

National Support for Afghan Cities

National Urban Policy (NUP) and National Spatial Strategy (NSS) to harness the benefits of urbanisation in Afghanistan.

This discussion paper provides the rationale for the development of a National Urban Policy (NUP) and National Spatial Strategy (NSS) in Afghanistan. Common in many countries, NUP and NSS aim to adopt a whole of government approach to deal with the complex and multi-dimensional nature of urban and integrated territorial development. The paper explains the core tenets of NUP/NSS and explores the best way forward to develop the first Afghan NUP/NSS.

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Steering Afghanistan's Urban Growth

Afghanistan, like most countries, could benefit from improving efforts to address the threats and opportunities posed by rapid urbanisation and urban growth. These can no longer be addressed by compartmentalized policy-making and interventions. Active support needs to be mobilized across the different spheres of government to ensure a coordinated approach to planning and management of cities and towns across Afghanistan, including pooling of scarce financial and human resources.

Currently there is still too much fragmentation of urban sector-related policies. The policies are often conflicting – not only between but also within different line-ministries. For instance:

- National development policies and plans tend to focus on employment in general and do not specifically or spatially link jobs to cities and towns. Opportunities to link industrial estates or export processing zones to urban development

remain under-exploited;

- A sectoral decision to construct a new ring road around Kabul city might lead to huge land speculation and loss of spatial and revenue gains if not accompanied by a multi-sectorial urban growth management planning and control mechanism at metropolitan level;
- Reforming institutions and legislation in a 'spatially blind' way would not address the specific needs of rural and urban communities;
- Centralization of Kabul planning functions hamper the planning support to other cities and towns across the country, as well limits central level urban policy capacities.

A key way to harness urbanisation for development is to ensure a broad policy framework and spatial strategy is in place. National Urban Policy and associated spatial strategies/plans can be a key foundation of this.

Box 1: Contours of a National Urban Policy for Afghanistan: "People's Cities"

Addressing the urban needs and aspirations of a diverse and pluralistic Afghan society with a policy mix and urban interventions for and by all citizens to achieve peaceful, prosperous, equitable and livable Afghan cities and towns.



The diagram shows a stratified population pyramid with the different possible groups living in urban settlements and communities. Two virtuous cycles are drawn round the pyramid. The first cycle (in black) shows the requirement for the NUP to equally focus on three types of 'needs': basic needs for all urban residents in terms of access to safe shelter, food, safe water, electricity, sanitation, healthcare and basic education must be ensured. However, a city is historically defined by 'higher urban needs' such as affordable access to higher education, specialized healthcare, different types of housing, specialized shops and employment opportunities, urban culture, urban leisure, mass public transport, city parks, etc. The more people that have access to these 'urban commodities', the more prosperous the city will be. Lastly, local and central governments also have to find ways to unlock 'urban aspirations' of urban individuals and communities, as entrepreneurs or associated in social enterprises or NGOs. A second cycle (in red) shows the process of translating tailored Afghan 'urban policies' into a coherent set of 'urban strategies', implemented through a selective number of strategic 'urban interventions'. This requires strong partnerships, which could be galvanized in an 'Urban Charter' with a selection of joint actions and clear division of responsibilities among all the signatory parties, including private sector, civil society and academia. Returning back to the center-piece of the diagram, we can build a narrative of the 'People's Cities', inspired by the Afghan success story of 'People's Process', which initially targeted mainly deprived rural populations in Afghanistan.

What is a National Urban Policy?

Achieving sustainable urban development requires that stakeholders, through a participatory process, foster urban policies that promote a national system of more compact, socially inclusive, better integrated and connected cities that are resilient to climate change. Therefore, a National Urban Policy (NUP) is an important tool available to governments that seek to manage and direct urbanisation, and to turn urbanisation to positive effect while accommodating its inevitable stresses. According to UN-Habitat, a National Urban Policy is¹:

“A coherent set of decisions derived through a deliberate government-led process of coordinating and rallying various actors for a common vision and goal that will promote more transformative, productive, inclusive and resilient urban development for the long term.”

A NUP should address urban planning, legal framework and financial instruments in a harmonized way at national, regional and local levels. Cities, if supported by the national government, can contribute greatly to national economic vitality, social dynamism and sustainable ecosystems. Learning from experiences abroad, some principles of NUP include: participatory, inclusive, implementable, measurable, affordable (cost-effectiveness and resourceful), pragmatic, action oriented and people-centered.

What is a National Spatial Strategy?

A NSS is the territorial or spatial dimension of the combined National Urban and Rural Policies at the country level. In other words, if a problem or solution cannot be attributed in a spatially distinct way, it should not be mentioned in the NSS. Therefore the

NSS should be a rather concise, cross-cutting document outlining the national strategies to achieve overall better territorial balances and qualities within and between urban and rural areas, which should be clearly defined in the NSS. Other characteristics of the NSS - based on international best practices - are:

- Long term perspective (20-50 years);
- Transnational/macro-regional perspective Visionary – survey related;
- Selective (vision-derived strategic priorities) – only showing planned changes of national importance;
- Spatial concepts to unpack complex territorial realities and desired changes;
- Qualitative and quantitative spatial objectives;
- Alignment with legal and financial frameworks;
- Approved by Government or Parliament – binding for all ministries, provinces and municipalities – not statutory for citizens;
- Multi-stakeholder and public involvement through sensibilization and consultation;
- Reader friendly – strong narrative and well illustrated.

In essence, a National Spatial Strategy should provide a territorial development vision at national level, thus serving as a framework for regional and city-regional planning as well as for all spatially relevant aspects of the National Urban Policy – while balancing it out with national rural strategies and interventions. The NSS should identify and set a plan for the national urban hierarchy, including city-regions, city-networks, national and regional transport corridors, eco-systems with natural resource reserves of national importance and last but not least critical urban-rural partnerships to foster a balanced territorial development of the entire country.

Basic Do's and Don'ts for NUP and NSS

| DO'S | DON'T |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop NUP/NSS through participatory and consultative process to ensure ownership and implementation. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rush the process and outsource the entire drafting of policy and strategy documents. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make a whole of government approach. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only involve 'urban sector' ministries. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage entire city regions, this is the core city and its surroundings needed for a functional and integrated development of the core city. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only focus on Kabul as capital city; engage with all Afghan cities and towns. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage all government departments, sub-national governments, non-governmental urban stakeholders such as agencies, NGO's, business, community, academia and the cultural sectors. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only involve government officials in designing the NUP and NSS. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Align with national, local and donor finance. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow for a piecemeal approach dictated by non-coordinated donor finance. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn from experiences abroad. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Copy-paste foreign policies. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aim for a policy mix of short, medium and long- term interventions and measures. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scope the policy and strategy for short-term gain and political term in office. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include actions to increase capacities and skills to develop and implement the policies and strategies. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conceive policy and strategy without implementation plan that covers capacity (finance, human and institutional) and communication. |

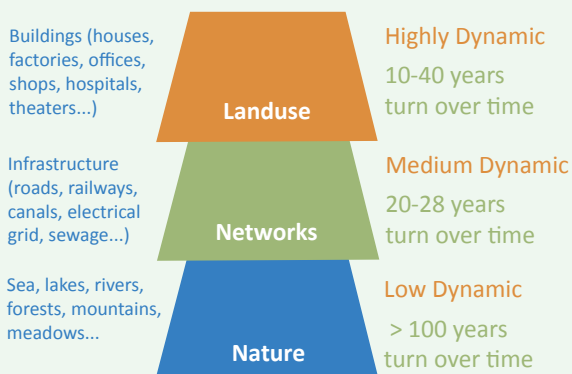
¹ 'National Urban Policy: A Guiding Framework', UN-Habitat, 2015

Box 2: Contours of a National Spatial Strategy: an Urban-Rural Territorial Pact for Afghanistan

A NSS recognizes the existing natural, infrastructure and human settlement situation and seek to build on this in a strategic way to guide urban growth and direct infrastructure investments while protecting and strengthening natural resources.

A way to unpack the complex challenges and opportunities of the Afghan national territory is by differentiating three basic structural layers with different space-time dynamics (see diagram).² This could be tailored towards a basic content structure for the first Afghan NSS with the following territorial components and structures of national interest:

3 LAYER APPROACH



- Main rivers and lakes within their respective river basins and urban centres, including a strong transnational and cross-border component;
- National parks and eco-systems (including mountains), often as overlay of the main rivers and lakes, but with a national protective status and restrictions of permissive human activities and their relation to human settlements;
- Food production and rural and urban development, including identification of rural and urban growth poles;
- Spatial distribution of economic sectors across the territory;
- Natural resources distribution and their correlation with cities;
- Multimodal and multi-nodal transport and mobility networks for people and goods, including cross-border and transnational axes and corridors;
- Distribution of telecommunication corridors in relation to urban development, industries and job concentration;
- Polycentric urban development and hierarchy of cities and functions including national city-regions, the Kabul National Capital Metropolitan Region, additional growth poles and cross-border gateways;
- Energy corridors and infrastructure of national importance;
- Tourism and recreation, including cultural and natural heritage preservation;
- Natural and disaster risks prone areas and affected human settlements.

The International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning, adopted by UN-Habitat Governing Council in April 2015, provide additional guidance to further develop the NSS as well subsequent spatial strategies and plans at regional and local level in Afghanistan. The guidelines emphasise inclusive and participatory principles, and can be consulted to ensure national implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and Goal 11 on 'Making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable'.³



²The three layer approach was first applied by the Dutch Government in its Fifth National Spatial Planning Memorandum, 2001

³'Sustainable Development Goals', see <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

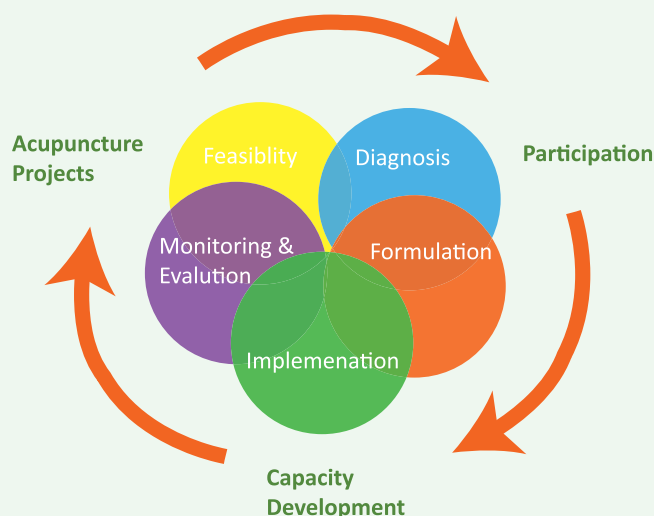
⁴'The Evolution of National Urban Policies— A Global Overview', UN-Habitat & Cities Alliance, 2014

⁵'National Spatial Frameworks – Lessons learnt from international experiences', UN-Habitat internal report, 2014

⁶'National Urban Policies – A Guiding Framework', UN-Habitat, 2015

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Box 3: Experiences from other countries



National Urban Policies do not only differ from country to country but also evolve in terms of priorities and urban development trends. Many countries of the Global North have shaped their NUP/NSS around the nexus of industrialisation and urbanisation, while many countries from the Global South are shaping policies to guide transition from rural to urban. Some Asian countries developed policies to guide a combination of both industrialization and urbanisation. In most countries there has also been a gradual shift of focus from cities towards city-regions and metropolitan areas, addressing a multitude of decision-makers and stakeholders to implement national policies and spatial strategies. More recently countries also prioritize more social inclusive and environmental friendly urban policies, addressing e.g. climate change and growing inequalities in cities. Many countries also shift attention from provision of roads and other infrastructure towards more inclusive and environmental friendly transport and mobility policies, including a substantial modal shift towards public and non-motorized urban and metropolitan transport. On the important issue of affordable housing there is a worldwide policy shift from isolated mono-functional high-rise apartments towards well connected high-density mixed-used housing units, which also includes a strategy to upgrade existing informal settlements and slums.

Possibly inspiring for Afghanistan are the National Urban Policies and Spatial Strategies of some countries in Latin America – e.g. Colombia Chile and Brazil; in Africa – e.g. Ethiopia, South Africa and Rwanda; and elsewhere in Asia, e.g. South Korea, Malaysia, China and India. A Cities Alliance/UN-Habitat report explores these and other examples in more detail⁴, while another UN-Habitat report also presents lessons learnt from international experiences on NSS's, including cases such as South Korea, China, Malaysia and Morocco.⁵ Based on many inspiring practices UN-Habitat developed a guiding process design for NUP.⁶ The diagram shows the relationship between the NUP phases, as well as highlighting the roles of the three NUP pillars. The NUP phases are not presented in a linear fashion. Instead, the diagram emphasizes the overlapping nature of all phases. In order to ensure a reflective and iterative policy process, it is possible to move fluidly between the phases. As the quality of the process is crucial, a tailor made methodology and institutional set-up (Steering Committees, Technical groups, etc) is required to drive and steer the preparation and approval of the documents within a reasonable span of time.

Ways forward

- A multi-sectorial and multi-stakeholder NUP will need to address pressing Afghan urban challenges in a strategic thus selective way – given the limited capacities and financial resources at hand – by prioritizing the most urgent and feasible actions, but framed within a long term and broadly shared vision for Afghan cities and towns on a longer term;
- Start with a Green Paper on NUS/NSS open for discussion, with proposals which are still at a formative stage – initiated and presented by the key players of Urban NPP;
- Based upon broad consultation, flesh out the elements suitable for a White Paper issued by the Government as formal statements of policy, including proposals for legislative and administrative reform, which may be debated before new laws or law amendments are introduced;
- Develop in parallel the NSS including a proposed definition of 'the urban' and 'the rural' as basis for complementary urban and rural policies and spatial strategies.



The Future of Afghan Cities (FoAC), is a government-led programme of MUDA, IDLG/GDMA, Kabul Municipality and ARAZI that focuses on the development of a Urban National Priority Programme (U-NPP) that will set Afghanistan's urban priorities for the coming decade. To support this, FoAC will also undertake a detailed analysis of five city regions and at least 20 strategic district municipalities to provide key data and recommendations for policy and programme design.

