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## URBAN RECOVERY, OR CHAOS?

Few would deny that Afghanistan's urban centres face huge challenges. The physical chaos that prevails today in most towns and cities is routinely explained by Afghan civil servants as a consequence of decades of conflict, population growth and lack of public investments. All of these are indeed contributory factors, but the core of the problem lies in the failure to undertake institutional reforms, particularly related to outdated systems of planning and urban management. Beset by turf-wars as to their respective mandates, the civil servants concerned seem unable or unwilling to transform the dysfunctional systems that they have inherited, and which continue to hamper effective urban development, while providing lucrative opportunities for some to benefit from the speculative urban construction that now characterises most towns.

At six per cent growth per year,<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan has amongst the fastest rates of urbanisation in Asia. The likelihood of a surge in urban growth in the country was highlighted immediately after the international intervention in a 2002 joint needs assessment by the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and Asia Development Bank (ADB) identifying priorities for rehabilitation across all sectors. Despite this and subsequent studies and strategies, international support for Afghanistan's urban sector has been, at best, half-hearted. Added to this, in a context with

very limited indigenous capacity for planning and urban management, the UN has singly failed to provide leadership or effective technical assistance, let alone to fulfil its mandate for coordination.

In seeking to fill this vacuum, international agencies have engaged since 2003 in ad hoc sharing of information and, in response to requests for support from the Ministry of Urban Development, contributed to processes that might have laid the ground for a national strategy for urban development. Not as consultative or inclusive as many would have wished, these processes have been both fitful and reactive, driven to a large degree by the cycle of donor conferences. One of the consequences has been a tendency to be accumulative, rather than selective, avoiding effective prioritisation. For example, the joint formulation of a National Urban Programme (NUP) in 2004 comprised five sub-programmes:

- Governance and management was to address 'the overarching political, administrative, managerial and technical institutional structures and mechanisms that will deliver effective, efficient and accountable urban governments';
- Community-based upgrading foresaw 'the integrated upgrading of conditions for households living in informal and under-serviced housing areas, with special emphasis on marginalised and vulnerable communities, through community participation to determine investment in infrastructure and services';

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<sup>1</sup> UN Development Programme, 'Millennium Development Goals', Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Country Report 2005, Vision 2020 summary, 2005.

- Land development and management was to facilitate ‘the development of urban land – with special emphasis on sites and services development for housing – and associated technical mechanisms, such as town planning, land registration and transfer, cadastral mapping, etc., that will increase the supply of serviced land in urban areas’;
- Infrastructure and services were to be improved through ‘expansion of main infrastructure networks and services to standards commensurate with the availability of resources, and the strengthening of the operating agencies to ensure effective and efficient service delivery’;
- Heritage conservation and revitalisation aimed at ‘strengthening communities’ links with urban heritage, through conservation of historic buildings and areas, retaining their essential character while finding roles that can sustain urban activities’.<sup>2</sup>

Without the human or financial resources to realise this highly ambitious array of sub-programmes, the NUP seems to have been forgotten by civil servants and donors alike.

This tendency to present encyclopaedic wish lists has made it difficult for potential donors to identify priorities, in contrast to sectors in which more convincing cases for specific investments have been made. A succession of Ministers of Urban Development and mayors have bemoaned this lack of investment (only 2.5 per cent of the 1383–86 budget was earmarked for urban projects, with even less actually disbursed) without acknowledging that a lack of focus, along with inertia and persistent malpractice within the institutions they lead, may be a factor in their failure to secure resources.

Almost six years after the formulation of the NUP, only limited progress had been made in two of the areas defined in the programme. One was in infrastructure, with improvements in access to piped water in Kabul and 11 other cities as a result of German-funded investments in networks, along with the ‘corporatisation’ of what was a parastatal national water utility. The World Bank-funded Kabul Urban Rehabilitation Programme (KURP) enabled the rehabilitation of infrastructure in five districts of Kabul, building on a number of community-based initiatives focusing on upgrading

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Urban Development and Housing, National Urban Programme: ‘Consolidated Strategy’, August 2004.

and urban conservation that were implemented by Afghan and international NGOs and the UN Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat).

With a reported backlog of some 40,000 applicants for municipal plots in Kabul alone, and only a tiny fraction of urban inhabitants having secure tenure, the system of management of urban land is in need of urgent review. The manner in which powerful individuals have ‘rendered’ valuable city-centre land and property suggests, however, that the current system is very beneficial for the few. While international media coverage of the highly-visible urban building boom has tended to suggest that it is a sign of a vibrant recovery, there is less debate about the social and environmental cost at which this speculative ‘development’ is being achieved, or why it remains largely un-taxed. If, as has been projected,<sup>3</sup> Afghanistan’s urban population doubles by 2015, there is a likelihood that the three-quarters of households presently denied access to basic services will increase yet further, with unknown social and political consequences.

Rather than addressing this volatile reality, much official energy since 2006 has been devoted to plans for an ‘eco-neutral’ new city in Dehsabz, to the northeast of the capital. Japanese-funded consultants formulated a master plan, subsequently endorsed by the Afghan cabinet, for a city that might house 3 million inhabitants by 2025. While it remains difficult to secure resources for the rehabilitation of Kabul’s threadbare infrastructure networks, claims that this far-fetched scheme will be funded largely from sales of residential and commercial land are implausible, as are those of the ‘recycle-oriented resource use’ that might prevail in this brave new urban world. On a less ambitious scale, regional and ‘strategic plans’ prepared by the Ministry of Urban Development risk remaining on paper unless there is some will to enforce their provisions on the ground.

A similar form of disconnect seemed to characterise the provisions for urban recovery that were included in the Afghanistan Compact of 2006,<sup>4</sup> namely that

by end 2010; municipal governments will have strengthened capacity to manage urban

<sup>3</sup> Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, ‘Securing Afghanistan’s Future: Accomplishments and the Strategic Path Forward’, March 2004.

<sup>4</sup> The Afghanistan Compact was a joint statement of intent issued at a conference on Afghanistan held in London on 31 January and 1 February 2006.

development and to ensure that municipal services are delivered effectively, efficiently and transparently; in line with Afghanistan's MDGs, investment in water supply and sanitation will ensure that 50 per cent of households in Kabul and 30 per cent of households in other major urban areas will have access to piped water.

By even the most optimistic estimates, fewer than one in ten urban residents across the country have access to piped water, with this proportion only likely to decrease as growth outstrips investments. Previous claims that 'public-private partnerships' would close this gap and enable a significant expansion of infrastructure seem to have been quietly forgotten.

As part of efforts to bridge the gap between the upbeat official line and the grim urban reality, an analysis of challenges facing the sector was included in initial drafts of the urban component of the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) in 2008. Undertaken by a group of Afghan and international specialists under the leadership of the Minister of Urban Development, the formulation process was handicapped from the start by chronic institutional rivalry, with the result that few municipal staff participated in

consultations and critical data was not shared. In addition, much of the analysis was dropped from the highly-sanitised final version of the ANDS document, which instead set out a case for a National Urban Policy (with barely a reference to the 2004 exercise), Institutional Reform Action Plans, Revenue Improvement Programs and Infrastructure Investment Plans, but with little detail on how these might be practically be achieved. As seems to have been the case in some other sectors, there has been minimal follow-up on the massive ANDS process.

The launching of the 'Kabul Process' in July 2010, along with the ongoing 'transition planning' on the National Priority Programmes, has helped to focus attention on the crisis facing most urban centres in the country. The challenge now is to ensure that the new initiatives that may emerge, including an ambitious proposal for an Urban National Solidarity Programme, not only draw on earlier sectoral strategies but also take account of the volatile reality of Afghanistan's current urban landscape, where private interests seem to prevail over any processes of institutional reform that could pave the way for programmes to address the needs of a fast-growing number of urban residents.

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Jolyon Leslie is an architect who has managed a range of urban and rural rehabilitation programmes in the Middle East and Central Asia. In 2004, he published *Afghanistan: The Mirage of Peace*, co-written with Chris Johnson.

## ABOUT THIS CHAPTER

This chapter is part of a larger volume called *Snapshots of an Intervention: The Unlearned Lessons of Afghanistan's Decade of Assistance (2001–2011)*, edited by Martine van Bijlert and Sari Kouvo. The volume is a collection of 26 short case studies by analysts and practitioners, each with long histories in the country, who were closely involved in the programmes they describe. The contributions present rare and detailed insights into the complexity of the intervention and, in many cases, the widely shared failure to learn necessary lessons and to adapt to realities as they were encountered.

The chapters and full document can be found on the AAN website ([www.aan-afghanistan.org](http://www.aan-afghanistan.org)) under publications.

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