Afghanistan

Development Indicators

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<tr>
<td>34,385</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
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Total fertility rate, 2009: 6.4

Percentage urban, 2009: 24.8%

Net migration rate, 2009 (per 1,000): -2.6

Per capita GDP, 2009 (at current prices in US Dollars): 501$

Remittances received to GDP, 2009: N/A


1 G.M. Arif, Joint Director, Pakistan Institute of Development Economics and Dan Woods, Associate Program Officer Regional Labour Migration and Research, IOM Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific
The population of Afghanistan is about 34 million, of which almost 80 per cent live in rural areas. Taking into account refugees and those in a refugee-like living situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan and significant communities in Germany, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America, up to six million Afghans reside abroad (Arif and Shujaat forthcoming). The country’s population is growing about 2.8 per cent annually, and is projected to exceed 90 million people by 2050. Afghanistan ranks near the bottom of worldwide development indices, with a human development index (HDI) ranking of 155 out of 169 (Human Development Report Office 2010) and an average life expectancy at birth of 44.6 years in 2010 (World Bank 2011).

Migration has long been part of the social landscape of Afghanistan, and many households often send at least one family member abroad to seek employment. This decision, made in the context of socio-economic and security conditions, can be viewed as a survival strategy. The wage disparity between Afghanistan and bordering countries, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, and the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), are important considerations for labour migrants seeking employment overseas.

The economy of Afghanistan relies on foreign aid, which accounted for 45.7 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2009 (World Bank 2010) and is a major factor behind the high economic growth of the past few years. However, the country remains extremely poor. More than one-third of the labour force is unemployed, and much of the employment is in informal sectors. Among the migrant and refugee populations, this figure is significantly higher, with estimates that the unemployment rate for refugees without a primary education exceeds 60 per cent (Groenewold 2006).

Due to the effects of post-conflict dispersion and periods of mass out-migration, remittances provide an important addition to the GDP and are a valuable source

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**KEY POINTS**

- The limited number of decent jobs continues to be a strong push factor for migration from Afghanistan. Efforts to alleviate this problem are hindered by the country’s widespread poverty, high population growth, particularly among the younger working age population, volatile security situation, drought conditions and reliance on illicit crops.

- Remittance flows tend to go through informal channels due to limited financial infrastructure in rural areas and higher returns compared to formal channels.

- Inadequate border controls, widespread poverty, embedded cultural factors and increasingly sophisticated and well-funded transnational crime networks contribute to the trafficking of persons, particularly women and children.

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**Social and economic context of migration**

The population of Afghanistan is about 34 million, of which almost 80 per cent live in rural areas. Taking into account refugees and those in a refugee-like living situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan and significant communities in Germany, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America, up to six million Afghans reside abroad (Arif and Shujaat forthcoming). The country’s population is growing about 2.8 per cent annually, and is projected to exceed 90 million people by 2050. Afghanistan ranks near the bottom of worldwide development indices, with a human development index (HDI) ranking of 155 out of 169 (Human Development Report Office 2010) and an average life expectancy at birth of 44.6 years in 2010 (World Bank 2011).

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2 The member States of the GCC are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates.
Figure 1. Refugees from Afghanistan by country of destination, 2009

Source: UNHCR (no date).
of foreign exchange. Many Afghan families rely on the remittance potential of at least one family member, particularly unmarried men, working in the Islamic Republic of Iran or Pakistan (Monsutti 2005). Remittances from family members working outside the country enable families to settle debts, pay for food and living expenses and, in some circumstances, reinvest the money (Monsutti 2006).

While remittances are a source of income and stability for many households in Afghanistan, recorded remittances from Afghans living abroad are far below their potential amounts (IOM 2008). Two factors behind this may be the perceived risk of doing business in the country and strong cultural barriers to using formal remittance channels. Consequently, most of the remittances from Afghans living abroad flow through informal channels.

Afghanistan is one of the few countries in the region that lacks a concrete emigration policy or a legal framework for managing international migration. As a consequence, the country has limited capacity to develop and implement policy, issue regulations or enact laws on matters relating to migration.

The bulk of out-migration from Afghanistan in the past decades consisted of people fleeing conflict and oppression, mainly to neighbouring countries, namely, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan. Although large numbers of refugees have returned to Afghanistan, especially those who fled to the countries mentioned above, there is still a large diaspora of recognized refugees abroad.

Three main periods in recent history of Afghanistan generated waves of migration from the country. The first wave followed a period of instability from 1979. The second wave was caused by instability, oppression, and conflict between various groups and the Taliban Government during the 1990s. The third wave began in the early 1990s, as a large number of the well-educated Afghans from the liberal urban middle and upper classes migrated to Europe and North America to escape the Taliban regime. This large-scale migration spread to people from the lower-educated rural areas in the mid 1990s as the Taliban began to assert control. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, estimates of the number of Afghans living overseas included 3.2 million in Pakistan, 2.2 million in the Islamic Republic of Iran and several hundred thousand in disparate communities across the globe (Monsutti 2005).

A study commissioned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Office (UNHCR) estimates that about six million people left the country between 1979 and 1992 (UNHCR 2009). After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the UNHCR launched voluntary repatriation programmes in both the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan under a tripartite agreement and since 2002, more than four million Afghan refugees have been repatriated. However, despite this massive repatriation, Afghanistan continues to be the world’s largest country of origin for refugees.

In 2009, there were still more than 1.9 million Afghans living with refugee status abroad. The majority of them were in the Islamic Republic of Iran (54 per cent) and Pakistan (40 per cent). Other countries hosting large communities of refugees from Afghanistan were Germany and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (see figure 1). Also of note, India, has been hosting a sizeable
Labour migration from Afghanistan is characterized by seasonal and cyclic patterns prompted by higher wages and relative stability in neighbouring countries, interspersed with phases of dramatic, large-scale migration during periods of political instability. More than three decades of continuous conflict have weakened the institutions of Afghanistan and prevented the Government from maintaining control in outlying regions. This instability combined with the destruction of infrastructure, breakdown of industry and loss of farms, houses and irrigation channels constituted major push factors for migration (Monsutti 2006). In addition, extended drought, such as in 2000 and 2004, has forced many rural families whose livelihood comes from land and livestock to adopt alternative livelihood strategies and consequently migrate in search of work (Nakanishi 2005).

Migration between Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan is often temporary and cyclical in nature. A number of Afghan migrants use Pakistan as a transit country to the Islamic Republic of Iran, as controls at border crossings between Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran are more strictly managed than those between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan. The Islamic Republic of Iran is also a transit country for onward travel to GCC countries, Turkey and Europe. A field survey by UNHCR in 2007 and 2008 showed continuity in cross-border movements, with seasonal variations in incoming and outgoing migration, and higher movements recorded in spring and summer (UNHCR 2009). Also of note, most labour migrants departing from the Afghanistan capital Kabul use the services of smugglers to facilitate border crossings (Stigter 2004).

As the opportunities for labour-migrants seeking seasonal work in Afghanistan during the planting and harvesting seasons are limited, the vast majority of in-migration to Afghanistan over the past three decades has been the repatriation of Afghans who left the country during periods of instability (Monsutti 2006).

In April 2002, a tripartite agreement among the Interim Authority of Afghanistan, Islamic Republic of Iran and UNHCR was signed, supporting the commencement of the voluntary return of Afghan citizens. This was followed in 2003 by a similar tripartite agreement among the Governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and UNHCR. About three million Afghans returned to their home country between 2002 and 2005 under the programme, including about 800,000 from the Islamic Republic of Iran and more than two million from Pakistan (figure 2). UNHCR estimates that about 4.5 million Afghan refugees have been repatriated from the two countries since 2002 (UNHCR no date).
Figure 2.
Number of returning Afghan refugees from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan (assisted and spontaneous), 1989–2010

Source: UNHCR (no date).

Pakistan

Islamic Republic of Iran
With regards to Pakistan, many Afghan migrants living in the northern part of the country returned home in 2008 and 2009 due to the high cost of living, lack of employment opportunities and the deteriorating law and order situation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (UNHCR 2011).

Despite the country’s high unemployment rate, migrant workers from other countries are employed in Afghanistan due to skill mismatch, especially in the construction industry. In 2006, some 60,000 Pakistani labour migrants were reportedly working in Afghanistan, with the majority holding seasonal construction jobs (Yousafzai and others 2006). Nepal, alone, reported an outflow of 1,292 workers to Afghanistan in 2009 (NIDS 2010).

In addition to activities that focus on assisting returning refugees with financial assistance (UNHCR 2006) or providing technical and vocational skills to enhance the income generation potential of returnees (IOM 2008), the Government of Afghanistan and international organizations have initiated several projects aimed at increasing the return of qualified expatriates to Afghanistan. Principal among these is the Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) Expatriate Services Program that places returning Afghan citizens in government ministries (Embassy of Afghanistan 2010).

In 2011, a tripartite agreement among Afghanistan, Australia and UNHCR was signed to assist in building the capacity of government ministries, and to cover both the humanitarian migration of Afghans to Australia, and the return of Afghans who had made unsuccessful claims for protection in Australia (Australia Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2011).

Currently, 18,204 inhabitants live in an estimated 37 informal settlements in the Afghanistan capital, Kabul. A World Bank-UNHCR study conducted in 2011 of urban displacement in Afghanistan found that more than 90 per cent of those surveyed intended to settle permanently in cities. The study noted that members of internally displaced people (IDP) households tend to have lower literacy rates and formal levels of education, with 20 per cent of the males illiterate and only one of 100 women surveyed able to read. Also the severe acute malnutrition rate among this group was as high as 11 per cent and almost 20 per cent of the children aged 10–16 years must contribute to family income generating activities. These inhabitants survive in makeshift tents or shanties with inadequate infrastructure to maintain and sustain dignified living conditions (OCHA no date, World Bank and UNHCR 2011).

Human trafficking

Afghanistan faces a considerable human trafficking problem as a country of origin, transit and destination for the trafficking of women and children. As a landlocked country sharing borders with six countries with inadequate border controls, widespread poverty, and an increasingly sophisticated and well-funded transnational crime network, Afghanistan offers an environment conducive to human trafficking (IOM 2004).

Children, especially boys, are reportedly trafficked to Saudi Arabia, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan for forced begging, labour and sexual exploitation while girls are reportedly being trafficked to GCC countries for forced marriage. In Saudi Arabia, some children are trafficked by their parents who enter the country on a pilgrimage visa and then force their children to beg to finance the cost of the pilgrimage. In the worst cases, parents sell their children there or simply just abandon them (Fall and others 2007).

While the country has made some steps to implement protective mechanisms, such as the formation of the Committee to Counter Child Trafficking, it is not a party to either the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, or the SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution, leaving a gap in legal provisions for prosecution. Additionally, Afghanistan has not acceded to any of the key conventions related to migrant workers, but signed the Convention and the Protocol related to the status of refugees (table 1).

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<tr>
<th>INTERNATIONAL INSTRUMENT</th>
<th>ENTRY INTO FORCE</th>
<th>STATUS</th>
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<tr>
<td>ILO Convention concerning Migration for Employment (rev 1949) (Nº.97)</td>
<td>22 January 1952</td>
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<tr>
<td>ILO Convention concerning Migrations in Abusive Conditions and the Promotion of Equality of Opportunity and Treatment of Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) (Nº.143)</td>
<td>09 December 1978</td>
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<tr>
<td>International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families</td>
<td>01 July 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children</td>
<td>25 December 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Air and Sea</td>
<td>28 January 2004</td>
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<tr>
<td>1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees</td>
<td>22 April 1954</td>
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<tr>
<td>1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees</td>
<td>04 October 1967</td>
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Source: ILO (no date), United Nations (no date).


• ________ (2008). “Afghan civilian assistance program (ACAP) fact sheet” (Kabul, IOM).


• World Bank and UNHCR (2011). Research study on IDPs in urban settings – Afghanistan (Kabul, World Bank).