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LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN AFGHANISTAN: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN URBAN AND RURAL AREAS

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Abstract

Afghanistan grapples with a significant urban-rural divide, with 73% of its 42 million population residing in rural areas plagued by a 61% poverty rate and limited access to essential services like education, healthcare, and clean water, while urban centres, housing 27%, face rapid urbanization with 3.3% annual growth and informal settlements accommodating 80% of urban residents. This divide, intensified by decades of conflict, centralized state-building, and climate vulnerabilities, threatens national stability, economic progress, and governance legitimacy. This research paper investigates how effective local governance, through integrated urban-rural development strategies, can address disparities in services, infrastructure, and economic opportunities. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, it analyses urban municipalities and rural governance structures Community Development Councils, Cluster-Level Development Councils and District Development Assemblies, which evaluates initiatives like the "City for All" program, which enhanced urban tenure security, and the National Solidarity Program, which empowered rural communities. The paper identifies challenges such as systemic corruption, institutional weaknesses, socio-cultural barriers, economic disparities and environmental issues like droughts. Structured into sections on historical context, governance initiatives, challenges and the necessity of integration, it argues that bridging this divide is critical for sustainable development and political stability. Recommendations include developing a national integration strategy, strengthening decentralization, investing in rural infrastructure, promoting economic opportunities, enhancing community participation, addressing gender and climate challenges, and

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leveraging international support from organizations like UN-Habitat. By fostering inclusive governance, Afghanistan can achieve a unified, resilient future.

Keywords: *Local governance, urban-rural divide, Afghanistan, sustainable development, political stability*.

1. Introduction

Afghanistan presents a stark and deeply consequential urban-rural divide, a fissure running through the heart of its social, economic and political landscape. While major urban centers like *Kabul, Herat* and *Mazar-i-Sharif* exhibit concentrated populations, relatively better infrastructure, and greater access to services and markets, the vast majority of the population resides in rural areas characterized by geographic isolation, limited connectivity, profound poverty, and severely restricted access to essential services such as healthcare, education, clean water and electricity.[2] This disparity is not merely geographical, but it reflects entrenched inequalities in power, resource allocation and opportunity, deeply intertwined with the country's complex history of conflict, tribalism and centralized governance models. Understanding this divide is fundamental to analyzing Afghanistan's governance challenges, as it shapes everything from citizen-state relations and service delivery effectiveness to the legitimacy of governing institutions and the dynamics of conflict and stability. The persistence of this gap significantly undermines efforts to build cohesive national identity and effective local governance capable of responding to the distinct needs of all citizens.[3]

Afghanistan faces a profound urban-rural divide that significantly shapes its social, economic, and political landscape. As of 2024, with a population of 42 million, only 27% reside in urban areas, which are experiencing a rapid growth rate of 3.3% annually, while 73% live in rural regions characterized by higher poverty rates of 61% and limited access to essential services such as water, education, and healthcare.[4] This divide is not merely geographical but reflects deep disparities in governance structures, economic opportunities, and infrastructure. Rural areas often rely on traditional governance mechanisms like *shuras*

[2]HosnaJalil, *The Taliban and the Rural-Urban Divide* (Afghanistan Research Network, 2023).
[3]Jadaliyya- جدلية, "The Impact of Centralized State-Building on the Urban-Rural Divide in Afghanistan" *Jadaliyya*, Sept. 11, 2023, *available at*: https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/45298 (last visited July 1, 2025).
[4] Simon Kemp, "Digital 2024: Afghanistan," *Global Digital Insights*, Feb. 2024, *available at*: https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-afghanistan (last visited July 5, 2025).

and *Community Development Councils* (CDCs), while urban centers benefit from more formalized municipal systems.[5] The divide has been exacerbated by decades of conflict and centralized state-building efforts that have marginalized rural communities, contributing to political instability and unrest.

Moreover, "hidden urbanization" complicates the divide, as some areas exhibit urban characteristics but are not officially recognized as urban, blurring governance boundaries. Rural-urban migration, driven by degraded rural livelihoods due to recurrent droughts and climate hazards, further strains urban areas, where 80% of residents live in informal settlements with poor access to services. Understanding and addressing this divide is critical for effective local governance, as it directly impacts service delivery, economic development and the overall stability of the nation.[6]

Thus, bridging the urban-rural chasm in Afghanistan is not simply an aspirational development goal, it is a critical prerequisite for achieving sustainable peace, genuine political stability and long-term economic progress. The profound disparities fuel resentment, marginalization and instability, creating fertile ground for insurgent recruitment and undermining trust in central authorities. Rural populations, historically neglected and often bearing the brunt of conflict, experience development gains disproportionately slowly, perpetuating cycles of poverty and vulnerability. This neglect severely hampers national economic potential, as underdeveloped rural areas cannot effectively contribute to or benefit from broader markets. Furthermore, effective governance hinges on inclusivity and legitimacy. A state perceived as serving only urban elites or specific regions loses credibility across large swathes of its territory, weakening its ability to enforce laws, collect revenue, and provide security. Addressing this divide is thus essential for building a more resilient, equitable, and ultimately stable Afghanistan where the benefits of governance and development reach all citizens, regardless of location.[7]

1.1 Scope and Purpose of Study

[5]Andrew Beath, FotiniChristia and Ruben Enikolopov, "The National Solidarity Programme: Assessing the Effects of Community-Driven Development in Afghanistan," 22 *International Peacekeeping* 302–20 (2015).
[6]Katrina Kosec and Leonard Wantchekon, "Can information improve rural governance and service delivery?," 125 *World Development* 104376 (2020).
[7]Dr. Antonio Giustozziand Dr OrzalaNemat, "Local Governance Under Taliban Rule, 2021-2023", *Central Asia Program*, 2023, *available at*: https://centralasiaprogram.org/publications-all/local-governance-under-taliban-rule/ (last visited July 5, 2025).

This paper argues that effective local governance, empowered and strategically supported, serves as the pivotal mechanism for bridging Afghanistan's urban-rural divide; by implementing integrated development strategies specifically designed to synchronize urban growth with rural revitalization, such governance can systematically address the critical disparities in service delivery, infrastructure connectivity, and economic opportunities that perpetuate the gap and undermine national cohesion.This paper will focus specifically on the role of local governance structures and processes in mediating the urban-rural divide within Afghanistan. It will examine the existing formal and informal governance mechanisms at the sub-national level, including provincial councils, district administrations and CDCs, analyzing their current capacities, mandates and limitations in addressing cross-jurisdictional disparities. The analysis will delve into the key challenges hindering effective integrated governance, such as weak institutional capacity, corruption, limited financial resources and fiscal decentralization, security constraints, geographic barriers, and the complex interplay between formal state institutions and traditional power structures. Finally, the paper will explore potential strategies for integration, evaluating approaches like decentralized planning and budgeting, targeted infrastructure investments linking rural producers to urban markets, equitable service delivery models leveraging technology where feasible, fostering rural economic diversification linked to urban demand, and strengthening coordination mechanisms between urban municipalities and rural district governance bodies. The scope excludes a detailed analysis of national-level macro-politics or international military strategy, concentrating instead on the sub-national governance levers directly influencing the lived experience of the urban-rural gap.

2. Conceptual Framework

Afghanistan’s local governance system is a complex mix of formal and informal structures, shaped by decades of conflict and centralized state-building. Urban areas are governed by municipalities, which manage services and urban development, supported by initiatives like the "City for All" program (2016-2020), which focused on land management, urban planning, and municipal finance, registering 1 million properties and collecting 48 million ($690,000) in revenue.[8] In contrast, rural governance relies on a three-tiered structure under the *Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development* (MRRD), CDCs, CLDCs and DDAs. CDCs,

[8] UN Habitat, “Improving Tenure Security in Afghan Cities – Afghanistan”, *Relief Web*, 2018, *available at*: https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/improving-tenure-security-afghan-cities (last visited July 5, 2025).

established in 2003, represent 25-300 families and are elected by secret ballot, with 72% of respondents in a study viewing the CDC head as the most powerful village figure. These councils resolve conflicts and organize community efforts but face challenges like unclear legal status and perceptions of being donor-driven, which some argue undermines state legitimacy.[9] The *Independent Directorate of Local Governance* (IDLG) facilitates coordination, but the constitution's requirement for elected councils at provincial, district, and village levels remains partially unfulfilled, with only Provincial Councils elected as of 2009. Centralized governance has historically marginalized rural areas, contributing to the urban-rural divide and fuelling instability.

Table 1: Key Local Governance Structures in Afghanistan

Area	Governance Structure	Key Features	Challenges
Urban	Municipalities	Formalized, manage services, urban planning, supported by programs like "City for All"	Rapid urbanization (3.3% growth), 80% in slums, infrastructure strain
Rural	CDCs, CLDCs, DDAs	Community-driven, elected CDCs (25-300 families), high legitimacy (72% view CDC head as powerful)	Unclear legal status, donor-driven perceptions, resource scarcity

2.1 Historical Analysis

Afghanistan's governance landscape has been profoundly shaped by decades of conflict, foreign interventions, and centralized state-building efforts, which have entrenched the urban-rural divide and complicated local governance. Since the late 1970s, the country has endured near-continuous conflict, beginning with the Soviet invasion (1979–1989), followed by civil war, the Taliban's rise in the 1990s, and the U.S.-led intervention post-2001.[10] These conflicts disrupted governance structures, destroyed infrastructure, and eroded trust in state institutions, particularly in rural areas where 73% of Afghanistan's 42 million people reside.[11]

[9]Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, *Informal Order and the State in Afghanistan* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016).
[10] Julie Lowenstein, "US Foreign Policy and the Soviet-Afghan War: A Revisionist History", 59 *Harvey M. Applebaum Award* 9 (2016).
[11]Conor Tobin, "The United States and the Soviet-Afghan War, 1979–1989" *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

Foreign interventions, while introducing programs like the *National Solidarity Program* (NSP) to empower local governance, often imposed Western models that clashed with traditional systems like *shuras* and *jirgas*, creating parallel governance structures that undermined state legitimacy. The reliance on foreign aid for initiatives like CDCs further complicated local governance, as these structures were often perceived as donor-driven, lacking sustainability after international support waned.[12]

Centralized state-building, particularly post-2001, exacerbated rural marginalization by concentrating resources and decision-making in urban centers like Kabul. The 2004 Constitution established a unitary state with strong central authority, limiting local autonomy and sidelining rural governance structures. This centralization, restricted provinces ability to generate revenue or implement policies tailored to local needs, leaving rural areas with inadequate services, like 40% of villages lack paved roads and 42% of rural children have no access to education. Urban areas, while also strained, received disproportionate investment, fueling perceptions of neglect in rural communities. This urban bias deepened economic disparities, with rural poverty rates at 61% compared to 27.6% in urban areas.[13]

The urban-rural divide has historically fuelled rebellions, as rural grievances over exclusion and lack of services translated into political instability. The Global Security Review of 2019 highlights how rural populations, feeling marginalized by Kabul-centric policies, supported insurgencies like the Taliban, who capitalized on these divides by offering alternative governance in rural areas.[14] From the 1929 uprisings against *King Amanullah's* reforms to the Taliban's resurgence in the 2000s, rural discontent has been a recurring driver of conflict. These rebellions underscore the need for inclusive governance that addresses rural needs to prevent further instability. Addressing this historical legacy requires balancing centralized authority with local empowerment, ensuring rural communities have a voice in governance and access to resources.[15]

[12]Wolfgang Minatti and Isabelle Duyvesteyn, "Concepts of Legitimacy: Congruence and Divergence in the Afghan Conflict," 22 *Civil Wars* 1–25 (2020).
[13]Rashid A. Mushkani and Haruka Ono, "Urban planning, political system, and public participation in a century of urbanization: Kabul, Afghanistan," 8 *Cogent Social Sciences* 2045452 (2022).
[14]ShakirUllah, Ali Abbas and Usman Khan, "Religion as a Political Instrument: Comparing State Assimilationist Strategies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan," 16 *Religions* 864 (2025).
[15]Sadia Sulaiman, *Taliban Resurgence in Afghanistan: The Role of Post-Conflict Reconstruction*(Nanyang Technological University, 2014).

3. Governance Structural Initiatives in Urban and Rural Afghanistan

Both urban and rural initiatives aim to address Afghanistan's urban-rural divide, but challenges persist. Urban areas benefit from formalized structures and international support, while rural councils face resource constraints and institutional weaknesses. Integrating these systems through coordinated policies could enhance service delivery and reduce disparities, fostering sustainable development across Afghanistan.[16]

3.1 Municipalities and the "City for All" Program

In Afghanistan's urban centers, municipalities serve as the primary governance bodies, tasked with managing essential services such as water supply, sanitation, waste management, and urban planning. With only 27% of Afghanistan's 42 million people living in urban areas, these centers face significant challenges due to rapid urbanization (3.3% annual growth) and the prevalence of informal settlements, where 80% of urban residents reside.[17] Municipalities, often underfunded and understaffed, have historically struggled with limited revenues and weak institutional capacity, leading to inadequate service delivery and infrastructure strain, particularly in cities like Kabul, where air pollution (PM2.5 levels at 86 mg/m³) poses additional health risks.[18]To address these challenges, the Government of Afghanistan, with technical assistance from UN-Habitat and support from donors like the EU and USAID, implemented the "City for All" program (2016-2020). This initiative targeted Kabul and 11 other cities, including *Mazar-e-Sharif*, *Kandahar*and *Bamyan*, focusing on three key areas: land management, urban planning, and municipal finance.[19]

a) *Land Management:* The program achieved a significant milestone by surveying and registering 1 million properties, 500,000 in Kabul and 500,000 in other cities and issuing occupancy certificates starting in March 2018, following regulatory approval in December 2017. This effort enhanced tenure security for urban residents,

[16]RadhaIyengar, Jacob N. Shapiro and Stephen Hegarty, "Lessons Learned from Stabilization Initiatives in Afghanistan: A Systematic Review of Existing Research", RAND Labor & Population *WR-1191* (June 2017).
[17]Naqibullah Ahmadi, *Drivers of Urban Transition in Afghanistan and the Country's Urban Future*(OSCE, Policy Brief #51, 2019).
[18] M.Z. Taqwa and N.C. Tharavathy, "A Study on Urban Air Pollution of Kabul, Afghanistan", 11(1)*International Journal of Plant and Environment* 68-76(2025).
[19]Matthew French et al., "Institutionalizing participatory slum upgrading: a case study of urban co-production from Afghanistan, 2002–2016," 31 *Environment and Urbanization* 209–30 (2019).

particularly *internally displaced persons* (IDPs) and returnees, who constitute a significant portion of the urban population living in informal settlements.[20]

b) *Urban Planning:* The "City for All" program developed strategic action plans for infrastructure through a participatory "people's process," involving community workshops and Municipal Advisory Boards. These plans were completed for five districts in Kabul like Districts 1, 5, 6, 13, and 16 and cities like Kandahar, Mazar-e-Sharif and Bamyan. The plans included five-year capital investment strategies to improve urban infrastructure, ensuring community priorities were addressed.[21]

c) *Municipal Finance:* The program significantly improved municipal revenues by distributing 47,000 *safayi invoices* (municipal service charges) and issuing 2,400 business licenses since October 2017, collecting Afs 48 million ($690,000) in revenues. This financial boost has enabled municipalities to fund basic services like waste management and park maintenance, fostering greater self-reliance.[22]

The "City for All" program has been lauded for enhancing tenure security, particularly for vulnerable populations, and for promoting community participation through inclusive planning processes. The establishment of Municipal Advisory Boards and community workshops ensured that local voices, including those of women, were integrated into urban governance, aligning with *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) like SDG 11 and SDG 5. The program's focus on municipal finance has also laid the groundwork for more sustainable urban governance, reducing dependency on external funding.[23]However, challenges remain. Rapid urbanization continues to strain municipal resources, and the high prevalence of informal settlements complicates service delivery. Further, environmental issues, such as severe air pollution and climate-driven migration, require ongoing investment and coordination beyond the program's scope.[24]

3.2 Rural Governance Structures

[20]MaqsoodRezayee, Gabriel Hoh Teck Ling and SitiMisnan, "Approaches to Addressing Informal Settlement Problems: A Case Study of District 13 in Kabul, Afghanistan," 9 *Engineering Management Research* 1 (2020).
[21]JithinRaveendran, "Learning from Afghanistan: The Futility of Occupation in Nation-Building," 18 *Journal of Strategic Security* (2025).
[22]Mohammad Shahab Sharifi et al., "Modeling the Impact of Socio-Economic and Environmental Factors on Air Quality in the City of Kabul," 16 *Sustainability* 10969 (2024).
[23]SaiforaBarekzai, *Women's Participation in School Management Shuras in Afghanistan* (Karlstads University, 2014).
[24] Adriana Zobrist Galád, "The Challenges and Role of Structures in the Reconstruction of Afghanistan." 11(2) *Connections*5–36 (2012).

Rural Afghanistan, home to 73% of the population, faces stark challenges, including a 61% poverty rate, limited infrastructure with 40% of villages have only dirt roads and inadequate access to education with 42% of children lack access and healthcare.[25] To address these issues, rural governance is structured through a three-tiered system under the MRRD i.e. CDCs, *Cluster-Level Development Councils* (CLDCs) and *District Development Assemblies* (DDAs). These bodies aim to empower communities, foster participatory development, and bridge the gap between rural areas and higher-level governance structures.[26]

a) *Community Development Councils (CDCs):* CDCs are the cornerstone of rural governance, representing clusters of 25-300 families. Established under the NSP in 2003, CDCs are elected through a transparent process involving at least 80% voter turnout within community clusters. A 2020 study found that 72% of respondents viewed CDC heads as powerful, indicating their legitimacy in rural communities. CDCs serve dual roles as governance and development institutions, facilitating community-driven projects and resolving local disputes. The NSP, a flagship initiative, has established 26,395 CDCs across 34 provinces, covering approximately 22 million people and financing 55,050 subprojects, including 23,205 kilometers of tertiary roads. Notably, half of CDC members are women, promoting gender inclusivity in decision-making, a significant shift from traditional male-dominated structures. However, CDCs face challenges such as resource scarcity, unclear legal status, and perceptions of being donor-driven, which some argue undermines state legitimacy.[27]

b) *Cluster-Level Development Councils (CLDCs):* Information on CLDCs is limited, but they are part of the rural governance framework, likely serving as intermediate bodies coordinating development efforts across multiple CDCs within a district. The NSP's structure involves clustering communities for CDC elections, suggesting that CLDCs

[25] S. Haidary,"A Comparative Study of Life Quality in Urban and Rural Areas of Afghanistan: A Case Study of Jawzjan Province", 5(4)*Journal of Economics, Finance and Accounting Studies* 01-09 (2023).
[26]WaisAlemi, "Institute of Rural Development Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, Afghanistan" (2017).
[27]Mohammad Asif Akbari and ObaidullahRahmani, "The Performance Review of the Community Development Councils from Prospective of Local Governance in Afghanistan", 8(1) *International Journal of Education and Research*183 (2020).

may facilitate collaboration among these clusters, though their specific roles and functions are not well-documented in available sources.[28]

c) *District Development Assemblies (DDAs):* DDAs operate at the district level, bridging villages and provinces by prioritizing local development needs. *The National Area-Based Development Programme* (NABDP) has supported DDAs to independently manage development projects, such as electricity, transportation, and irrigation infrastructure, which have created temporary employment opportunities. DDAs play a critical role in monitoring projects at least 104 under NABDP and ensuring community needs are addressed at a broader scale. However, their establishment has faced delays due to political transitions and debates over the role of constitutional District Councils.[29]

CDCs have significantly enhanced community welfare and representation, particularly for marginalized groups like women, through participatory development under the NSP and the *Citizens Charter Afghanistan Project* (CCAP). DDAs have strengthened district-level coordination, ensuring rural voices reach provincial authorities. These initiatives have delivered tangible benefits, such as improved infrastructure and access to services, benefiting over 13 million Afghans. However, rural governance structures face significant hurdles. CDCs, while legitimate, are constrained by limited resources and reliance on foreign aid, raising concerns about sustainability post-NSP. The lack of clear legal status for CDCs and DDAs complicates their integration into national governance frameworks.[30]Furthermore, socio-cultural barriers, such as low education levels as 42% of rural children lack access and gender inequality with rural women's literacy is three times lower than urban women's, limit participation, particularly for women in governance roles. The controversy surrounding donor-driven initiatives persists, with some arguing that they undermine state legitimacy, while others view them as essential for empowering rural communities.[31]

[28]Thomas Waldman, *Evaluation Of Cluster Community Development Council (Ccdc) Pilot Project* 175(PRDU, 2015).
[29]Arne Strand, Magnus Hatlebakk, TorunnWimpelmann, MirwaisWardak, "Community-Driven Development or community-based development?", *Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute* (CMI Report R 2022:3).
[30]Karim UllahBaidar and Fayaz Gul Mazloum Yar, "Evaluating Community-Based Development in Rural Afghanistan: a Comprehensive Analysis of The National Solidarity Program And Citizens," 5 *Eduvest - Journal of Universal Studies* 271–83 (2025).
[31]Basir Ahmad Hasin, Mir Mohammad Ayoubi and Nasar Ahmad Shayan, "Challenges and prospects: women's education in contemporary Afghanistan," 6 *Frontiers in Global Women's Health* 1477145 (2025).

3.3 Challenges in Bridging the Urban-Rural Divide

The urban-rural divide in Afghanistan is perpetuated by a range of systemic, institutional, socio-cultural, economic and environmental challenges. ***Systemic challenges*** include corruption, patronage networks, and the supremacy of politics over technical reform, which hinder effective governance. ***Institutional challenges*** involve unclear divisions of authority between central and provincial levels, poor leadership by governors due to limited delegation, and delays in electing district and village councils, weakening accountability.[32]***Socio-cultural barriers*** are significant, particularly in rural areas, where 42% of children lack access to education, and rural women's literacy is three times lower than urban women's, exacerbating gender inequality.[33]***Economic disparities*** are stark, with 61% of rural residents and 89% of nomadic populations living in poverty, alongside high youth unemployment averaging 22.3% in 2020 and low agricultural productivity. ***Environmental vulnerabilities,*** such as land degradation, water scarcity, and recurrent droughts, disproportionately affect rural areas, driving migration to urban centres. In urban areas, challenges include rapid urbanization, with 80% of residents in informal settlements lacking basic services and severe air pollution.[34]The lack of recent census data last conducted in 1979, further complicates governance and planning, making it difficult to address these disparities effectively.

Table 2: Key Challenges in Bridging the Urban-Rural Divide

Category	Urban Challenges	Rural Challenges
Systemic	Corruption, patronage networks	Corruption, lack of national consensus on governance
Institutional	Weak urban planning, limited investment	Unclear legal status of CDCs, resistance from district governors
Socio-Cultural	Social exclusion, gender inequality	Low education (42% children lack access), gender inequality (3x lower

[32]AlamzebMomand, "Impacts of Centralization on the Performance of Local Governance in Afghanistan; A Survey in Nangarhar Province" *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2021).
[33] Frances Z. Brown, "Aiding Afghan Local Governance: What Went Wrong?," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* Nov. 8, 2021, *available at*: https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/11/aiding-afghan-local-governance-what-went-wrong?lang=en (last visited July 5, 2025).
[34]Trung Thanh Nguyen et al., "Security risks from climate change and environmental degradation: implications for sustainable land use transformation in the Global South," 63 *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 101322 (2023).

		female literacy)
Economic	27.6% below poverty line, 89% in slums	61% poverty rate, 22.3% youth unemployment, low agricultural productivity
Environmental	Air pollution (Kabul PM2.5: 86 mg/m³), climate hazards	Land degradation, water scarcity, recurrent droughts

4. Strategies for Integration

Several strategies have been implemented or proposed to bridge the urban-rural divide through integrated development. The ***National Solidarity Program (NSP),*** a flagship initiative, provided block grants to CDCs for community-identified projects, empowering rural communities and improving local governance. However, its reliance on foreign aid and sustainability issues have sparked debate, with some arguing it undermines state legitimacy. ***Decentralization*** is another key strategy, aiming to devolve authority and resources to provincial and district levels to make governance more responsive.[35] The Provincial Budgeting Policy approved in 2015, piloted fiscal deconcentrating in sectors like education and health, showing promise for balanced development. ***Infrastructure investment*** in rural areas, such as roads, water supply and sanitation, is critical to improve connectivity and access to markets, reducing disparities.[36]***Community-driven approaches,*** like UN-Habitat's "People's Process," emphasize participatory planning and implementation, ensuring community needs are met in both urban and rural contexts.[37]***Economic integration*** through initiatives like microfinance and market access for rural products can create jobs and reduce poverty.[38] Finally, addressing ***climate resilience*** through integrated urban-rural planning is essential, given Afghanistan's vulnerability to climate change.[39] These strategies, while

[35]John William Groninger, Charles M Ruffner and S Alan Walters, "Sustaining Rural Afghanistan under Limited Central Government Influence," 2 *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 24 (2013).
[36]KadoukpèGildasMagbondé, Djiby Racine Thiam and Natascha Wagner, "The Economic Impacts of Rural Water Supply Infrastructures in Developing Countries: Empirical Evidence from Senegal," 87 *Environmental and Resource Economics* 2571–628 (2024).
[37]FanenTerdoo, "Assessing the role of participatory planning approach in enhancing informal settlements upgrading in low income regions," 2 *Discover Global Society* 98 (2024).
[38]Blessings Kerry, "The Impact of Microfinance on Poverty Alleviation in Rural Communities," 6 *International Journal of Developing Country Studies* 1–12 (2024).
[39]ChinaraAdamkulova and ZhorobaiAitbaev, "Ensuring climate resilience in Central Asia through the establishment of a water management education program," 15 *Journal of Water and Climate Change* 1551–64 (2024).

promising, face challenges like security concerns, political instability and coordination issues between urban and rural governance bodies as analysed under Table 3.

Table 3: Strategies for Bridging the Urban-Rural Divide

Strategy	Description	Examples	Challenges
Decentralization	Devolve authority and resources to local levels	Provincial Budgeting Policy (2015)	Political resistance, coordination issues
Infrastructure	Improve rural roads, water, sanitation	National Rural Access Program (NRAP)	Funding shortages, security concerns
Community-Driven	Participatory planning and implementation	UN-Habitat's "People's Process," NSP	Sustainability, donor dependency
Economic Integration	Promote rural jobs, market access	Microfinance Investment Facility for Afghanistan (MISFA)	Low agricultural productivity, market access barriers
Climate Resilience	Integrated planning to address climate impacts	UN-Habitat's focus on climate-driven migration	Resource constraints, lack of expertise

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Afghanistan's urban-rural divide poses significant challenges to sustainable development and political stability, driven by disparities in services, infrastructure and economic opportunities. Effective local governance, through integrated urban-rural development strategies, is key to bridging this gap. By strengthening governance structures, addressing systemic and institutional challenges, and implementing community-driven and decentralized approaches, Afghanistan can foster balanced growth and resilience. Stakeholders must prioritize coordinated policies that empower both urban and rural communities, ensuring a stable and inclusive future.

Afghanistan's urban and rural governance structures reflect the country's complex socio-political landscape. Municipalities, bolstered by initiatives like the "City for All" program, have made strides in addressing urban challenges through improved land management,

planning, and finance. In rural areas, CDCs, CLDCs, and DDAs, supported by programs like the NSP and NABDP, have empowered communities but face sustainability and resource challenges. Bridging the urban-rural divide requires integrating these systems through decentralized, participatory approaches that address disparities in services, infrastructure and economic opportunities, fostering a more inclusive and resilient Afghanistan.

5.1Recommendations and Policy Implications

To bridge the urban-rural divide, Afghanistan should adopt the following policies:

a) ***Develop a National Integration Strategy:*** Create a coordinated framework linking urban and rural programs, ensuring alignment between the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing (MUDH) and MRRD.

b) ***Strengthen Decentralization:*** Formalize the roles of CDCs and DDAs, and expand fiscal deconcentrating to more sectors, building on the 2015 Provincial Budgeting Policy.

c) ***Invest in Rural Infrastructure:*** Prioritize roads, water, and sanitation to enhance connectivity and access to services, reducing migration pressures on urban areas.

d) ***Promote Economic Opportunities****:* Support rural agriculture and microfinance, and create market linkages to urban centres to reduce poverty and unemployment.

e) ***Enhance Community Participation:*** Integrate CDCs into national governance frameworks with training and resources, ensuring community-driven development is sustainable.

f) ***Address Gender and Climate Challenges:*** Invest in rural education, particularly for women, and develop climate-resilient infrastructure to mitigate environmental impacts.

g) ***Leverage International Support:*** Collaborate with organizations like UN-Habitat and the World Bank to fund sustainable, locally-driven initiatives.