning case: Effective management of city regions can reduce inward migration pressure to city centers, promote planned urban extension and integration with existing surrounding settlements to promote a more balanced national settlement pattern and socio-spatial inclusion.

Seeing achievements in all of the above relies on accurate and timely information/data on city region dynamics, which is simply not available at present in Afghanistan.

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[3]UN-Habitat (2004) Urban-Rural Linkages: An annotated Bibliography 1994-2004. UN-Habitat; Nairobi
[4]There are also around 40 CDCs within the municipal boundary as well (over 80,000 people covered under NSP).
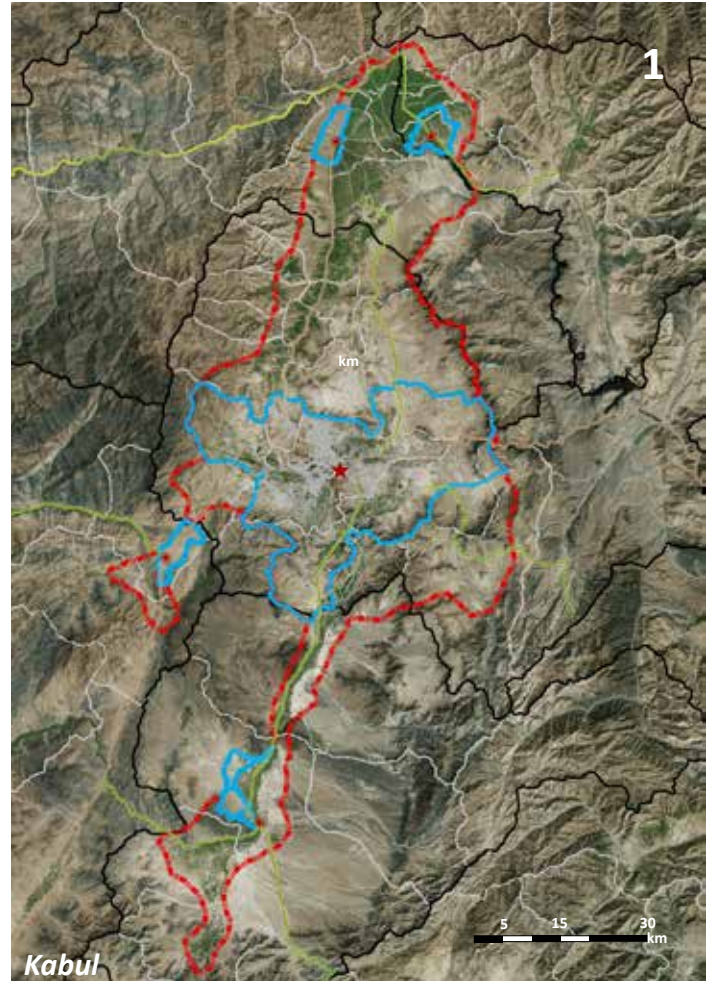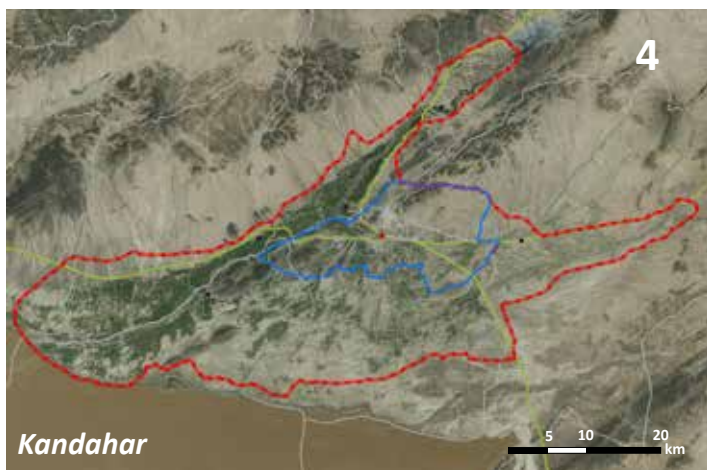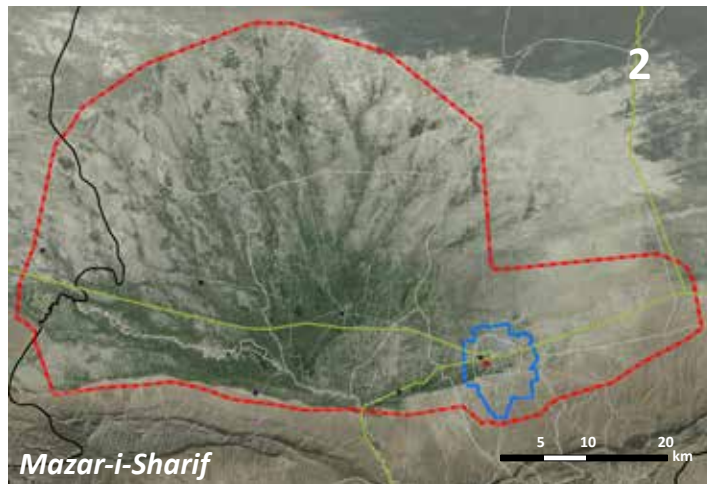
[5]http://afghanag.ucdavis.edu/country-info/Province-agriculture-profiles/hi-rat-herat
[6]SoAC 2015 land-use analysis found that 36% of total municipal land is used for agriculture.

Five major city regions in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has five major city regions. Kabul City Region is the largest, at approximately 5,400km², connecting Kabul city with the surrounding five provinces. The four other city regions cover a total land area of approximately 6,500km², approximately 20% larger that Kabul City Region. The area of the provincial capital city to the city region varies greatly, from 3% in Mazar-i-Sharif to 56% in Kabul. These five main city regions together house an estimated 69% of Afghanistan's urban population and roughly one quarter of Afghanistan's total population.[7]

LEGEND: city region boundary   municipal boundary   main road   provincial boundary

2 Mazar-i-Sharif

3 Herat

4 Kandahar

1 Kabul

5 Jalalabad

[7] GoIRA (2015) The State of Afghan Cities 2015. GoIRA: Kabul. http://unhabitat.org/books/soac2015/

[8] Office of the Deputy Prime Minster (2006) A Framework for City Regions. London, UK.

[9] UN-Habitat (2015) Afghanistan's Urban Future. UN-Habitat: Kabul. http://un-habitat.org/afghanistans-urban-future/

[10] UN-Habitat (2015) Understanding Urbanisation. UN-Habitat: Kabul. http://unhabitat.org/understanding-urbanisation-monitoring-urban-dynamics-in-a-fragile-and-resource-constrained-context-discussion-paper-9/

Experience from other countries

One can see examples of prosperous city-regions throughout the developed world (e.g. Greater London[8] and the Tokyo Metropolitan Area) as well as in developing countries (e.g. Istanbul, Turkey; the Mumbai Metropolitan Region; Hanoi Capital Region; Greater Cairo; and Jakarta, the largest Metropolitan region in the Islamic world). Closer to Afghanistan, the Rawlpindi-Islamabad city-region is an example of urban growth area that has created a city-region where, based on functional relationships, it is a singular thriving entity, connected with the surrounding area.

History has shown that when urbanisation is managed properly it is a source of development.[9] Cities and their regions contribute a significant share of national economies; provide jobs and facilitate industrialization; support social and cultural development, and promote peace and stability.

The urbanisation process is not just people moving to cities from rural areas. It is also the physical expansion of cities to incorporate surrounding built-up areas; and the growth of smaller towns into larger cities. This process is seldom arbitrary but occurs in city-regions given the natural gravity towards economically and socially prosperous human settlements/cities. City region planning and governance is essential to manage this urban expansion.

Examining city regions

The Future of Afghan Cities Programme (FoAC) currently under implementation is examining the five major city regions in Afghanistan. It is following a similar methodology to the State of Afghan Cities 2015 Programme by analyzing up-to-date satellite imagery of the regions in terms of land use (agriculture, residential, commercial, roads, etc), housing and population.[10]

The outcome will be a baseline dataset on the city regions that will support improved programme design, city region governance, and planning major infrastructure in these city regions. It will directly support the development of the Urban National Priority Programme (U-NPP).
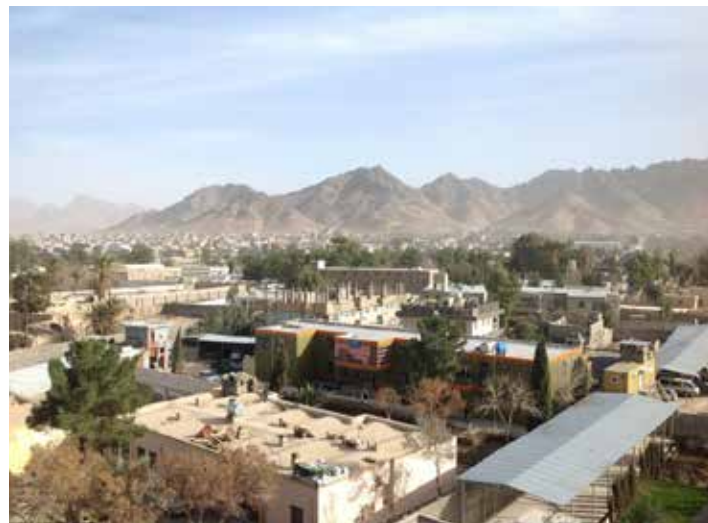
> ## "Urbanization, if done well, is an effective instrument and driver of rural prosperity as well as general economic development,"
>
> Dr. Clos, Executive Director, UN-Habitat

Ways forward

- Undertake the city regions analysis and make results available to all stakeholders for policy and programme development;
- Improve the engagement of 'rural' and 'urban' focused ministries, particularly for new programme design such as the Citizens Charter, Urban Solidarity Programme, and Urban National Priority Programme (U-NPP);
- Initiate cooperation on how to improve metropolitan governance in these five city regions. The areas of solid waste management, transportation and mobility, and environmental protection are possible starting points;
- Address major city region infrastructure deficits that constrain rural-urban market linkages for food supply, and local economic development;
- Improve security and safety of city regions through inter-municipal coordination;
- Engage citizens and sub-national authorities in 'visioning' city regions to begin a process of developing urban growth management strategies and plans.