

# STATE OF AFGHAN CITIES

2015

VOLUME ONE



Ministry of  
*Urban Development Affairs*  
Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

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Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan  
Independent Directorate of Local Governance



**Kabul Municipality**  
Islamic Republic of Afghanistan



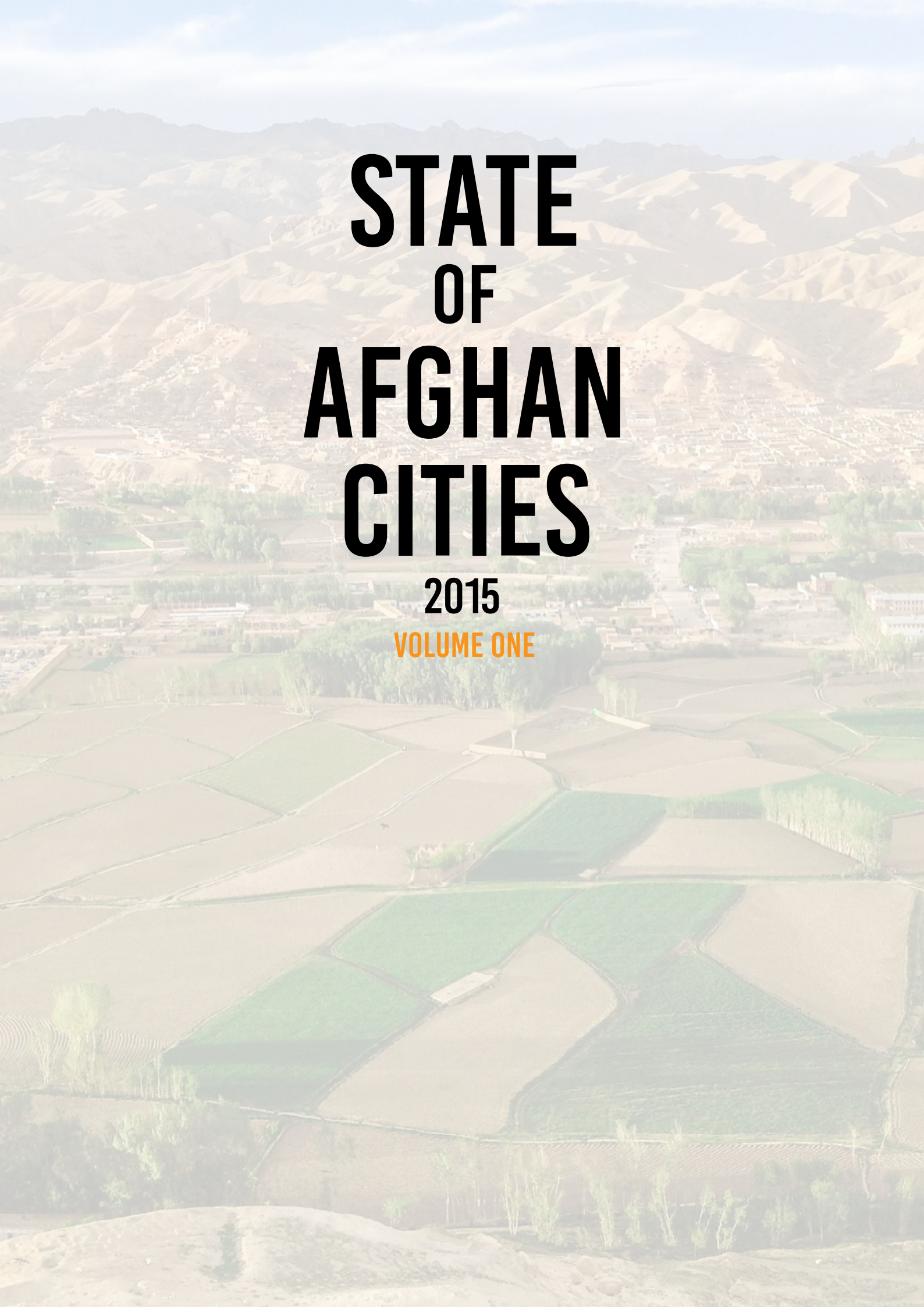
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Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2015) The State of Afghan Cities 2015. GoIRA: Kabul

An aerial photograph of a city in Afghanistan, showing a dense urban area with a grid-like street pattern. In the foreground, there are large, terraced agricultural fields, some of which are green, indicating crops. The background features rolling hills and mountains under a clear sky.

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# MINISTER'S FOREWORD

Ministry of Urban Development Affairs

Cities have great potential to improve livelihoods, drive economic growth and provide safe and affordable housing and adequate services. With continued urbanisation in Afghan cities occurring in the next few decades, there is a great opportunity to promote urban development that is sustainable, equitable and a catalyst for economic growth.

The priorities of the National Unity Government of Afghanistan for the urban sector are very clear. The 'Realizing Self-Reliance' Framework presented at the London Conference on Afghanistan in 2014 explicitly stated cities are to be drivers of economic development. The Ministry of Urban Development Affairs (MUDA) is currently leading the drafting of an Urban National Priority Programme (U-NPP) and associated comprehensive urban development programme. Together these will lay the foundations for a sustainable urban future.

However in Afghanistan, basic information for urban areas does not exist, is outdated, or not shared. As a result, MUDA has been challenged to pro-actively guide the growth of Afghanistan's cities and harness urbanisation as a driver of development.

This State of Afghan Cities 2014/15 report and associated dataset is already providing essential inputs to these ongoing processes. It will ensure the outcomes are pragmatic and reflect the ground realities across the country.

I sincerely thank all programme partners, the Government of Australia, and UN-Habitat for supporting MUDA to implement this programme. It has been of significant benefit. The data – as well as our increased capacity for urban monitoring – will continue to be used for better urban planning and policy-making to improve the lives of the Afghan people.

*H.E. Sadat Mansoor Naderi, Minister for Urban Development Affairs*



# DIRECTOR GENERAL'S FOREWORD

Independent Directorate of Local Governance

The Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) is proud to have taken a leading role in the development and implementation of this catalytic programme. The State of Afghan Cities 2014/15 focuses on one of IDLG's core mandates: overseeing the 33 provincial municipalities and over 150 district municipalities, under the leadership of the General Directorate of Municipal Affairs (GDMA).

The urban future facing Afghanistan is just as much a challenge for urban planning and housing as it is for sub-national governance. For more than one-quarter of the Afghan population, municipalities are the first 'point of contact' – the everyday 'face of the state'.

This report demonstrates both the enormous challenges as well as opportunities in terms of municipal governance. Challenges include insufficient capacity and resources, corruption, gender inequality and limited transparency and accountability. Opportunities include the mandate to raise local revenues and ability to reach a considerable percentage of the population with increased tenure security and improved service delivery.

IDLG remains committed towards improving the capacity, transparency and accountability of municipal governance. Through presenting a detailed picture of the state of Afghanistan's provincial municipalities, the report is a positive step towards laying the foundations for municipal elections, improving the transparency of municipal staffing and finances, and better planning and coordination of municipal service delivery.

*H.E. Ghulam Jilani Popal, Director General, Independent Directorate of Local Governance*



# KABUL MAYOR'S FOREWORD

Kabul Municipality

Kabul Municipality is home to the largest share of the total urban population in Afghanistan. It has witnessed considerable expansion over the past decade and has greatly contributed to national economic growth, stabilisation and reconstruction.

Numerous studies of Kabul City have been undertaken over the past decade however none has undertaken such a rigorous and comprehensive analysis of the existing situation as this one. Furthermore, no studies have directly compared Kabul with the other major cities in the country in order to understand their similarities and differences in terms of key dimensions such as land use, access to services and dwelling characteristics and population densities.

The findings and dataset that have been produced under this programme are of enormous value for Kabul Municipality. The land-use and dwelling maps lay the foundations for the detailed planning of each Nahia (city district), which will help to guide public and private investments, improve municipal revenue collection (especially safyee/property taxation), and ensure community-based upgrading interventions are linked with larger-scale urban upgrading investments to maximise their impact.

It is with slight regret that this activity was not undertaken a decade ago in order to have an earlier baseline assessment and to therefore be able to properly track how Kabul City has changed over the past ten years. Nevertheless, learning this lesson, Kabul Municipality is committed to implementing the activity on a regular basis (at least every five years) in order to monitor urban change in the city and demonstrate its impact on improving access to affordable land and housing, livelihoods, and basic services for all Kabul residents.

*H.E. Abdul Ahad Wahid, Kabul Mayor (a.i)*



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the first-ever comprehensive and reliable assessment of Afghanistan's 34 Provincial Capital Cities. It is a key output from the ambitious one-year programme, The State of Afghan Cities 2014/15, developed and implemented by three lead partners: Ministry of Urban Development Affairs (MUDA), Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), and Kabul Municipality (KM); with technical assistance from the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and financial support from the Government of Australia.

The programme developed an innovative, reliable and cost-effective methodology in order to examine the 'state' of Afghanistan's major cities. It used recent and high-resolution satellite images to extract key land-use and dwelling data. This was combined with field checks and city workshops to engage local stakeholders, improve data accuracy, and build human and institutional capacities for improved urban data monitoring and use.

Overall, the report demonstrates that because the 'urban agenda' has been largely missing in the past decade, Afghan cities have grown haphazardly, informally, with limited access to affordable and quality basic services, and with considerable socio-economic divisions and exclusion. There has been insufficient national policy and regulations to guide urban development; limited realistic and grounded spatial plans; and weak municipal governance to ensure equitable service delivery and effective management of the inevitable urbanisation transition facing the country.

The programme and this associated report come at an opportune time. The 'urban agenda' has been explicitly prioritized by the National Unity Government of Afghanistan as a driver of economic and social development. This recognition that urbanisation is an inevitable phenomenon is long overdue.

Urbanisation is not a problem to be solved but, if done well, is an effective instrument and driver of prosperity, stabilisation, and state building. The basis for harnessing urbanisation is having accurate and timely information upon which to base policy and planning decisions. This report makes a step forward in this direction.

***“We will make cities the economic drivers for development. In order to do so we need to improve living conditions and service delivery in urban centers.”***

GoIRA (2014) Realizing Self-Reliance, London Conference on Afghanistan

## KEY MESSAGES

**Afghan cities are a driving force of social and economic development, state-building and peace-building, yet their full potential has been constrained by the absence of an effective urban policy and regulatory framework, insufficient and poorly coordinated investment, and weak municipal governance and land management.**

- Afghanistan's urbanisation has largely been informal. Cities have expanded rapidly over the past decade without effective spatial plans and limited access to formal land and housing. The result has been informal, low-density sprawl; increasing socio-spatial inequality; and significant infrastructure deficiencies.
- Yet Afghan cities have been a significant source of economic and social development. Urban-based economic activity such as services now account for over 50% of national GDP, with agriculture accounting for 25% (down from 50% in 2002). Urban communities and citizens have demonstrated significant capacity to lead neighbourhood upgrading and local peace-building efforts.
- A change is needed to combat the negative by-products of urbanisation. An improved national policy, legal and regulatory framework is essential, along with increased capacity and authority of municipalities, to avoid another decade of informal 'laissez faire' urban growth, and to harness cities as drivers of economic and social development.

**The 34 Provincial Capitals are home to over eight million Afghans, roughly one-third of the total population. While Kabul is overwhelmingly large, the Regional Hubs and Transit and Trading Hubs are home to significant urban populations as well.**

- Afghanistan has a relatively geographically balanced urban spatial structure although Kabul dominates with an estimated 41% of the urban population. Kabul and the four regional hubs of Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kandahar and Jalalabad are home to 69% of the urban population (in the 34 provincial capitals).
- In addition to these five largest cities, the eight Trading and Transit cities: Lashkar Gah, Kunduz, Taluqan, Pul-i-Khumri, Sheberghan, Zaranj, Maimana, and Ghazni also contain significant populations and are important regional economic and transit centres.
- At the smaller end of the spectrum, Provincial Centres and Urban Villages have comparatively smaller populations but still represent more than was previously recognised in many cases.
- Interventions should be tailored to the particular typology of cities: Kabul, Regional Hubs, Trading and Transit Hubs, Provincial Hubs, and Urban Villages. A national spatial strategy can help to promote spatially balanced and equitable urban growth in the coming decades, creating a 'system of cities' and reducing pressure on Kabul.

- On average, 27% of the built-up area of cities are vacant plots (land subdivided but not yet occupied), reflecting a decade of land grabbing, land sales by municipalities, and private sector speculation. These vacant plots are sufficient to accommodate

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