

# National Youth Policy Review: Afghanistan



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## ABSTRACT

As a least developed country in South Asia, Afghanistan is recognized as one of the world's youngest countries, where two-thirds of Afghanistan's population is under 25. Afghan youth are a source of social change, entrepreneurship, and economic prosperity if they have the appropriate skills and opportunities to get involved.

Recent studies pointed out that the Afghan youth's human capital is underdeveloped and underutilized. Most youth will not have the opportunity to finish their secondary education, and about 42% of those aged 15 to 24 are not educated, nor employed, or enrolled in any vocational training, while it is even worse for young girls (68%).

Afghanistan's youth confront several obstacles that should be addressed for the country to go forward. Education, employment, health, youth participation in decision-making organizations, high rates of child marriage, insecurity, and high rate of immigration are among those major challenges. Despite having a specific policy for youth in the country, above mentioned challenges are getting worse over the years due to corruption, insecurity, unemployment, and poverty, specifically after the fall of the previous government.

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## I . Executive Summary

This study aims to examine the situation of Afghan youth in the light of current public policies by focusing on specific domains; education, employment, health, and participation. Through a holistic development approach, development initiatives targeting Afghan youth must acknowledge the whole spectrum of their economic, educational, social, and psychological needs.

Although the Office of the Deputy Minister of Youth Affairs (DMoYA) released the first-ever Afghanistan National Youth Policy (ANYP) in 2014 to guarantee that investments in youth benefit them equitably and lead to their growth, the youth situation in the domains mentioned above is at still at stake after six years from the policy release.

After decades of scarcity, Afghan youth begin to place a high societal value on education, considering education and skills training as a pathway to economic inclusion. School is a key source of social capital for Afghan youth, and the provision of free and subsidized education options is highly appreciated. Youth often feel left behind due to a lack of educational opportunities (secondary and vocational) in rural areas.

Even if education is accessible, local circumstances are caused to restrict participation in secondary and university level education. Poverty and the necessity to support the family are the leading cause of early school dropout in males (World Bank, 2019a). Gender norms, particularly shame and early marriage, and the overlapping impacts of poverty are the main factors affecting females.

Security issues, such as those encountered when traveling or at school, are also important contributors (World Bank, 2019a; UNICEF, Samuel Hall, and Ministry of Education, 2018). Working with communities to shift gender stereotypes, promote education among youth, and reduce poverty are all critical factors in keeping children and youth in school.

Employment being a path to inclusion, male youth unemployment and underemployment are causing social costs across the country, and young men and women ranked unemployment as the most serious problem they face. Across the country, there is a strong demand for solid, long-term jobs. This need is unlikely to be satisfied in the current climate of weak economic development, necessitating new measures to support young involvement. The fulfillment of effective short- and long-term economic development plans is linked, among other things, to meeting job demand. Meanwhile, a realistic perspective must consider the young people who are already upset because they are unlikely to find a steady job soon.

Alternative routes for constructively engaging these youth in their communities will likely be required to foster social inclusion. Volunteering and community service are two possibilities. A dearth of female ‘appropriate’ employment is a challenge for women who want to work. The study emphasizes the need to pay close attention to local gender norms, which vary significantly across Afghanistan.

Concerning youth participation, it is unfortunate to write that most youths are left behind to participate or take part in local and national political or administrative positions due to corruption, being from a different ethnic group, and family background regarding the political parties.

To conclude with a critical domain, youth health, the lack of reproductive health information, disproportionately high rates of adolescent pregnancy, and restricted access to medical services are the critical health concern for many Afghan youths, especially girls who marry early that the government should take into account.

## II. Situation of Young people

Afghanistan is home to one of the world's youngest populations. Almost 80% of the population is under the age of 35. Most Afghan youths are in the 'youth' category's lower age range, reflecting the country's high fertility rate. Between the ages of 15 and 24, around 21% of Afghans are between 15 and 24. The majority of Afghanistan's population, slightly under half (47%), is under 15. Afghanistan's young are geographically spread, with over 72 percent residing in rural regions. They are primarily seen in homes with precarious income sources, including agriculture, livestock, and daily work.

Over 75% of Afghans have been displaced at least once in their lives. This large-scale population migration reflects the severity of war-related suffering, social upheaval, psychological difficulties, and access to resources like education and health care (WB, 2020). According to World Bank data, Afghan youth's potential is being underutilized. The majority of Afghan adolescents are unemployed or underemployed, and educational achievements are dismal. Following two decades of slow growth, employment and education indices for youth have reached a stand still. In Afghanistan, youth make up 38 percent of the workforce, a smaller percentage than the rest of the adult population. Only 18% of the working youngsters have a stable, paid position.

Currently, 42 percent of individuals aged 15 to 25 are not in school, employment, or training (NEET), with women accounting for 68 percent of the total. The vast majority of Afghan youngsters will not complete secondary school. Slow economic development is now limiting the Afghan economy's ability to provide paid employment to the projected 400,000 - 500,000 young Afghans joining the labor market each year (World Bank, 2020).

What happened two months ago, the constant backdrop of insecurity have exacerbated the problems faced by young Afghans and put their generation in danger. The conflict has hampered the development of governmental institutions and service delivery, particularly in hard-to-reach rural regions, in addition to imposing a tremendous human cost in terms of injuries, relocation, and psychosocial difficulties.

Afghanistan's economic progress has also been impeded (and has lately slowed) by this fragile environment. Afghanistan's poverty rate rose from 38 percent in 2011/2012 to 55 percent in 2016/2017 while falling to 47.3 percent in 2019/2020. As long as job development and service delivery are limited, and more than half of Afghans continue to live in poverty, youth's ability to move above their current circumstances is limited. According to NSIA (2019), evidence from Afghanistan and elsewhere suggests that unemployment, particularly among young males, can lead to dissatisfaction and alienation, potentially leading to social strife.

### 1. Demographic Composition

Afghanistan is now classified as a "pre-dividend" nation (the only one in South Asia), with a high fertility rate (over four births per woman), rapid population expansion, a large number of children, few elderly, and a high dependence ratio. This is about to change, and Afghanistan will reach the early dividend stage of the demographic shift by the end of 2021. When birth rates fall steadily while the working-age population rises, an economic window of opportunity opens. To see the benefits of this once-in-a-generation demographic opportunity, Afghanistan must make the required investments now to prepare for the upcoming 'adolescent bulge' joining the labor market. Investing in teenagers is thus critical to realizing the country's further economic potential.

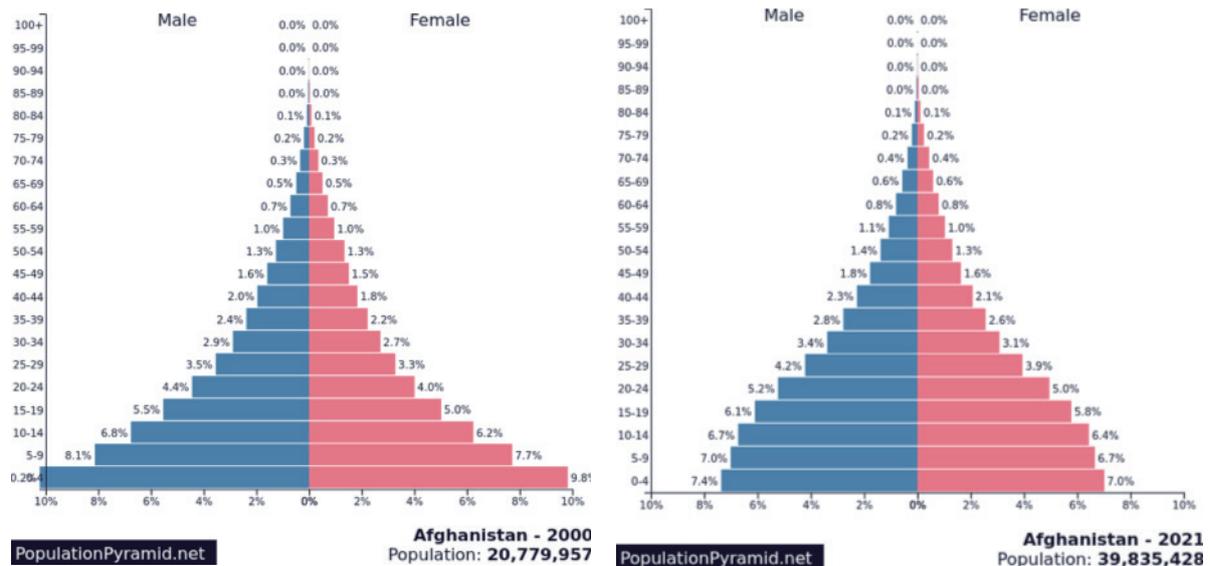
Afghanistan's total population was projected to be 39.8 million in 2021, with 51.7 percent males and 48.3 percent females with a population growth rate of 2.3 percent. Afghanistan is one of the world's youngest countries, with a birth rate of 4.13 per

woman. As we can see in the population pyramid, more than half of Afghanistan's population (63.7%) are between 15 and 25. This implies that more than half of the country's population is reaching working age, offering a strong human resource basis.

When comparing the two decades of the Afghan population pyramid from 2000 to 2021, we can observe that the young population is almost half of the total, according to the ANYP youth definition (aged 15-35) of males and females. The demographic age structure of Afghanistan's population is represented by a pyramid with a large base of younger aged population narrowing as age increases due to high fertility rates in 2000 (7.48 births per woman) and fertility rate in 2019 (4.13 births per woman) and consequent annual population growth of 3% in 2000 to 2.3 percent increase from the year 2020 in 2021.

We can observe that, despite a massive rise in the country's population from 20,779,957 in 2000 to 39,835,428 in 2018, there has been a considerable drop in the fertility rate throughout the years, the youth population is still large due to the high fertility rate in previous years.

According to the population pyramid depicted below, Afghanistan is undergoing nearly 3% demographic change due to fertility control compared to the past two decades. This has ramifications for the country's economic and social growth. Second, unlike other countries, Afghanistan's male-to-female ratio has remained relatively constant.



Source: Population Pyramid using UNDP data.

## 2. Definition of Youth

The term "youth" has no widely accepted international definition. However, for statistical purposes, the United Nations considers 'youth' as individuals aged 15 to 24 years old, regardless of any different definitions adopted by the Member States.

As a result of the statistically focused definition of youth by the UN, children are those under the age of 14. However, it is worth noting that under Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, "children" are defined as those under the age of 18.

The Afghan National Youth Policy (ANYP) defines youth as anybody aged 18 to 35, although it also includes recommendations for teenagers (between 12 and below 18 years of age). The government specifically highlighted adolescents' educational and health requirements, as this is a key period of transition into the young phase of life. Childhood is a period of

physical, mental, and psychic development that prepares a person for adulthood. Afghanistan's laws split infancy into three stages:

- a) Undiscerning minors aged 0 to 7,
- b) Discerning minors, ages 7 to 12, and
- c) Adolescents or juveniles, ages 12 to under 18.

Children between the ages of 7 and 13 are considered juveniles under Afghan criminal law. According to Afghan labor law, a juvenile is one who has reached the age of 14 but has not yet reached the age of 18. Furthermore, Afghan law prohibits marriage before 18 for males and 16 for females, which is typically later than the onset of puberty for both genders. Its further splits "youth" into two categories: pre-youth (Naw-Jawan) and youth (Jawan) ages 12 to 35.

Within the government, there is also disagreement. The National Statistics and Information Authority of Afghanistan (NSIA) rejects the GoA's two-tiered classification of youth and instead uses its three-tiered classification system, which includes:

- a) Pre-adolescents (ages 11 to 14)
- b) Teenagers (ages 15–19)
- c) University students and young professionals in their twenties and thirties (Age 20-25).

The uncertainty around the term "youth" has significant programmatic consequences. Any youth-targeted programming, whether offered by the GoA or international organizations, must define target beneficiaries, necessitating the development of a set of youth-specific criteria. While most actors use their inclusive definitions of youth, a more crosscutting definition that many collaborating organizations can agree upon can help clarify the challenges of defining youth on the ground.

Youth is defined by the United Nations (UN) as persons between 15 and 24. Meanwhile, the World Health Organization (WHO) distinguishes between a series of well-characterized teenage growth phases. Teenagers between the ages of 14 and 17 begin to experiment with sex, drugs, friends, and dangers, establish strong peer bonds, form more stable partnerships, and improve social and problem-solving skills. Adolescents between the ages of 16 and 19 can set long-term goals for themselves, understand how their choices and decisions affect the future, differentiate between right and wrong (morally and ethically), and transition from a child-parent/guardian relationship to an equal adult-adult relationship.

UNESCO described youth by projecting a question, "what do we mean by 'youth'?" Youth is best defined as a transition from childhood reliance to adulthood's independence and knowledge of our involvement as community members. Youth is a more ephemeral term than an age group. However, the most straightforward method to categorize this group is by age, particularly in terms of education and work.

As a result, the term "youth" is frequently used to refer to a person between the ages of leaving compulsory education and finding their first job, defined by UNESCO. As unemployment rates rise and the expense of setting up a self-sufficient family rises, many young people are forced to remain dependent for more extended periods.

### 3. Key youth issues at stake

Afghanistan's youth confront several obstacles that should be addressed for the country to go forward: poor education and health systems, high rates of child marriage, mass unemployment, insecurity, low level of political participation due to the government system corruption, and high rate of immigration are among those major Afghan's challenges.

In addition, finding a standard definition for youth is one of the challenges in addressing them. Youth participation in politics is a relatively new goal for most democratic governments, but it is crucial, especially in light of current events, democratic transitions, and conflict settlement in Afghanistan. The universal declaration of human rights includes participation as one of its guiding principles, and young people's freedom to participate has been recognized as important in several international agreements.

According to the UNFPA (2017), over the five days of meeting with the support of the Mashranu Jirga (upper house) of the national assembly of Afghanistan, the Deputy Ministry of Youth Affairs, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and the 120 passionate young legislators from all part of the country discussed their active engagement as future leaders and change agents.

The gathering's main goal was to draw the government's attention to important issues facing today's youth, such as poor education and health systems, high rates of child marriage, mass unemployment, and the perilous journeys many young people take as refugees to escape all of these issues.

According to Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2021), youth are frequently active in non-formal political processes such as activism and civic engagement. They are not formally represented in provincial and national political institutions such as local councils and Parliament.

In finding a job, youth have a hard time respecting public officials for getting a chance to get in a position where gaining the base experience related to a position in a political and administrative area is a major issue. This exclusion, along with restricted educational and economic prospects, might leave young people bored and dissatisfied with their current situation. In Afghanistan, people under the age of 25 are seldom found in positions of official political leadership. The national Parliament of Afghanistan and a third of the world's countries have a minimum age requirement of 25 years. If a politician is under 35-40 years old, it is standard practice to refer to them as "young."

Youth are underrepresented in formal political institutions and procedures such as parliaments, political parties, elections, and public administrations. Women in mid-level and decision-making/leadership roles face even greater challenges.

Many students dropped out of school and university because of poverty and the indirect effect of job seekers' history. As an Afghan youth, I experienced how difficult it is to find a job in Afghanistan without giving a bribe or knowing someone to be selected as an employee, especially when you are of different ethnicity from or close to an employer.

While many skilled job seekers remain unemployed for about two to three years or even for their whole life, some are placed with their relative support in the governmental organization even if they are not eligible for the recruitment process. This issue affected those teenagers who were in school. Some get disappointed by considering the current employment procedure, and they will ask their families, "why should I continue to study? when there are many job seekers with a good degree, but they are not getting a place, I should start working from now in any possible way." Their families ignore studying, and even some illiterate families push their children to work because of poverty.

Child labor is another major problem in Afghanistan, as tens of thousands of children work dangerously such as the carpet industry, bonded labor in brick kilns, and metal workers. Afghan kids are routinely forced into risky professions because of extreme poverty, predicting a dismal future for the country's youth.

## 4. Needs of youth

The National Youth Policy, under the key intervention policy, has emphasized the need for the promotion of sustainable youth entrepreneurship through increasing young people's access to sustainable finances, increased financial literacy and business skills, and work opportunities for youth through formal and informal apprenticeship and public and private internship programs.

According to UNFPA (2020), about 63.7 percent of Afghans are under 25, indicating a steep "pyramid" age structure in which a large cohort of young people is gradually forming. Young people can contribute to a demographic dividend: a big working-age population with few dependents, providing wealth to their society if they have access to education and jobs, decent health care, and empowerment.

In Afghanistan, young people face significant health, education, employment, and gender inequity problems. Adolescent pregnancy, related to child marriage, contributes to high maternal death rates and prevents females from seeking educational and job opportunities, while drug addiction is an increasing problem among young men. Afghanistan's youth literacy rate is poor (62 percent for young males and 32 percent for young women), and finding quality work remains one of the country's major difficulties.

Girls and young women are often discriminated against and are more prone than their male counterparts to be victims of violence and abuse. Achieving the potential of young girls and women and eventually eradicating institutional gender inequality will be critical to realizing Afghanistan's demographic dividend.

Considering the current situation of Afghanistan, where the terrorist group of Taliban captured all the cities except Panjshir (August 15), there is ongoing unemployment, poverty, and immigration crisis. Many people lost their jobs, and some did not want to work with the Taliban group. Also, those families who could leave the country left, and youth who worked with international organizations, the army, NATO, and the U.S. are trying to leave the country. According to the latest figures from the White House, approximately 116,700 people evacuated to the U.S. with the help of the U.S. Army from August 14 - August 30. Similarly, according to Reuters, more than 4,100 Afghans evacuated with the help of the German military on August 30. The numbers mentioned above show that the situation is already getting worse in case of unemployment, poverty, and lack of skilled workers in the country's future. Other countries, including South Korea, have been helping people evacuate. However, the total number of evacuated people so far is unknown due to the lack of records.

## III. Policy Realities

Demographers have called Afghanistan's demographic realities the "youth bulge," which contrasts sharply with the aging populations of the West, offering a unique set of economic, political, and social challenges. Experts call this age a "statistically dangerous cohort," and its goals, expectations, successes, and defects will shape Afghanistan's future in the next years and decades. Right now, the issues that this reality presents are daunting (HIMAL South Asian, 2014).

There is one national youth policy in Afghanistan, named 'Afghanistan National Youth Policy,' designed in 2014. In the year, the Office of the Deputy Minister of Youth Affairs (DMoYA) released the first-ever Afghanistan National Youth Policy (ANYP) to guarantee that investments in youth benefit them equitably and lead to their growth.

The ANYP aimed to plan and execute short-, medium-, and long-term policies and programs to develop young talents, skills, and potential in the economic, social, cultural, and political sectors through an inclusive approach including all relevant governmental and non-governmental institutions. The ANYP was created to bring about long-term change in the lives of young people at various levels and to address a lack of cooperation amongst youth development sectors.

The ANYP was developed per Afghanistan's National Development Strategy (ANDS), National Priority Programs (NPPs), and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (MDGs) with the following purpose:

- Acknowledge youth as a critical group for Afghanistan's development and poverty reduction.
- Identify fundamental needs of youth and provide the legal framework and strategic guidelines for sustainable youth development.
- Identify gaps and shortfalls in existing policies and programs of both public and private sectors for youth and provide a joint framework for addressing these gaps.
- Acknowledge the distinctive and complementary role of government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the private sector, and youth organizations in youth development and provide a joint framework for common goals.
- Strengthen coordination between the various government and non-governmental organizations involved in youth-related issues.
- Provide a framework for designing and implementing assessment and monitoring mechanisms to amend and support youth-related programs and interventions.
- Provide opportunities for political, economic, social, and cultural participation of youth and invigorate youth at the national and sub-national levels.
- Include youth development priorities in the main policies and programs of government.
- Improve coordination among relevant government entities, international organizations, and NGOs for effective and sustainable political, economic, and social youth development.
- Build effective capacity of youth by meeting their needs.
- Provide and support appropriate and decent employment to youth for their economic and social development.

Although the ANYP was designed to be consistent with the realities of population growth and utilize youth energy for sustainable development and progress of Afghanistan, we see most of the purposes were only in the policy and were not taken into action due to corruption, insecurity, and political interest and behavior of adults about youth. Furthermore, from now on, it would not be valid for the Taliban as the new government might design their policy according to their interests.

## 1. Governmental institutions related to youth

In the Afghanistan government system, the Deputy Ministry of Youth Affairs of the Ministry of Information and Culture (DMoYA) was the only governmental office working with youth. Several NGOs and non-profit organizations were working in youth capacity-building programs for the collapsed government.

The (DMoYA) was directly responsible for overseeing the execution of the ANYP through the Program Coordination and Policy Development Directorate. The Directorate would provide suggestions to other ministries and agencies for better policy and program execution in the country.

The Ministry of Information and Culture (MOIC) was in charge of overseeing the ANYP's implementation. The MOIC

informs the Council of Ministers about the policy's implementation process and seeks political support for its implementations. The DMOYA's Office will monitor the ANYP's implementation at the national, subnational, and local levels.

The ANYP was developed to meet the social and economic needs of the country. Government executive departments and non-government organizations have suggested this policy to meet adolescents' social and economic requirements in the short, medium, and long term.

The following government agency participates in the formation and enactment of the ANYP:

- Deputy Ministry of Youth Affairs of the Ministry of Information and Culture
- Ministry of Education
- Ministry of Higher Education
- Ministry of Justice
- Ministry of Finance
- Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs Martyrs and Disabled
- Ministry of Public Health
- Ministry of Women's Affairs
- Ministry of Counter-Narcotics
- Central Bureau of Statistics
- Independent Directorate of Local Governance

Along with the government entities listed above, the DMOYA supports civil society institutions to design and formulate their programs according to priorities as defined in the ANYP.

At the province level, youth directorates, in collaboration with governors, governmental directorates, and civil society organizations, are responsible for implementing the ANYP and coordinating the execution of youth programs. The appropriate governmental and non-governmental groups will execute youth development initiatives, both economic and social, and all these institutions will be accountable to youth.

## 2. Overview of existing youth policies by domains

We focus on the following essential categories of inclusion for Afghan youth: employment, education, health, and voice and participation. The analysis is based on current data and policy issues in the context of Afghanistan.

### a) Employment:

In the job market, young people are underrepresented. In the last five years, the status of youth in the job market has deteriorated. Most young people are either unemployed or inactive (48 percent). Despite making up the majority of the population, youth make up 38 percent of the labor force participants in Afghanistan. Only 18% of young people who work are employed in stable paid positions. Self-employed adolescents (35 percent), day laborers (18 percent), and unpaid family workers account for many of working youth (29 percent).

Adults and youth are involved in vulnerable employment at comparable rates; however, youth are more likely to be jobless and inactive than the rest of the adult population. All people aged 14 and above who were

- (a) working fewer than 40 hours;
- (b) available to work more hours; and
- (c) willing to work further hours during the reference period of one week

were classified as underemployed (NSIA, 2018).

Rural youth are more likely than urban youth to be employed, but they are also more likely to be underemployed and working in hazardous conditions. Agriculture is the most common occupation for employed youth in rural regions (as compared to the service sector in urban areas). The line between solid income-generating job and unpaid family labour is blurred within agriculture, and the work is susceptible to agricultural production's inherent cyclicity. Male and female youngsters both migrate to cities to search work in the service industry (WB, 2020).

In a survey conducted by the World Bank (2019), few young people expressed an interest in moving overseas. Respondents overwhelmingly expressed dissatisfaction with migrants' experience both in route and once they arrive at their destination. High returnee movements from both countries since 2014 may have affected their unfavorable perceptions of life in Pakistan and Iran (World Bank, 2019b).

## **b) Education:**

Afghanistan's formal education system includes a variety of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs that range from kindergarten through grade 12. The delivery of education is extremely reliant on the help of other actors. Various national and international NGOs provide Community-Based Education (CBE) in a variety of hard-to-reach regions. Accelerated learning programs supplement the official education system, allowing children who have missed school due to conflict or other causes to make up for the lost time.

In the 2015-2016 fiscal year, 95 percent of government education funding went to general education, 4% to Islamic education, and the rest to technical and vocational training. In 2013, UNESCO endorsed a national TVET plan. TVET has risen in popularity among the development assistance community and commercial institutions in recent years as a potential approach to quickly educate untrained employees with appropriate skills so they may enter the job market. The lack of coordinated pre-primary education is a significant flaw in the educational system, influencing all future educational outcomes. Only around 1% of age-appropriate children attend pre-school, primarily administered privately and located in cities.

Afghanistan's school system has been destroyed by more than three decades of persistent violence. Despite recent success in increasing enrolment, finishing elementary school remains a distant goal for many of the country's youth particularly in rural regions and for girls. Enrolment numbers vary widely in the poorest and most distant parts of the country, and females continue to be denied equal access. While many IGOs, NGOs, and governments have attempted to promote equal education for all, about 3.7 million children are out-of-school in Afghanistan, and 60% of them are girls.

In Afghanistan, education has little bearing on young people's employment prospects. However, it does predict the types of jobs that young people will have in the future. Work chances are comparable for youth with all degrees of schooling. On the other hand, the type of employment that a young person undertakes is heavily impacted by their educational background. Individuals with a high school diploma are almost entirely employed in salaried positions. However, studies suggest that teenage inactivity grows with educational achievement, meaning that more educated adolescents are less active.

### c) Participation:

According to NSIA (2020), today's youth deserve true and meaningful opportunities to participate in political processes and contribute to real-world development solutions, as expressed by youth in the majority of interviews. When given a chance to organize, speak their views, and engage meaningfully in political decision-making, young people consistently demonstrate their willingness and capacity to create constructive, long-term change. They also get a greater sense of belonging and are more likely to demand and defend democracy.

Even when given the opportunity, young people may lack the authority to take advantage of them, or they may be susceptible if they do. Many Afghans are socially and economically dependent on their social networks due to the strong social structure in the family and a lack of social safety systems. Youth are more susceptible in this sense since they lack the social and financial capital required to exert influence on their networks or act independently. It is probably not surprising that, outside of financial limitations, many Afghan adolescents questioned for the survey cited "family support" and "family permission" as essential to achieving their goals. The intergenerational conflict was discovered in the following areas:

**Education participation:** Gender norms and financial precarity were major limitations in adopting education, especially beyond the basic level, as several previous researchers have found. Parents and children may hold opposing viewpoints on the importance of these limitations. In this research, some male and female adolescents believed that their families just valued education less than they did, so they were less inclined to support it.

**Participation in youth groups and other organizations in the community:** Families may have doubts regarding the value of their children's engagement in these organizations. Families saw Youth Services Coordinators (YSCs) as 'un-Islamic' or a waste of time in some circumstances. This dilemma can be exacerbated by the propensity for these organizations to encroach on or play against other communal power structures. This emphasizes the necessity of educating and onboarding communities on the role of community structures like YSCs and community development corporations (CDCs).

According to a survey by reconciliation resources (2018), while respondents were worried about the destinies of all Afghans, most tended to think that Afghan youth was in a particularly tough situation, with limited options for exerting themselves politically. Respondents reported feeling silenced and censored in a variety of ways. "If we voice our opinions and criticize those in power in the province, some persons in authority in the province will send us threats and warnings," one respondent said.

Many Afghan youths do not vote, which can erode democratic governance and damage the political system's representativeness, leading to the disenfranchisement of young people. Further study in Farah, Afghanistan, based on the opinions of young people and youth-led organizations, shows that they believe they are routinely excluded from politics and feel neglected (FES, 2021). They expressed a need for a nurturing environment in which to develop their political ideas and involvement techniques.

According to Ahmadi (2015), youth engagement in violence has increased substantially in Afghanistan over several decades, as political and religious organizations have used disadvantaged youth to further their political and religious beliefs. This is a growing source of worry, but no national plan or specific public policy has been developed to address it. There have been several studies on youth radicalization, particularly among Muslim youth, but few have been done on Afghan youth.

### d) Health:

Many Afghans, particularly women, marry at a young age, making reproductive health concerns particularly significant to young Afghans. Lack of reproductive health knowledge, disproportionately high rates of adolescent pregnancy and limited

access to medical facilities, combined, put adolescents, particularly young women, in a vulnerable health condition.

Although Afghanistan's health statistics are gradually improving, youths remain particularly vulnerable in two areas: mental and reproductive health. In Afghanistan, mental health is poorly understood, and the healthcare system is ill-equipped to detect and treat mental health issues. Restricted contraceptive usage, a high fertility rate, and limited access to health facilities worsen poor reproductive health indicators, closely connected to educational levels.

Even though there are more healthcare facilities than ever, health infrastructure falls short of demand, fertility rates remain high, and contraception use is low. Less than 20% of married women use a modern family planning method, and more than three-quarters (76%) of women give birth without the assistance of a skilled attendant (Afghanistan Poverty Assessment, nd).

Economic instability has had a detrimental emotional impact on several of the study's participants. Some kids described emotions of hopelessness and despair as a result of various impediments to improving their circumstances. There is agreement among available studies that mental health results in Afghanistan are poor. Exposure to violence, social trauma, relocation, and a lack of sufficient support services are among the reasons for this (Conseil Santé and Governance Institute of Afghanistan, 2018; Sayed, 2011).

Furthermore, the impoverished do not always have the worse mental health outcomes, implying the necessity of considering other factors that influence mental health. On the other hand, individuals and communities may incur financial expenses as a result of poor mental health outcomes (Bloom et al., 2018). Youth are also less inclined to take advantage of chances if they are depressed about the future (Duflo, 2012).

Recent literature on social networks, resilience, and mental health has found that conflict, poverty, and instability in Afghanistan led to poor mental health, and more study is needed in this area (Sayed 2011). Poverty, for example, is generally thought to lead to poor mental health outcomes, but the link is not always direct— in certain countries, poor individuals have better mental health than non-poor people (Das et al., 2007). The strength of one's social networks is one well-known technique for people to cope with trauma and adversity. Social networks are essential for mental health in Afghanistan. Under the appropriate circumstances, good relationships may help create resilience (Kawachi & Berkman 2001). Feeling respected and connected to one community can help people overcome some of the adverse effects of trauma and hardship and can sometimes have a more significant influence on emotions of happiness (Trani & Bakhshi, 2013). However, significant degrees of social duty come with these networks, which may cause a burden during difficult times. One such stressor is the pressure placed on young people to support and respect their families (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010).

### 3. Legal frameworks underpinning youth policies

The ANYP was developed according to the values and principles of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Afghans have very rich social and cultural norms, and Afghan youth must be nurtured based on these norms and values, including peace, justice, and brotherhood. The values enshrined in the ANYP are as follows:

1. Based on Article 14 of the Constitution, respect for the national identity.
2. Based on Article 6 and 34 of the Constitution, respect for the human dignity, human rights, culture, religion, and political views of others.
3. Based on Article 6 and 22 of the Constitution, social justice, and access to resources.
4. Based on Article 20 and 2 of the Constitution, gender equality.
5. Based on Articles 43, 44, 46, and 47 of the Constitution regarding the potential of youth and adolescents.

6. Active political, economic, and social participation.
7. Commitment and sincerity towards all principles and values of the Constitution of Afghanistan.
8. Protection of Afghanistan's cultural heritage.

## IV. Conclusion

Afghanistan has one of the youngest populations in the world. It is estimated that about 80% of the population is under the age of 35. Many Afghan young are in the lower age range of the 'youth' group, reflecting the country's high birth rate. The youth in Afghanistan is geographically dispersed, with approximately 72 percent living in rural areas. They are mostly seen in households with uncertain income sources such as agriculture, livestock, and day labor.

Afghanistan National Youth Policy, which was developed in 2014, is the only national youth policy. The Office of the Deputy Minister of Youth Affairs released the first-ever Afghanistan National Youth Policy (ANYP) this year to ensure that investments in youth are equitable and contribute to their development.

The ANYP aimed to develop youthful talents, skills, and potential in the economic, social, cultural, and political sectors through an inclusive strategy, including all relevant governmental and non-governmental organizations.

The ANYP was established to influence long-term change in the lives of youth at all levels and to address a lack of collaboration within youth development sectors. Despite having such policy, the youth challenges such as poor education and health systems, high rates of child marriage, mass unemployment, insecurity, low levels of political participation, and a high rate of immigration are major challenges in the light of public policy over the years that have gotten worse, particularly after the previous administration fell.

Youth in the rural area believe they are being left behind in the development agenda because of a lack of infrastructure, education, and work opportunities. Both urban and rural youth blamed instability, a poor economy, and government's indifference for the lack of possibilities for the young. On the other hand, rural youth blamed their deficiencies on their rural position, implying that the government should fill up the gaps.

While youth education and employment possibilities should remain a major governmental goal, concentrating solely on these areas overlooks chances to strengthen social cohesion in Afghanistan at a critical moment.

Regarding youth engagement, it is worse luck to report that most young people have been left out of local and national politics and administrative activity because of corruption, ethnicity, and family background.

Focusing just on economic inclusion is unlikely to address the many issues that lead to youth exclusion. While many young Afghan women want to work, a large percentage of them do not. Most Afghan youngsters who wish to work are unlikely to do so based on current economic projections. A strategy that focuses solely on job development and skills training would likely overlook opportunities to promote social cohesiveness among these youngsters, especially among disillusioned young males.

## 1. Needs of youth and policy needs: What is at stake and what needs to be done.

Looking into the youth challenges deeply through the context of public policy in Afghanistan, education for girls, unemployment, and youth participation are at stake. To fight these challenges, the following possible solutions are recommended:

- Strengthen discussion with government counterparts and collaborate with them to build a common commitment to young inclusion, especially by defining key objectives. Addressing these hurdles may require uncomfortable themes such as anti-government sentiment, ethnic marginalization, and gender standards to be discussed. The Afghan National Youth Policy (GolRA 2014) and National Youth Strategy (2017– 2021) are essential in advancing the youth agenda and need to be further developed in the years ahead.
- The difficulties encountered by Afghan adolescents and overlapping vulnerabilities should be considered in project design. Women and girls suffer intersecting vulnerabilities, as do youngsters who lack social networks to help them. The project design goal should be to empower adolescents within their social networks while also looking for possible disruptions that might further disempower them, such as igniting intergenerational or intergroup conflicts or dividing communities along gender lines.
- Increase the availability of skills-based training in rural regions, focusing on generating income for both men and women. Future investments in this sector should be based on working with communities to investigate necessary skills, particularly in agriculture, where the majority of adolescents are likely to stay employed. More work has to be done to overcome the social and cultural hurdles that women (especially young, unmarried women) experience while participating in projects, including investigating culturally acceptable possibilities for women and their families.
- Finally, while including literacy components into skills-based training, as some providers have done, is useful, more specific study on literacy programs for kids is needed, as present statistics provide no indication of demand for these courses or the success of existing programs.
- Furthermore, complement economic inclusion initiatives with social cohesion-promoting activities. Strengthening mental health and drug addiction programs, conflict resolution initiatives, and the growth of volunteer activities are all possibilities. Interventions that include youth as change agents in their communities and government programs might help to strengthen social cohesion while also improving government relations. This type of engagement with kids may be beneficial to teenagers who, on the one hand, feel abandoned by the government and, on the other, feel powerless in their communities.

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