



Urbanization Dynamics in Afghanistan: Historical Roots, Current Patterns, and Future Prospects (A Case Study of Balkh Province)

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Abstract: Urbanization is considered as one of the significant socio-economic evolutions of the contemporary era, having a critical role in economic growth, urban development, and spatial change. This paper examines the dynamics of urbanization in Afghanistan with a focus on historical roots, current patterns, and future prospects of urbanization in Balkh Province. The findings illustrate that population growth, migration, internal displacement, returnee resettlement, and the concentration of governmental offices in Mazar-e-Sharif have been the major drivers of urban expansion. Urban growth in Balkh province has largely occurred in a horizontal and unplanned manner, resulting in the emergence of informal settlements and urban sprawl. In addition, the research identifies major urban challenges, such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of a centralized sewerage system, insufficient solid waste management, traffic congestion, lack of public transportation, shortage of green spaces, and unstable institutional coordination. Despite these obstacles, Balkh province possesses significant opportunities, including strategic transit location, reliable electricity supply, promoting private-sector investment, and the existence of Mazar-e-Sharif's Strategic Development Framework (SDF). The paper argues that the future of urbanization in Balkh depends on shifting from unmanaged expansion toward sustainable and inclusive urban development. Key policies include the regularization and upgrading of informal settlements, improvement of public infrastructure and services, promotion of managed vertical development, environmental protection, climate resilience, and strengthening institutional coordination and digital governance. The study concludes that achieving sustainable urban development in Balkh requires comprehensive urban planning, effective governance, citizen participation, and realistic strategic vision.

Keywords: Urbanization, urban expansion, urban sprawl, waste management, urban development.

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INTRODUCTION

Cities are created as a result of urbanization (Hussain and Imitiyaz, 2018), and function as economic hubs and centers of excellence in education, health care, culture, social services, government administration, employment opportunities and livelihood to serve as engines of economic growth (Hidayat and Yoshitaka (2021). Cities are not only the drivers of economic development (UN-Habitat, 2014), but also throughout the history, they have been the main centers of learning, culture and innovation (Palanivel, 2017). The world's population reached 8 billion in November 2022, with over half (55 per cent) living in urban areas, a figure projected to rise to 70 per cent by 2050 (United Nations Statistics Division, 2023).

The term "Urbanization" comes from the Latin "urbanus"-urban and indicates the increasing role of cities in public life (Alimova, 2022). Urbanization implies a change in the economic, social and cultural aspects of the society, and leads to increase of urban areas, population and processes (Hussain and Imitiyaz, 2018). It generally involves the shift in population from rural to urban settlements. From a demographic perspective, the urbanization level is best measured by the urban population share, with the urbanization rate

being the rate at which that share is growing (Gordon and David, 2014).

Afghanistan is a predominately rural society, but this is changing fast as the country is experiencing the most powerful wave of urbanization in its history. In 1950, only 1 out of every 20 Afghans lived in cities. In 2014, 1 out of every four, and an estimated 24% of the total population lived in cities (UN-Habitat, 2014). With an urban population growth of 3.3% per year, in 2024, the population living in Afghanistan's cities was estimated to be above 27%, and by 2060 1 out of every 2 – 50% of the population – is expected to live in cities. (UN-Habitat, 2024).

Balkh Province, situated in the northern region of Afghanistan, is rich in historical, cultural, and economic significance. It has been a prominent center of civilization since ancient times, especially during the era of the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom. The city of Balkh, also known as "the mother of cities" and "the cradle of Aryan civilization" is an ancient part of Balkh province which used to be a major cultural and regional hub in history (Khaliq, 2020). In the present day, Mazar-e-Sharif, the provincial capital, and a regional hub for northern Afghanistan, is a key economic and political center, with

a growing population and increasing urbanization rate (UN-Habitat, 2014). Developed around the Holly Shrine (Rawza), associated with Hazrat Ali, the fourth caliph of Islam, Mazar-e-Sharif is one of the most touristic cities of Afghanistan especially for religious tourists (Mazar-e-Sharif SDF, 2020). The province is strategically located along important trade routes, which has facilitated its historical role as crossroads of commerce between Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. The population of Balkh has grown rapidly in recent decades, driven by rural-urban migration, internal displacement, re-settlement of returnees and socio-economic factors (UN-Habitat, 2014). Mazar-e-Sharif, as the main urban center, has attracted a large portion of the rural population, leading to the expansion of urban settlements and the associated challenges of infrastructure, housing, and social services. In 2014, it was noted that Balkh's urbanization rate had accelerated, with Mazar-e-Sharif becoming one of the fastest-growing cities in Afghanistan (UN-Habitat, 2014). Projected in 2020, the population of Mazar-i-Sharif is expected to grow by approximately 150 per cent by 2040 (Mazar-e-Sharif SDF, 2020).

Urbanization is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it is considered the key to the urban problems, with 80% of economic activity occurring in cities, the opportunities available for employment and the enhanced and more cost-effective access to basic services can provide people and countries with the means to reduce extreme poverty and hunger (Watkins, 2013). On other side, unmanaged urbanization can also lead to the unchecked growth of slums, pollution and crime and contribute to the increased marginalization of rural poor and urban migrants whose access to basic goods, services and livelihood becomes increasingly perilous. Afghanistan's urbanization has largely been informal (UN-Habitat, 2014), and figures show that 80 per cent of the urban Afghans live in informal areas that are under-served and informal housing areas with little tenure security and very poor access to basic services (UN-Habitat, 2024). Yet, Afghanistan's cities have been a significant source of economic and social development. Urban-based economic activity such as services accounts for over 50% of national GDP (UN-Habitat, 2014). Speaking of Mazar-e-Sharif, it has grown significantly since 2002 (Mazar-e-Sharif SDF, 2020), and has likewise come across opportunities and challenges.

This paper will make an attempt to highlight the historical roots of urbanization in Balkh province, examining the factors, shaping its development over time. It will also analyze the current patterns of urbanization, and identify key trends, challenges, and opportunities in Mazar-e-Sharif City. Finally, the paper will explore the future prospects of urbanization in Balkh, offering insights into potential pathways for sustainable urban development.

This study is significant and essential, as it contributes to a comprehensive understanding of urbanization dynamics in Balkh, a province with profound historical, cultural, and economic importance in Afghanistan. By exploring the historical roots, current urbanization trends, and future prospects, this research offers valuable insights into the evolution of urban development in Balkh and its broader implications for the country's growth.

Furthermore, it builds a good understanding of the patterns of urbanization in Mazar-e-Sharif for policymakers, urban planners, and development actors to help them shape good responses in order to effectively address the challenges of infrastructure, housing, environmental pollution, and basic services. Along with the identified key issues, the research aims to propose considerable solutions for sustainable urban development that can enhance the quality of life for residents and contribute to the region's economic prosperity.

Finally, as Afghanistan is undergoing rapid urbanization phase, this research highlights the urgent need for effective urban governance and planning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term "Urbanization" comes from the Latin "urbanus"-urban and indicates the increasing role of cities in public life (Alimova, 2022). Urbanization is a complex socio-economic process that transforms the built environment, converting formerly rural into urban settlements, while also shifting the spatial distribution of a population from rural to urban areas. It includes changes in dominant occupations, lifestyle, culture and behavior, and thus alters the demographic and social structure of both urban and rural areas. A major consequence of urbanization is a rise in the number, land area and population size of urban settlements and in the number and share of urban residents compared to rural dwellers (United Nations, 2019). As per Joshua J. Mark (2014), urbanization is a process by which rural communities grow to form cities, or urban centers, and, by extension, the growth and expansion of those cities. In the words of Peng *et al.* (2011), urbanization is the process by which rural areas become urbanized as a result of economic development and industrialization. Demographically, the term "urbanization" denotes the redistribution of populations from rural to urban settlements over time. However, it is important to acknowledge that the criteria for defining what is urban may vary from country to country which cautions us against a strict comparison of urbanization cross-nationally. The fundamental difference between urban and rural is that urban populations live in larger, denser, and more heterogeneous cities as opposed to small, sparser, and less differentiated rural places. As defined by Afghanistan's law on urban development and housing (2017), urban area/city is a specific geographic area that is socially heterogeneous, relatively denser, and serves as

center for social, economic, administrative, political and service activities.

McGranahan and Satterthwaite (2014) indicate that there is an emerging consensus that urbanization is critically important to international development, but also mention a considerable confusion over what urbanization actually is; whether it is accelerating or slowing; whether it should be encouraged or discouraged; and, more generally, what the responses should be. The authors summarize that although urbanization brings serious challenges, attempts to

inhibit it through exclusionary policies, are likely to be economically, socially and environmentally damaging. Moreover, with the right support, urbanization can become an important element of sustainable development.

Japan International Cooperation Agency (2013) specifies that economic inequality, natural disasters and lack of infrastructure as three emerging problems associated with urbanization. It also shares six key issues of focus for urban and regional development utilizing Japan's efficient urbanization management expertise.

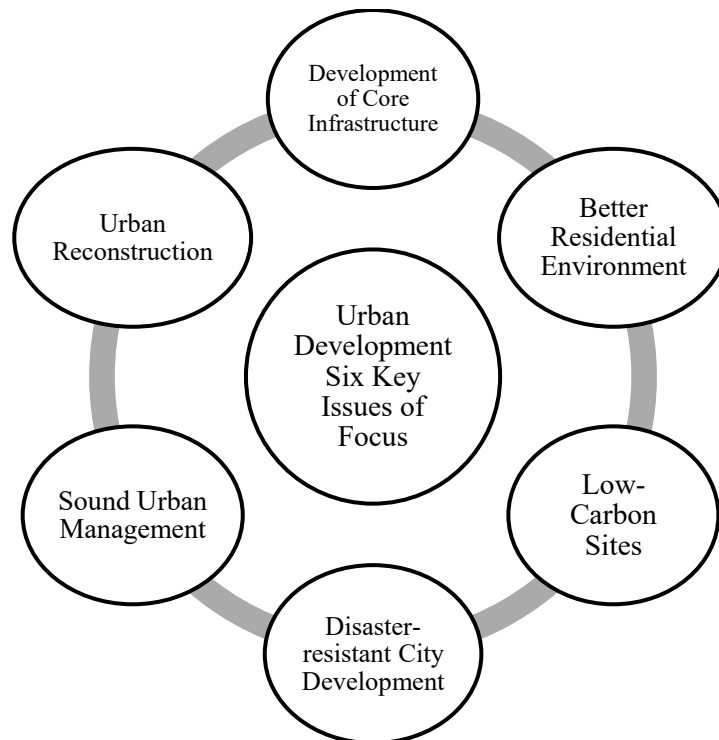


Figure 1: Six Key Issues of Focus in Urban Development; Resource: JICA, 2013.

According to SDG Resource Center (2026), urban planning serves as a critical tool for managing dynamics, enabling cities to maximize the benefits of urbanization while minimizing the downsides. Good urban planning can ensure equitable access to public services and amenities, adequate housing, and a high quality of life for all city residents. It can also help to mitigate environmental impacts by promoting efficient land use, reducing the need for car travel and enhancing urban green spaces. Furthermore, urban planning contributes to building resilient communities by incorporating measures to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change such as floods and heatwaves. In addition, it plays a role in promoting sustainable consumption, and production patterns by shaping the built environment in ways that encourage more sustainable behaviors. For instance, designing cities to be more walkable and bike-friendly can reduce reliance on private vehicles, thus lowering greenhouse gas emissions. As such, urbanization and urban planning are tied to each other.

Afghanistan's law on urban development and housing (2017) defines urban plans as tools for the effective use of land, development of infrastructures, networks, and zones, and leading future growth of urban areas.

Calogero (2011) acknowledges three modes of urban planning (urbanization) in Afghanistan. The first mode is formal planning, in which Afghan public agencies develop and implement strategies for guiding urban development. The second mode is informal planning, in which the urban regime sets both direct and indirect rules that guide urban development. These include denial of recognition, exclusion from the legal sphere, and maintenance of a 'vulnerable reserve' of available labor and space for potential investment. The third mode is exceptionalist planning, in which elites—including Afghans, Afghan-expatriates, and non-Afghans—violate rules and expectations with knowing impunity.

Hanif *et al.* (2021), have assessed the evolution of urbanism in three different time period from 1979 to 2018 in six major cities in Afghanistan. During the first period (1978-1992), the shift from green areas to urban areas was relatively low and steady. Afghanistan experienced a seemingly rapid urban expansion during Mujahedeen and Taliban regimes (1992-2001). However, this rapid urban expansion was structurally unplanned. Based on their findings, six major cities- Kabul, Kandahar, Kunduz, Mazar-e Sharif, Jalalabad and Herat have witnessed the highest urban development from 2001-2018. This is due to the massive return of the Afghan refugees from neighboring countries along with the rapid economic development and relative general conditions in Afghanistan. It is argued that the rapid unplanned urban development has significantly led to socio-economic challenges within major cities in Afghanistan.

In a policy brief, Ahmadi (2019), explored drivers of urban transition in Afghanistan and the country's urban future. The research found Afghanistan, one of the fastest urbanizing countries in the world, which is induced by poor economic conditions, lack of basic services and public utilities in the rural areas and also by social preferences. In addition, the sectoral distribution of employment differs markedly between urban and rural areas, with agriculture more prominent in rural areas and services more prominent in towns and cities. Accordingly, the urban-rural gap in access to basic services has prevailed in different ranges in Afghanistan, thus differences have acted as a push factor for rural-urban migration. People move to cities in search of benefiting urban services, health care, educational opportunities and higher standard of living. Moreover, in Afghanistan, service delivery and infrastructure development have not kept pace with the country's rapid urban transition, thus Afghan cities have grown haphazardly, informally, with limited access to affordable and quality basic services. Particularly the rapid urban growth has caused the rise of urban slums, climate change, air pollution and traffic congestion in big cities of Afghanistan.

In a discussion paper titled "Afghanistan's Urban Future" UN Habitat (2014), there is an overview of the significant urbanization transition facing Afghanistan. It shows that while urbanization presents considerable challenges, it also offers immense opportunities to harness urban development as a driver of economic growth, poverty reduction and peace-building.

Rahmati *et al.* (2020), studied urban growth and its impact on Kabul city; their findings emphasize that urbanism is good for a nation or city but if it is planned and done in the systematic manner. They add that due to four decades of conflicts in Afghanistan, all urban measures could not be implemented properly in Kabul City, which took a 'U' turn in the development and

growth of area. They acknowledge that in the long run, Kabul has the potential for being a smart city, meeting the needs of the youth and other citizens, only when the government is implementing laws and policies to strengthen the state regulations.

Vineet Chaturvedi *et al.* (2020), have analyzed urban development patterns in a conflict zone with a case study of Kabul City, Afghanistan. The study results indicate that unplanned settlements have grown 4.5 times during 2001-2017 whereas planned settlements have grown only 1.25 times. The unplanned settlements expanded mostly towards the west and north west parts of the city, and the growth of planned settlements happened mainly in the central and eastern parts of the city. They conclude that security and availability of infrastructure were the main drivers of growth for planned settlements, whereas unplanned growth, mainly on hillsides, was driven by the availability of land with poor infrastructure.

APPRO (2012) highlighted the relation between the migration and urban development in Kabul city. The findings claimed that since 2001, the rate of migration into Kabul has increased drastically, and this has placed much stress on the weak or non-existent infrastructure, fragile environment especially in terms of air quality, and scarce resources such as potable water. Along with that, the health and education sectors do not extend sufficiently to informal settlements.

There are very limited scientific resources available in the field of history and urban studies in Balkh province. Saleh M. Khaliq (2019) in his book examines the tourist attractions of Balkh. He refers to the six-thousand-year history of Balkh, considering it as a cradle of Aryan culture and civilization, and the Um-ul-Balad "Mother of cities" in the world.

Yousefifar (2010) evaluated the patterns of the emergence of cities and urbanization in the history of Iran. The results illustrate, in spite of the usual ideas, urbanization in Iran is the result of multiple factors and it should not be attributed only to the political factor which is only one of the many influencing factors. Taqi Rehnumaye (2009) believed that after the 1960s, the Iranian government, as a major and large employer, played a significant role in urban development by utilizing oil revenue sources and injecting both capital and operational credits into cities.

Maria E. Freire (2014) measured Africa's urbanization along with challenges and opportunities. According to their study, urban populations in Africa are expected to triple in the next 50 years, changing the profile of the region, and challenging policy makers to harness urbanization for sustainable and inclusive growth. They highlight dealing with Africa's growth and poverty challenges without managing urbanization is impossible. Detlef Kammeier and Issa (2017), in a policy note on urban governance, stated that Afghanistan

faces a wave, largely uncontrolled, of urban growth in the form of ‘informal’ settlements, without the most basic infrastructure, i.e., water supply, waste water and solid waste management and accessible schools and playgrounds, but also without suitable places of work for both men and women. Their study focused on the cities of Herat, Kandahar, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Jalalabad discusses the need for the development of national urban policy, and long-term capacity investment on municipal authorities. It also highlights the reforms initiated under Citizen’s Charter in the aforesaid cities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For this research, qualitative method has been used to explore urbanization in Balkh province. Semi-structured interviews (KIIs) were conducted to collect primary data from the urban experts, municipal authorities, and development agencies’ officers, and that field observations were organized. Further, existing literature, policy papers, reports and government documents were reviewed.

This study will investigate urbanization in Balkh Province, Afghanistan. More details about the area are given below.

Balkh, also known as "Umm al-Balad" or "Mother of Cities," was one of the first cities where ancient Aryan rulers displayed their high flags which symbolized their power and glory, atop tall towers. As an ancient city, it is located in the area of present-day Balkh and is famous for its beauty and is referred to as the "City of Pearls" (Saeedi, 2014). Balkh province is located in the northern region of Afghanistan, and is surrounded by Uzbekistan in the north, Tajikistan in the northeast, Kunduz province in the east, Samangan province in the southeast, Sare-Pul province in the southwest, and Jawzjan province in the west. The total population is over 1.5 million. (Afghanistan: Socio-Economic Survey, 2021). As given in Figure 2, 61.73% of the population lives in rural areas, and 38.27% of the population in urban areas.

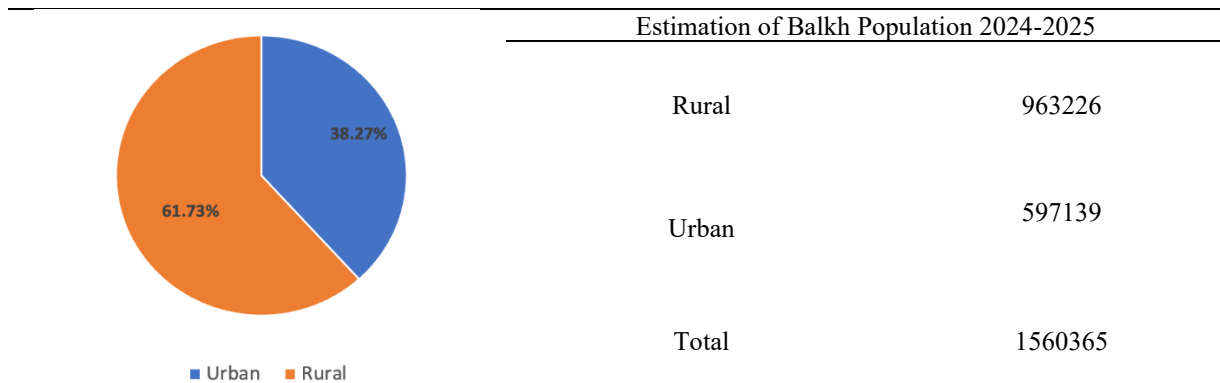


Figure 2: Ratio of Urban and Rural Population in Balkh Province, Resource: Estimated Population of Afghanistan 2024-25

Balkh Province and its provincial center, Mazar-e Sharif, is historically the political and economic hub of the north (Fishstein, and et, al. 2013).

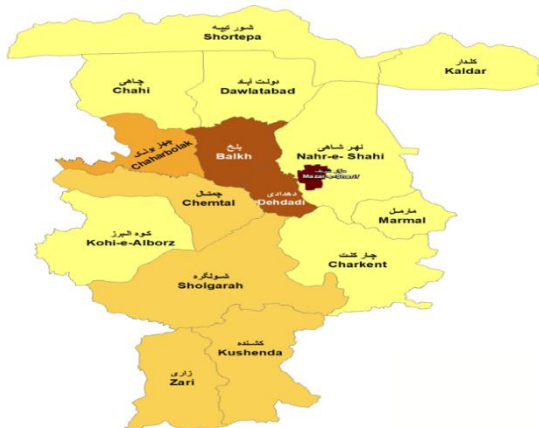


Figure 3: Map of Balkh province, Afghanistan; Resource: Estimated Population of Afghanistan 2025-26

RESULTS

Historical Roots of Urbanization in Balkh Province

The first cities, small and hard to distinguish from towns, seem to have appeared in the most favourable places sometime between 6000 and 5000 B.C. By 3000 B.C, true cities came into existence in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and India (Hussain and Imitiyaz, 2018). Ancient cities appeared around the residence of kings or around the fortress. The fortresses were defensive, and the structure was located in convenient strategic heights (Alimova, 2022). After that period, cities in the regions where city life had originated, went into eclipse for some 2000 years. Upon the emergence of Greco-Roman times, the Greco-Roman world of Europe flourished during the period 600 B.C to 400 A.D, resulting in the increase of towns and cities as the products of greater urbanization. In this period, a few cities reached a substantial size. Athens, at its peak in the fifth century B.C., achieved a population of between 120000, and 180000. Syracuse and Carthage were perhaps larger. However, under the Roman Empire, the existence of a large city became a

reality. Until the rise of London in the nineteenth century, Rome, the imperial capital, was known as the largest city in the world. (Hussain and Imitiyaz, 2018).

In medieval times, the largest cities in the world were such cities as Nanjing (470 thousand people), Cairo (450 thousand people), Vijanagar (350 thousand people), Beijing (320 thousand people). At that time, the largest city in Europe was Paris (275 thousand people). The population of Milan and Venice was half the population of Paris, and the population of London was only 50 thousand people. The largest cities in the world also included the Aztec city of Tinochtlan, destroyed in the nineteenth century.

By the beginning of the 18th century, 10% of the world's population lived in cities. Only in the 19th century, modern cities appeared. These included London (865 thousand people), Paris (550 thousand people), Naples (340 thousand people), St. Petersburg (330 thousand people) and Vienna (230 thousand people), Beijing and Canton (800 thousand people) as well as Constantinople (570 thousand people) were in number between London and Paris (Alimova, 2022). It was the nineteenth century that a true urban revolution ushered since a substantial portion of Europe's population came to inhabit the cities and towns. This happened due to the improvement in agriculture, transport, the opening of new lands and new trade routes, and the revolution in production and technology. By 1801, nearly a tenth of the population of England and Wales were living in the cities of 100,000 or larger. This proportion doubled in 40 years and doubled again in another 60 years. By 1900, Britain was an urbanized society. In general, the later each country became industrialized, the faster was its urbanization. The change from a population with 10 percent of its members in cities of 100,000 or larger to one in which 30 percent lived in such cities took about 79 years in England and Wales, 66 in the United States, 48 in Germany, 36 in Japan and 26 in Australia. In 1800, there were about 15.6 million people living in cities of 100,000 or more. By 1950, it was 313.7 million, more than twenty times the earlier figure. Much of this increase has obviously come from rural-urban migration, clearly the most massive migration in modern times. In 1800, there were apparently less than 50 cities with 100,000 or more inhabitants. This was less than the number in the million class today and less than the number of 100,000-plus cities currently found in many single countries. By 1950, there were close to 900 cities of 100,000 or more people, which is more than the number of towns and cities of 5,000 or more in 1800. Between 1950 and 2014, the urban population of the world grew from an estimated 0.7 billion to an estimated 3.9 billion (Hussain and Imitiyaz, 2018), and between 2014, and 2022, it grew to 4.4 billion inhabitants (World Bank, 2023).

The level of development of urbanization according to specialists in this field is divided into 4 stages:

- low urbanization – below 20%
- average urbanization – from 20 % to 50 %
- high urbanization – from 50% to 72 %
- very high urbanization – more than 72 %

The process of urbanization on a global scale is high in Europe, North America, South Africa, Australia and South America and some CIS countries. Average urbanization can be traced in Bolivia, Africa and Asian countries. Low urbanization can be traced in the States of West and East Africa, Madagascar and some Asian States. Experts on the truth call the 20th century, the century of urbanization because in 1900, 14 per cent of the world's population lived in cities and 12 cities had over a million people. And by the beginning of the 21st century, 45 per cent of the world's population lived in cities (Alimova, 2022). This is to note that between 1950, and 2014, the world urban population grew from 30 per cent in 1950 to 54 per cent in 2014 (Hussain and Imitiyaz, 2018). However, the increase continued, and by the end of 2022, the world's population reached 8 billion, with over half (55 per cent) living in urban areas, a figure projected to rise to 70 per cent by 2050 (United Nations Statistics Division, 2023).

Comparing the urbanization trend in developed and less developed nations, findings show that less developed nations have become the centers of rapid urbanization. A stark contrast exists between the more developed nations and less developed nations with respect to the patterns of urbanization. As per the United Nations (2015), in 1950, the urban population of the more developed regions was substantially larger than that of the less developed regions (444 million versus 302 million), so that the more developed regions accounted for 60 per cent of the world's urban population at a time when they had just 32 per cent of the world's total population. But already in the 1950s, the patterns of growth of the urban populations of the more developed and less developed regions were showing signs of divergence, with the former growing more slowly. As a consequence, by 1970, the urban population of the less developed regions had surpassed that of the more developed regions (677 million versus 673 million), and the difference increased rapidly thereafter. In 2014, almost three times as many urban dwellers were estimated to live in the less developed regions as in the more developed regions (2.9 billion versus 1.0 billion). In that year, the less developed regions accounted for 75 per cent of the world urban population and 83 per cent of the total world population. As the developing world becomes increasingly urbanized, the difference between these two figures will decline (Hussain and Imitiyaz, 2018).

In Balkh Province of Afghanistan, the city of Balkh, lying 20 kilometers west of Mazar-e-Sharif, is an ancient city. For centuries, like Athens, and Rome in the west, and Bayt al-Maqdis (Al-Quds), and Baghdad in the east, Balkh had been the center of science and expansion of religion. Throughout the history, it has had titles such as “the mother of cities” and “Makkah of eastern cities” which reflect its urban culture (Neghabi and Bahramyan, 2023). This city accommodates the traces of the settlement of Bactra that dates from around 2,000 BC and was a center of the Achaemenid empire before occupation by Alexander the Great in around 327 BC. Subsequently controlled by a succession of nomadic groups, Bactra became a key urban center for the Kushans, who ruled the region from the 1st to 3rd centuries AD. Many of the surviving Buddhist sites around Balkh date from this era, as well as from the Muslim dynasties that prevailed after the early 8th century AD, when Balkh was a center of commerce, learning and culture until its destruction in 1220 by the Mongols. The city recovered sufficiently to be an important center for trade under Timurid rule in the 15th century, after which the region was contested between local power brokers until being incorporated into Afghanistan in 1850. Its significance as a trading hub with Russia (and subsequently the USSR) persisted through the 20th century, and between 1978-89 the Soviets maintained a significant military presence in the area (Mazar-e-Sharif SDF, 2020). Before Bactra, this city was known as Paktra, and its foundation is ascribed to Kaiomars. History shows that at an early date; the city is said to have rivaled urban centers such as Babylon. The Italian explorer/traveler and writer, once described Balkh as the noble city and great seat of learning. In present-day Balkh, the traces of eastern walls, and Bala Hisar (a secondary fortified area) can be seen. Within this walled enclosure, Tepe Zargaran (an artificial mount from 2nd century AD), the tiled Timurid shrine of Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa from the 15th century, and Madrasa of Sayed Subhan Quli Khan from the 17th century, exist which are still touristic points and cultural assets (Ministry of Information and Culture-Afghanistan, 2004).

Mazar-e-Sharif, the provincial capital of Balkh province with 378 meters height from the sea level, the

latitude of 36.7 N and longitude of 67.2 E, is one of the five largest cities of Afghanistan. The name of this city is associated/derived from the shrine of Hazrat Ali, the fourth caliph of Islam and the son-in-law of Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH). Urban development of Mazar-e-Sharif had begun in the 15th century (9th century, solar calendar). At that time, the city had six gates/Darwaza (Darwaz-e-Shadian, Darwaz-e-Kholm, Darwaz-e-Siagerd, Darwaz-e-Yakhdan, Darwaz-e-Qubadian, and Darwaz-e-Balkh). As far as urban planning is concerned, the first master plan of the city was prepared in 1947 (1326, solar calendar) but the destruction to implement the master plan began seventeen years later, in 1964; the first detailed land use plan of the city was implemented in 1973 (1352, solar calendar) that resulted in new constructions and population density in the southern and eastern parts of the city, and the establishment of Bazaars/commercial centers around the shrine. The current municipal administration, Mazar-e-Sharif municipality, has a historical and organizational background of over a century, and was established in 1921 (1300, solar calendar). As a historical, cultural, political and economic center, Mazar-e-Sharif holds increasing significance, and has been continuously developing its modern characteristics (Mazar-e-Sharif Municipality, 2011).

Current Patterns of Urbanization in Balkh

Mazar-e-Sharif's population was 200000 in 1973 (SY 1352) and increased drastically due to the civil war in Kabul and the insecurity in the surrounding provinces. According to the unofficial figures, at present 1.2 million people are living in this regional city. Mazar-e-Sharif is characterized by rapid urbanization, but the urbanization rate is not defined (KIIs, Mazar-e-Sharif, 2025). Over the next 20 years, the population of Mazar-e-Sharif is projected to grow by approximately 150%.

Mazar-e-Sharif's Strategic Development Framework-SDF (2020) guides the urban growth towards the east in order to protect wetlands and aquifers to the north and agricultural lands in the west. It also aims at preventing urban sprawl by promoting development density along key corridors around the city core and integrating peripheral townships.



The eastward expansion of the city is not something new, but a strategy of the master plan 2019 of the city reinforced by SDF. Before SDF, the urban expansion was guided by Mazar-e-Sharif’s master plans in different directions. Prior to 1970s, urban development was centered around the Shrine of Hazarat Ali. The first major expansion happened in 1973. In 1980s, expansion was predominantly focused to the north, and northward expansion continued from the 1980s through the 1990s. In 2004, significant planned and unplanned developments emerged in all directions, notably in the east. In 2014, the city grew considerably from the early 2000s to 2014, and major expansions occurred in the south and the east through the new residential townships like Khalid Ibn Walid in the south. In 2018, eastward expansion continued with the establishment of new residential developments, Internally Displaced People/IDP camps, and industrial clusters along Kabul highway (Mazar-e-Sharif SDF, 2020).

Mazar-e-Sharif’s SDF has a clear demarcation of the protected areas which did not exist in the previous urban plans including the master plans. There was a vision to protect the old city areas such as Gozar Breshna, Gozar Khair Khwa, Part of Darwaze Shadian, Gozar Chetgari and Marmul, Gozar Mirza Hassan Qasab, Gozar Nayeb Ha, Aqeb Bala Hesar, Sultan Ghiasuddin, Gozar Siagird, Gozar Ota Qul, Gozar Say Dokan, Gozar Yakhdan, part of Gozar Qurghan... but they have not been protected in action.

There are 146 illegal and 56 legal townships in Mazar-e-Sharif that reflect the urban sprawl. Comparing with the master plan coverage area, they are all out of the master plan boundaries, but some have been recently covered by the strategic plans including SDF. Mazar-e-Sharif is significantly characterized by informal/unplanned development. Its planned

development is estimated to be 31 percent and informal development is 69 percent based on the master plan that defined a 36.7 square km territory while compared with the actual urban area, it is approximately 11.4 percent formal and 88.6 percent informal. The underlying factors behind the informal/unplanned development include prolonged civil war, lack of central government for decades, lack of urban plans, delayed urban planning, and limited financial resources for land acquisition. Still, tens of urban plans are missing, which further leads to unplanned growth. Within the master plan coverage area, only eight projects/areas have developed in accordance with the detailed land use plans which include Kart e Ariana, Kart e Solh, Kart e Khorasan and Sayed Abad, Bukhdi, Naw Bahar, Parsa, Nawshad, Zerhat. Unfortunately, these projects still don’t have specific supplementary plans for other services such as water, electricity, telecommunication, sewerage, greening... to be used for service management purpose.

A burning issue in planned areas is unpermitted construction. Less than 10 percent is reported to have had permitted construction in residential areas. Recently, Mazar-e-Sharif municipality has collected construction tax from all properties built without construction permit. This may be a good measure in terms of revenue management, but has implicitly recognized dozens of non-standard constructions that are big threats to human life, in addition to non-compliance with the engineering and environmental standards. Tendency for unpermitted construction arises from low economy, poor municipal control over decades, insecurity, existence of warlords, and poor access to architecture services. The same problem exists in commercial and industrial areas of Mazar-e-Sharif. 15 percent of commercial areas is reported to have had permitted construction whereas it is zero in industrial areas.

Vertical development is new to the city, and as a recent trend, it is estimated between 10 to 20 percent, but it is significantly increasing. The rest follows the horizontal development approach. In terms of focus, urban development is mainly focused on urban infrastructures. Urban culture, resources and people are yet to become priority areas for the municipal administration.

Key urban services, and their conditions are as follows:

1. Solid waste management: There is only waste collection service by the municipality, covering 11.4 percent of the territory while a private company, permitted by the municipality, conducts door to door waste collection, in lieu of additional fee (*in addition to the Safayi tax paid to Mazar-e-Sharif municipality*) from the service recipients. The private service has a much wider coverage. Other solid waste management measures such as waste recycling and processing are not in place. Neither there are tangible efforts aimed at reducing and reusing waste.
2. Sewerage systems and sewage management: There is no central sewerage system in the city. People use non-standard septic tanks (absorptive toilets) in their houses or residences, which are emptied by private tankers. In the absence of a centralized system, efforts have been made to build decentralized systems. So far, only a few ones have been built for some schools like Abdullah Ansari High School, Sultan Razia High School, Gawher Khatoon High School, and Tajrobawi High School, Balkh Police Department and the National Army Base. Further, the designs for four decentralized treatment centers/systems in four corners of the city (Shirabad, Prozhe Khalid, Khatme Dasht e Shor and Airport area) have been prepared. In 2025, a private company has established a sewage treatment center at airport area (Goremar), with an immediate aim of emptying the septic tankers in this pre-determined location. Their future goals include irrigation of 300 acres of land with the treated water, and generation of composts for agricultural purposes. This service falls under the responsibility of Afghanistan Urban Water Supply and Sewerage Corporation (AUWSSC), and is still counted as one of the failures in Mazar-e-Sharif.
3. Stormwater management and drainage infrastructures: Canal adequacy and quality is not bad, but other key canal-related services such as canal cleaning and maintenance are not regularly provided. Canals are usually blocked by wastes thrown by people, and therefore, rainwater flows over roads, and creates hassles on rainy days.
4. Urban road construction, resurfacing, cleaning and maintenance: The city's estimate need for asphalt and concrete road is 800 square kilo meters, but it currently has 136 square kilo meters of asphalt road and about 300 square kilo meters of concrete roads. There is still a gap of 45 percent to be filled. Street sweeping is carried out in about 30 percent of the roads, but the maintenance effort needs significant improvement.
5. Urban traffic management and infrastructure: Engaged in traffic infrastructures, and engineering aspects, Mazar-e-Sharif municipality installs traffic lights. This service so far covers around 20% of the areas needed to be covered. There is traffic patrolling by the Traffic Police in which the municipality is not engaged, and that it is not yet that effective. The law on municipalities provides for municipal traffic employees to manage traffic in crowded areas, but no progress reported. Traffic fines imposed by the traffic police existed, but abolished in recent years. Given these, traffic congestion is a serious issue especially around the shrine.
6. Urban public transportation and infrastructures: The city does not have a public transportation system. Instead, there are decentralized transportation facilities, and scattered stations, creating a big crowd and traffic congestion. There are only a few standard stops, and one inter-provincial bus terminal. The roads don't have specific bus lines or cycling lines. No flyovers, but a few underground passes/markets, exist. Lack of parking lot is a serious issue in the city. Some of the intersections built are not standard, and cause traffic congestion.
7. Public green spaces/greening: There are green/flower beds in the middle of 136 square kilo meters of road, and increased efforts are being made to improve these flower/green beds. From an urban planning perspective, all detailed land use plans of the city have defined areas for public green spaces, but they have been converted into residential plots. After decades, a big shift is noticed. It is such that Mazar-e-Sharif municipality has been paying increasing attention to greening and green space development, and is working closely with communities to ensure their effective engagement and support. In this connection, it has started reconstruction of Project S Recreational Park in district 9, and Afghan Turk Recreational Park in district 7. Further, it has initiated the construction of a new park called Barg at Kart e Solh, district 7. Overall, the approach to greening is horizontal, and no vertical greening efforts are visible yet.
8. Construction and maintenance of municipal markets: Mazar-e-Sharif has three ground and five underground municipality-owned markets and so many private ones. Of these, only one has a parking lot.
9. Cultural heritage management: The law on municipalities (2018) has defined functions for Grade 1 municipalities (Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Mazar-e-Sharif and Jalalabad) in the area of cultural heritage management and tourism, but Mazar-e-Sharif municipality is not engaged yet. It is left as the sole responsibility of the Department of

Information and Culture in Balkh. As stated, cultural heritage management is not good.

10. Water Supply: As an urban service delivered by AUWSSC, it is rated quite poor both in terms of access and quality.
11. Electricity: As an urban service delivered by Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS), it is good both in terms of access and quality.
12. City Lighting System: Lighting system is available in the central areas of the city, adding to the beauty and safety of the city roads. There is an increasing attention to city lighting.
13. City Address System: This is now in place in most areas of the city, facilitating access to locations.
14. Pollution (Air, Sound, Soil, Visual and Water): The city suffers from medium air pollution in winter, but it is much better compared with Kabul and other cities. Sound pollution is an increasing problem which has not been attended to. There is low soil pollution, and increasing water pollution.
15. Disaster management/flood management: The law on municipalities (2018) is clear about the role of Grade 1 municipalities in flood management, but it is reported as very little in practice.
16. Housing: Mazar-e-Sharif municipality used to distribute land for residential, commercial, industrial and administrative purposes, but now it is banned. It does not implement any housing projects. There are private housing projects, but no state-led/owned projects are in place.

In this era of digital governance and service delivery, Mazar-e-Sharif municipality does not yet have any online services for people, businesses and government administrations.

There is a central municipal approach for the delivery of municipal services while Mazar-e-Sharif municipality has 12 Nahia (municipal district) offices which are extended arms of the administration. At present, they play a role in revenue collection, coordination, and some administrative service like certification of residence.... Communities used to be engaged in the identification, design, implementation and monitoring of community projects such as street upgrading through donor funded programs like Citizen's Charter Afghanistan Project, a World Bank project, but not in municipal ones. There is still some, but not to the extent it was. One key urban service provider is the private sector. It is engaged in the design and construction of private townships, public-private partnership/PPP- based service delivery such as markets and parks, and delivery of services (road construction, building construction, greening...) as contractor to the municipality. The private sector also plays a key role in the delivery of health, telecommunication, education, and industrial services.

In informal areas, making 69% of the master plan territory, urban service is in a very bad condition.

Their top service priorities are road, water, electricity, solid waste, and markets. Up until now, remedial strategies have been formulated for six projects (*Amani, Pashtoon kott Baba Yadgar, Gozar Etifaq Zeraat...*) that resulted in upgrading the respective areas. In addition to service constraints, tenure security is a serious issue in informal areas.

To facilitate and accelerate development, it is important to ensure good governance values, systems, and practices are in place. Findings show that the adequacy and responsiveness of legal, policy and administrative frameworks need improvement. Citizen participation was greater during CCAP implementation (2016-2020) as there were so many functional Community Development Councils (CDCs) and Gozar Assemblies (GAs) in addition to the Municipal Advisory Board. Public accountability sessions are held by the municipality on a quarterly basis to inform people about the municipal decisions, processes, revenues and expenditures. Complaints redressal mechanisms exist but need improvement. Partnership with the sectoral line departments such as AUWSSC, DABS, Department of Communications and Information Technology (DCIT), Department of Urban Development and Housing (DUDH), Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), Police Department including Traffic Police... exists but it is characterized by poor coordination, lack of integrated planning and implementation, and lack of shared vision and processes for the city (KIIs, Mazar-e-Sharif, 2025).

In an assessment of the level of the achievement of SDG Goal 11 in Mazar-e-Sharif, the following conclusions have been made:

1. There is greening service in Mazar-e-Sharif, but it is not considerably effective due to budget constraints and lack of citizens' support in maintaining trees. Moreover, greening is mainly focused on tree planting.
2. Solid waste management is limited to waste collection by the municipality and in some areas by the private sector while it is also necessary to take action in the area of waste segregation, standard disposal, and recycling.
3. Mazar-e-Sharif is affected by water, soil and air pollution, but no effective measures are in place. Therefore, the urban sustainability ratio has decreased.
4. In spite of fairly good urban plans, but due to the poor implementation, and absence of effective control over construction projects, there is a low level of resilience to natural disasters and climate change.
5. People have access to drinking water, but they are not satisfied with the quality and the rate. This has in turn decreased the urban safety ratio of the city.
6. The city has a good ethnic composition, but due to lack of attention to the needs of poor families in the area of appropriate and affordable housing, and

inadequate attention to vulnerable individuals especially the disabled, the urban inclusiveness ratio is also low.

7. The city does not have a sewerage management system which is one of the biggest weaknesses in the area of urban safety.

The findings of the aforesaid assessment show that SDG Goal 11 has not been considerably implemented in Mazar-e-Sharif because it has not been a priority. Lack of coordination among the institutions and budget constraints also hindered the implementation. SDGs have been nationalized with a number of deficiencies, and incompliance with the country's actual needs, but not localized in Afghanistan. Government staff are yet to know what SDGs are. UN/donor agencies have supported SDG implementation, but not in a municipality-led, or municipal strategy-based approach (Rasikh, 2024).

Future Prospects of Urbanization in Balkh

The future of urbanization in Balkh Province, particularly in Mazar-e-Sharif, will be mainly driven by continuous population growth, migration dynamics, and the transforming role of the city in the northern region of the country. With an estimate of 150% increase in population over the next two decades, Mazar-e-Sharif is expected to become the prime urban and economic hub in the region. These changes will not only intensify the current challenges of land, services and, infrastructure, but will also reconfigure the spatial patterns of the city.

Nevertheless, the future urbanization of Balkh Province should be guided by a shift from reactive urban expansion toward managed, inclusive, and resilient urban development. Considering the population, migration and urbanization dynamics, future prospects mainly depend not on whether it grows but also on how it grows. Urban policies should, therefore, prioritize integrated development, social inclusion, environmental protection, and institutional improvement. The strategic vision including its identity should be redefined to address extant confusion whether it is a cultural and historical city, a business and modern city or a trade and transit city in the country. This needs wider discussions to reach an agreement and build a new vision based on the future expected identify. To achieve this, a strong political commitment, followed by administrative coordination and capacity development, is required.

1. Shift from Horizontal Growth to Managed Vertical Development

Historically, urban growth in Mazar-e-Sharif has been predominantly horizontal, contributing to urban sprawl, inefficient land use, and high service delivery costs. The latest emergence of vertical development, though still limited, indicates a potential shift in the city's urban sprawl. Due to many reasons such as land scarcity, rising land value, and increasing demand for commercial and residential space in central areas, vertical

development is likely to expand. This transition can be viewed as a golden opportunity if supported by appropriate regulatory frameworks, construction standards, and superb infrastructures. In addition, vertical development could play a critical role in restraining sprawl and enhancing urban density along strategic corridors, as envisioned in the SDF. However, it has to be noted that without strict enforcement of building standards and construction roles, vertical expansion could also bring new obstacles, particularly in terms of safety, disaster vulnerability, and environmental performance.

Therefore, future prospects depend on strengthening municipal capacity in construction control, urban design regulation, and professional service provision. Along with this, developing clear zoning regulations, height limits, and incentives for mixed-use development will be essential to ensuring that vertical growth contributes positively to urban efficiency, resilience, and livability rather than becoming another layer of informal settlement.

2. Regularization and Development of Informal Settlements

Informal development constitutes the majority of the urban area in Mazar-e-Sharif city. These areas are the most vulnerable places in the city. If these areas are neglected, they can be changed to center of poverty, hunger, crime, exclusion and abandoned settlements. Hence, instead of neglecting informal settlements, urban policies and programs should focus on structured upgrading and regularization including readjustment and redevelopment, as large-scale demolition or relocation is neither feasible nor socially sustainable. To achieve this goal, the following tasks have to be done:

1. Area-based upgrading focused on road construction, water supply and management, electricity, solid waste management, and markets' improvement.
2. Enhancing public participation in planning, design, and monitoring of development or redevelopment projects, and in implementing local resilience programs.
3. Mainstreaming urban regeneration and upgrading as the core of urban plans.
4. Policy and legal framework development, and effective application to support urban regeneration and upgrading.
5. Provision of financial and technical support to municipalities to transform informal areas.
6. Building partnership with private sector to play a significant role in the regeneration and upgrading process through investment and financing, housing development, job creation, infrastructures and services and innovation.

3. Improving Urban Infrastructure and Public Services

Urban sustainability and betterment of services in Mazar-e-Sharif requires a strong transformation in

infrastructure planning and service delivery models. In this regard, the following steps are required:

- If a city-wide sewerage system is not currently feasible, decentralized systems should be implemented for all residential, commercial, industrial, and administrative (government) development projects and complexes. At the same time, a phased strategy for a future city-wide sewerage network—incorporating all relevant technical, financial, and institutional factors—should be developed and gradually implemented. This approach will allow decentralized systems to eventually be integrated into a comprehensive city-wide network. To achieve this, Mazar-e-Sharif Municipality, in coordination with other urban stakeholders, should adopt a long-term vision and ensure that appropriate sewerage infrastructure is incorporated alongside road construction and other projects.
- Changing waste management system from collection-only to integrated waste management, including reducing, segregation, re-using and recycling.
- Establishing and strengthening a basic public transportation system, commencing with systematic bus routes and bus stands, and expanding non-motorized transport infrastructure and parking facilities.
- Building underpasses for motorized traffic in a number of circles as they are not responsive to the increasing traffic congestion.

For the aforesaid, public–private partnerships should be systematically leveraged, but under clear municipal oversight to ensure equity, affordability, and service quality.

4. Strengthening Environmental Sustainability and Climate Resilience

Environmental protection is a non-negotiable and an integrated principle in urban development. Hence, protecting agricultural lands, wetlands and aquifers should be formally enforced. To achieve this objective, the following measures should be observed:

- Introducing urban environmental zoning and enforcement mechanisms which can ensure proper land use, observing environmental standards, and, protect ecosystem.
- Expanding public green spaces and implementing vertical greenery systems as well as revitalizing green spaces where they have been converted into residential plots.
- Integrating climate resilience measures into road, drainage, and housing projects as climate-resilient infrastructure reduces damage from extreme weather, improves durability, and protects communities and investments.
- Strengthening flood risk management and early warning systems as improved flood planning and

early alerts help prevent loss of life and property by enabling timely preparedness and response.

5. Institutional Reforms, and Digital Transformation

Urban development prospects will remain constrained unless governance systems are transformed. Institutional fragmentation and weak coordination must be addressed through formal mechanisms.

Key recommendations include:

- Establishing an inter-agency urban coordination platform for Mazar-e-Sharif led by mayor: This is very much aligned with the provisions of the existing Law on Municipalities, defining mayor as leader of the city, and requiring other agencies to coordinate programs and projects with the urban plans. With this platform, key municipal departments, utility providers, and relevant stakeholders will come together for planning, data sharing, synergy development and joint service delivery, and service complementation. In Mazar-e-Sharif, fragmented institutional tasks often resulted in duplication of duties, services delivery delays, and inefficient use of resources. Thus, a formal coordination mechanism would enable agencies to align priorities, jointly plan urban investments, and respond more effectively to urban obstacles such as basic service delivery, infrastructure development, and land management. This network would also support real and evidence-based decision-making based on shared data from the ground level of the society.
- Strengthening the role of Nahia offices in localized service delivery: In Afghanistan’s local administrative system, Nahia (district) offices serve as the closest administrative link between the municipality and citizens. Empowering these offices would decentralize service delivery and improve accountability to the people. Empowered Nahia offices can play a vital role in identifying neighborhood-level priorities, improving accountability, and building trust between people and authorities.
- Introducing digital municipality: Digitalizing municipal services—such as online service delivery system, complaint management systems, and digital revenue collection—can significantly make municipal operations more efficient and effective. E-services would reduce processing time, minimize bureaucratic barriers, and limit opportunities for informal practices by standardizing procedures. Digital systems improve record-keeping, revenue tracking, and performance monitoring. This has to be noted that digitalization, in particular, offers a cost-effective pathway to improving transparency, efficiency, and accountability in municipal governance.
- Revitalizing citizen engagement platforms such as Community Development Councils and Gozar Assemblies, and using them as development wings for urban projects, not only donor projects.

6. Advancing Inclusive Urban Development and Housing Policy

Future urbanization in Balkh province should prioritize citizen-centric development. The absence of public housing initiatives leaves low-income households vulnerable to informal settlements and exclusion.

To overcome the above challenges, recommended actions include:

- Developing a municipal affordable housing strategy.
- Encouraging private sector participation through incentives and inclusionary zoning.
- Ensuring accessibility for persons with disabilities in public spaces and infrastructure.
- Delivering social services in underserved neighborhoods.
- These measures would significantly improve urban inclusiveness and social cohesion.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to explore the urbanization journey in Balkh province, particularly Mazar e Sharif as the socio-economic center. Urbanization in Balkh Province, reflects the complex interaction of historical legacies, conflict-induced migration, weak governance, and rapid demographic change. At the beginning, Mazar e Sharif was established as a shrine-centered city and then evolved through successive waves of expansion mostly shaped by insecurity and population displacement than by planned development. Consequently, contemporary urbanization in Mazar-e-Sharif is characterized by extensive informal growth, spatial fragmentation, service deficits, and environmental stress despite the presence of relatively sound planning instruments.

The analysis of current patterns demonstrates that urban growth has consistently outpaced institutional capacity, infrastructure provision, and regulatory enforcement. While strategic frameworks such as the Strategic Development Framework offer a coherent vision for guiding future expansion, their effectiveness has been undermined by limited implementation, weak coordination among sectoral institutions, and inadequate financial and technical resources. The predominance of informal development, widespread unpermitted construction, and insufficient basic services—particularly in sewerage, water supply, public transportation, and waste management—pose serious risks to urban safety, environmental sustainability, and social equity.

At the same time, the study highlights important opportunities. Mazar-e-Sharif's regional importance, relatively stable electricity supply, emerging private sector engagement, and renewed municipal attention to greening and public spaces provide a foundation upon which more sustainable urban development can be built. The recent shift toward strategic planning, growing interest in public-private partnerships, and the re-

emergence of community engagement practices signal potential entry points for reform.

The future prospects outlined in this study emphasize the need for a fundamental transition in urban management—from reactive, infrastructure-driven responses toward integrated, inclusive, and people-centered urban development. Managing spatial growth, upgrading informal settlements, promoting compact and vertical development, and strengthening environmental protection are not optional interventions but essential prerequisites for long-term urban sustainability. Equally critical is the reform of governance systems, including improved inter-agency coordination, enhanced municipal capacity, digitalization of services, and the institutionalization of citizen participation.

In conclusion, urbanization in Balkh Province stands at a critical juncture. If current trends of informality, weak regulation, and service inadequacy persist, the city risks deepening inequality, environmental degradation, and vulnerability to future shocks. However, with decisive policy action, institutional reform, and sustained investment, Mazar-e-Sharif can harness urbanization as a driver of economic growth, social inclusion, and resilience. The choices made today will determine whether the city's rapid growth becomes a long-term burden or a transformative opportunity for the people of Balkh Province.

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