



Obstacles and Challenges of Rural Development in Afghanistan: Examining Problems and Solutions: A Comprehensive Study

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Abstract

Rural development in Afghanistan faces a range of complex and interrelated challenges, which hinder sustainable growth in the region. This research aims to identify the main obstacles hindering rural development and provide strategic recommendations to achieve sustainable growth. The research utilizes a theoretical approach method with comprehensive document analysis, critical review, and literature review of current sources covering the period 2020 to 2024. Institutional, socio-cultural, economic, environmental and infrastructural factors affecting rural development were analyzed. The results show that rural development in Afghanistan is hampered by various challenges, including ineffective governance, centralized planning, and lack of a cohesive development strategy. Socio-cultural issues such as massive rural-to-urban migration, low education levels, gender inequality, and lack of community participation are also significant obstacles. Economically, poverty, unemployment, low agricultural productivity and limited access to markets and financial services hinder progress. Environmental issues such as land degradation, water scarcity and vulnerability to natural disasters worsen the situation. In addition, poor physical infrastructure, including inadequate transportation networks, limited access to clean water and sanitation, and minimal health and education facilities, further slow progress. The implications of this study emphasize the importance of a holistic and integrated approach that includes decentralization and improved governance structures, increased community participation in planning and implementation processes, and significant investment in infrastructure development.

Keywords: Rural Development, Afghanistan, Sustainable Growth, Institutional Challenges, Socio-Cultural Barriers, Economic Barriers.

INTRODUCTION

The development of rural areas is a cornerstone for achieving sustainable national growth, particularly in countries like Afghanistan, where a significant majority of the population resides in rural regions. Approximately 71% of Afghanistan's population lives in rural areas, predominantly engaged in agriculture, which forms the backbone of the country's economy (Yar & Yasouri, 2024). However, these rural areas are often neglected, leading to a wide range of socio-economic challenges that hinder the overall development of the nation (Rahmani, Wafa, & Yar, 2021).

Rural development in Afghanistan has historically been undermined by a series of complex and interrelated factors. Decades of armed conflict, political instability, and weak governance structures have severely disrupted the social and economic fabric of rural communities. The lack of adequate infrastructure, including roads, schools, healthcare facilities, and energy access, further exacerbates these challenges, leaving rural populations isolated and deprived of basic services. Additionally, Afghanistan's rural economy is characterized by low agricultural productivity, which is largely due to outdated farming practices, insufficient access to modern agricultural technologies, and a lack of institutional support (Zhu, Zhou, & Li, 2022). The socio-cultural context of rural Afghanistan also presents significant barriers to development. Deep-rooted traditions and cultural norms often limit the participation of women and marginalized groups in economic activities, while migration from rural to urban areas contributes to the aging of the rural population and the erosion of traditional social structures. Environmental issues, such as land degradation, water scarcity, and the impacts of climate change, further compound these challenges, threatening the livelihoods of rural communities and the sustainability of agricultural practices (Das, Das, & Pandey, 2023). Despite the critical role that rural development plays in national stability and prosperity, efforts to address these challenges have been fragmented and inconsistent. Previous strategies have often been top-down, with limited involvement of local communities in the planning and implementation processes. This approach has led to a lack of coordination among stakeholders, inefficient use of resources, and ultimately, the failure to achieve meaningful and lasting development outcomes (Couper et al., 2023). In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the need for a more holistic and integrated approach to rural development in Afghanistan. This approach must address the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by rural communities, combining investments in infrastructure, education, and healthcare with efforts to modernize agriculture and promote economic diversification. Furthermore, it is essential to involve local communities in the decision-making process to ensure that development initiatives are tailored to their specific needs and contexts (Dai, Fang, Guo, & Hou, 2023).

However, the current body of research on rural development in Afghanistan is limited, particularly in terms of empirical studies that explore the practical implementation of development strategies. Much of the existing literature focuses on theoretical frameworks without adequately addressing the on-the-ground realities faced by rural communities. This study seeks to bridge this

gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the institutional, socio-cultural, economic, environmental, and infrastructural barriers to rural development in Afghanistan.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a review of the existing literature on rural development challenges in Afghanistan and comparable contexts. Section 3 outlines the research methodology, detailing the document analysis and critical review methods employed in this study. Section 4 presents the key findings, discussing the major obstacles to rural development in Afghanistan and their implications for policy and practice. Finally, Section 5 concludes with a set of recommendations aimed at policymakers, development practitioners, and other stakeholders involved in rural development, emphasizing the need for coordinated and community-driven approaches to overcome these challenges.

This type of development is aimed at all economic, social, environmental, and political dimensions. Thus, the question arises: What are the challenges, constraints, issues, and barriers to rural development in Afghanistan?

The innovation of this research lies in its comprehensive theoretical approach to identifying and critiquing the multifaceted challenges to rural development in Afghanistan. By focusing on institutional, socio-cultural, economic, environmental, and physical infrastructure challenges, the study provides a holistic understanding of the barriers that hinder rural development in the country. The research methodology, which includes document analysis, critical review, and literature review, offers a robust framework for analyzing these challenges. The study's findings underscore the need for a coordinated and inclusive approach to rural development that involves effective planning, community participation, investment in infrastructure, and sustainable agricultural practices. This research contributes to the body of knowledge on rural development by highlighting the interconnectedness of the various challenges faced by rural communities in Afghanistan and by suggesting strategic interventions for overcoming these obstacles.

The study of rural development challenges in Afghanistan, while comprehensive in its theoretical approach, reveals several gaps in the current research landscape. These gaps highlight the necessity for future research endeavors to delve into the practical manifestations of these challenges and to empirically validate the theoretical findings. Specifically, there is a lack of empirical studies that directly engage with rural communities to understand the on-the-ground realities of development challenges. Additionally, the study calls for in-depth case studies of specific villages or regions to capture the nuances of rural development in varied contexts within Afghanistan.

Based on the above background, the objective of this study is to comprehensively identify and analyze the challenges hindering rural development in Afghanistan. The research aims to provide in-depth insights into the institutional, socio-cultural, economic, environmental, as well as physical infrastructure constraints faced by rural communities in Afghanistan, focusing on how these factors are interrelated in impeding sustainable development. The benefits of this research are expected to contribute significantly to the development of rural development theory and

practice, particularly in Afghanistan. First, this research will make an academic contribution in enriching the literature on rural development with a more holistic perspective and based on the Afghan context. Second, practically, the results of this research are expected to be used as a basis for formulating more inclusive and effective policies, both by the Afghan government and international organizations involved in rural development efforts.

METHODS

This study employs a theoretical approach to examine the multifaceted challenges of rural development in Afghanistan. The research methodology is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the institutional, socio-cultural, economic, environmental, and infrastructural barriers that hinder rural development in the country (Darojat, 2018). The following methods were utilized to collect, analyze, and synthesize the relevant data:

1. **Document Analysis:** Document analysis forms the core of the research methodology, enabling the systematic examination of existing documents and reports related to rural development in Afghanistan. A wide range of sources, including government publications, academic journals, conference proceedings, and reports from international organizations, were reviewed to gather data on the current state of rural development. This method allowed for the identification of key challenges and the assessment of policy and practice in the context of rural development.
2. **Critical Review:** A critical review of the literature was conducted to identify and analyze the major challenges and barriers to rural development in Afghanistan. This review focused on both qualitative and quantitative studies, offering a broad perspective on the issues at hand. The critical review involved evaluating the validity, reliability, and relevance of the selected studies, with an emphasis on understanding the root causes and implications of the identified challenges. This method was essential in synthesizing the findings from various sources and providing a coherent analysis of the existing knowledge base.
3. **Literature Review:** The literature review aimed to synthesize findings from previous research on rural development in Afghanistan, particularly studies published in recent years. This review included a comprehensive examination of theoretical frameworks related to development and underdevelopment, as well as the indicators of rural development such as poverty, unemployment, inequality, and national income. By integrating insights from recent studies, the literature review provided a foundation for understanding the complexities of rural development in Afghanistan and informed the development of the study's theoretical framework.
4. **Theoretical Framework:** The study is grounded in a theoretical framework that draws on various concepts and definitions of development, underdevelopment, and rural development. The framework was constructed by analyzing key indicators such as poverty, unemployment, inequality, and national income, which are critical to understanding the state of rural development in Afghanistan. Additionally, the framework incorporates sustainable

development strategies, particularly those relevant to the agricultural and food sectors, to propose a holistic approach to addressing the challenges of rural development.

5. **Data Analysis:** Data analysis was conducted through a qualitative approach, wherein the findings from the document analysis, critical review, and literature review were synthesized to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and barriers to rural development in Afghanistan. The analysis focused on identifying patterns, trends, and relationships among the various factors influencing rural development. The data were then categorized into key themes, including institutional challenges, socio-cultural barriers, economic constraints, environmental concerns, and infrastructural deficits.
6. **Limitations:** While this study provides a robust theoretical analysis of the challenges to rural development in Afghanistan, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The study relies primarily on secondary data sources, which may not fully capture the on-the-ground realities faced by rural communities. Additionally, the lack of empirical data limits the ability to generalize the findings to all rural areas in Afghanistan. Future research should consider incorporating primary data collection methods, such as field surveys and interviews, to complement the theoretical analysis presented in this study.
7. **Ethical Considerations:** This research adhered to ethical standards by ensuring that all sources of information were properly cited and acknowledged. The study also maintained a critical and unbiased perspective throughout the analysis, ensuring that the findings are presented objectively and accurately.

The methodology employed in this study includes a comprehensive review of existing literature, alongside qualitative analyses of data sourced from government reports and international organizations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

General Information about the Study Area

Ten referred to as the "Heart of Asia." The capital of Afghanistan is Kabul. Afghanistan shares borders with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China, Pakistan, and Iran. According to the estimated statistics of 2020, Afghanistan's total population is approximately 32.9 million, of which 16.8 million (51%) are men and 16.1 million (49%) are women. About 23.4 million people (71%) live in rural areas, 8 million (24.8%) in cities, and 1.5 million (4.6%) are nomadic (NSIA, 2020).

Afghanistan has a highly diverse climate, which allows the production of various agricultural products. Grain production, particularly wheat, is a fundamental crop, followed by vegetables and fruits. Livestock farming is an integral part of agriculture and a primary activity for the rural community. However, livestock farming is also widespread among nomadic and semi-nomadic people. Afghanistan is recognized as an agricultural country in the region and the world, and a significant portion of its exports consists of agricultural and livestock products. Thus, agriculture

holds a special place in the economic structure of this country (Rahmani et al., 2021) (YAR, ZAHID, & MIAKHIL, 2023).

Research Findings

It is an undeniable necessity that specific challenges and obstacles to rural development exist in every country. For example, the challenges in achieving sustainable rural development in India include population growth, natural resource degradation, environmental pollution, limited access to education, youth unemployment, poor health due to lack of healthcare, and weak infrastructure for receiving information. These challenges also include issues related to globalization and livelihood problems. The following will focus on the challenges of rural development in Afghanistan.

Challenges to Achieving Rural Development in Afghanistan

Afghanistan faces numerous challenges and obstacles in rural areas on the path to sustainable development. To achieve rural development in Afghanistan, attention must be paid to all economic, social, institutional, and environmental dimensions. It is important to note that focusing on one structure while neglecting others can lead to failure in the development process. Therefore, to achieve sustainable development in general and rural development in particular, these challenges and obstacles must be analyzed. This will draw the attention of policymakers and planners to create suitable conditions for addressing these obstacles with effective solutions and programs. Below are some of the most significant barriers and fundamental challenges to rural development in Afghanistan (Essar, Siddiqui, & Head, 2023).

Poverty: Afghanistan is currently facing numerous problems. Millions of people live below the poverty line and suffer from severe hunger. Low living standards and widespread poverty, especially in rural areas, are the primary challenges to the country's underdevelopment. The ongoing conflict for more than forty years has exacerbated these issues. In Afghanistan, poverty inequality is more severe in rural areas than in urban areas, and it is especially high among nomads. Nomads rely on livestock herding and constantly search for grazing land. A survey by the Central Statistics Organization of Afghanistan, conducted in 2016 and 2017, shows that more than 54% of Afghans live below the poverty line. Poverty levels are 18% in cities, 61% in rural areas, and 89% among nomads. The poverty rate in Afghanistan is extremely high, with more than 60% of rural and nomadic populations living below the poverty line. Half of the country's population earns less than one dollar a day, and the main source of income for rural inhabitants and small-scale farmers is subsistence production. According to statistics, most of the country's wealth is concentrated in the hands of less than 30% of the population, while over 70% of the people are poor or live below the poverty line. Additionally, wealthy individuals often transfer or invest their capital outside the country, which poses a significant threat to the country's economic growth and development. People living in rural areas of Afghanistan face challenges such as low agricultural productivity, limited technical knowledge and skills among farmers, inadequate

service provision, and inefficient resource use, all of which contribute to increased poverty (Yar & Nasih, 2024).

Rural Roads: Afghanistan's rural roads face two major issues: mountainous terrain and damage from decades of war. Of the roughly 40,000 villages across Afghanistan, more than 40% have dirt roads, and only about 38% have access to proper roads.

Unemployment: In 2020, the labor force participation rate for men was 68.4%, while for women it was 16.5%, reflecting the lower employment rate among women compared to men. The unemployment rate among youth in rural areas was 29.6% in 2016 and dropped to 22.3% in 2020. Unemployment is a significant and fundamental problem for rural residents in Afghanistan, contributing to increased migration from rural to urban areas and further exacerbating urban problems (Mahgoub et al., 2024).

Low Productivity: Today, agricultural development is key to improving welfare in many developing countries. Approximately 71% of Afghanistan's population lives and works in rural areas, and 61% of households derive income from agriculture. Agriculture is a major component of rural development in Afghanistan and can play a crucial role in reducing poverty and promoting sustainable growth through job creation, productivity improvement, and inclusivity. However, several challenges affect the low productivity of the agricultural sector, including management challenges, water scarcity, and traditional usage, lack of medicine, materials, and chemical fertilizers, land fragmentation due to inheritance laws, difficulties in preserving natural resources, particularly deforestation, lack of equipped laboratories for pest detection, limited support programs for production, and rural self-sufficiency, as well as land grabbing of government and private properties (Rahman, Sunderland, Roshetko, & Healey, 2017). According to the World Bank's 2014 report, it was recommended that Afghanistan's agricultural sector focus on three sub-sectors for economic sustainability: irrigated wheat, horticulture (including fruits, nuts, and vegetables), and livestock (including dairy, eggs, and poultry). These recommendations are based on their suitability for small-scale, intensively irrigated areas and peri-urban zones, which are expected to provide added value and employment. Additionally, studies by the International Labor Organization indicate that grapes and tomatoes generate the highest per-unit income. The regional market for grapes is highly competitive, and the establishment of a cold chain is essential for realizing potential growth in this sector. Wheat is the most widely cultivated crop, supporting the income of approximately 47% of households in Afghanistan, but it provides the lowest income per unit among the five crops examined (Eini-Zinab, Sobhani, & Rezazadeh, 2021).

High Population Growth: Afghanistan's population growth rate is high, and neither new technology adoption nor scientific research to enhance agricultural products and domestic production are evident. The continuous 2.4% population growth rate in the long term is a cause for serious concern, as most poor families have many children, which exacerbates economic inequalities. The average population growth rate in Afghanistan during the mentioned period was 3.15%, and it has never experienced a rate below 2%. It is predicted that Afghanistan's population

growth rate, particularly in rural areas, will remain constant over the coming decades. The rapidly growing population increases pressure on the country's resources, service delivery, and labor market, which is already affected by a lack of sustainable jobs (Bozorgzadeh & Mousavi, 2023).

Education: In Afghanistan, rural residents have limited access to basic amenities compared to urban dwellers. For instance, in education, due to security threats, a lack of educational facilities, and teachers, particularly female teachers, more than 42% (5 million) of eligible children do not have access to education. Six thousand schools lack buildings and other essential facilities, and hundreds of schools are located far from residential areas (Manalai et al., 2022).

The literacy rate in Afghanistan among men (aged 15 and above) is 62%, while among women it is 18%. In this country, only one in five women is literate, and the literacy rate for women in rural areas is three times lower than in urban areas. The Ministry of Education in Afghanistan faces a shortage of professional teachers, with more than 40% of school teachers being non-professional, representing a major challenge for the country's education system. The current curriculum does not meet Afghanistan's needs, and other significant challenges, especially in rural areas, include a lack of textbooks, desks, chairs, and school buildings. Not all regions are capable of providing equal education (Manalai et al., 2022).

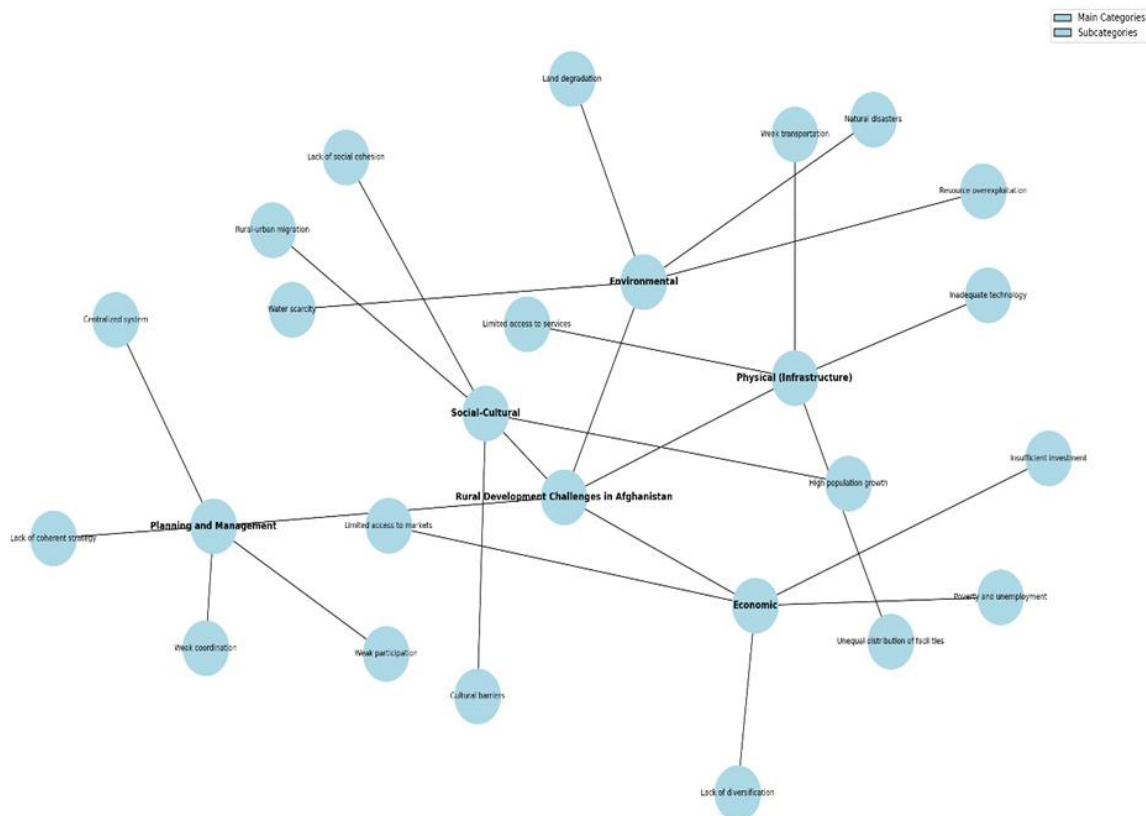


Figure 1. Conceptual Map of Rural Development Challenges in Afghanistan

This mind map illustrates the major categories and their specific challenges, providing a clear overview of the issues facing rural development in Afghanistan.

Challenges in Management, Regulation, and Planning (Policy-making)

One of the significant challenges in rural development in Afghanistan is planning and management, which lack a foundational and basic theory. The planning system in Afghanistan has consistently been characterized by a top-down approach and a high degree of centralization. This perspective, combined with maximum government intervention in rural development, has led to the exclusion of community participation, local institutions, and non-governmental organizations from the development process. This exclusion has resulted in a lack of coordination in planning and service delivery, increased costs, wasted human, financial, and social capital, and ultimately, the creation of gaps and dissatisfaction among the rural population. The consequences of these shared characteristics across rural areas include the perpetuation of inequality in the distribution of opportunities, resources, and benefits between urban and rural areas, and the vulnerability of the rural socio-economic system despite positive efforts in the field of rural infrastructure development (Story & Carpiano, 2017).

Researchers have identified the following as the main challenges related to management and planning for rural development in Afghanistan:

- 1) Lack of a coherent strategy for sustainable rural development.
- 2) Politicization of rural development and lack of accountability.
- 3) Theoretical weaknesses and the absence of a suitable practical model for rural development.
- 4) Lack of coordination in rural development programs in planning, implementation, and evaluation.
- 5) Weak management within governmental structures.
- 6) Lack of an independent oversight institution and a specific organization for rural development.
- 7) Centralized planning and decision-making system for rural development.
- 8) Interference by various government organizations in rural development programs.
- 9) Minimal community participation in the implementation and support of rural development projects.
- 10) Lack of involvement of NGOs and local private sector institutions in planning and executing rural development projects.
- 11) Insufficient attention to sustainable rural development.
- 12) Weak communication between local communities and the government.
- 13) Lack of spatial planning to support local economic growth.

Additionally, Savory and Ebrahimi, in their research, examined the barriers to rural development from the perspective of experts and pointed out issues such as price fluctuations of agricultural products, instability in agricultural prices, policy issues in pricing, neglect of the market for agricultural products, and the lack of a comprehensive market-based program as weaknesses in government policy-making (Sullivan, 2023).

Another challenge is the lack of cooperation with global institutions. Global reports indicate that Afghanistan is among the countries that make the least use of foreign credits and assistance.

Consequently, the global share of Afghanistan's agricultural sector and rural communities does not match their needs and capacities. The grand objectives of establishing connections and leveraging cooperation with global institutions could be twofold: on the one hand, to seek resources and knowledge not available or sufficiently developed within the country, and on the other, to offer resources and knowledge developed within the country for the benefit of other countries. Afghanistan's rural development and agricultural sector should consider and pursue both of these goals (Nehring, 2022). International aid and cooperation can be categorized into four areas:

1. Technical, which could involve receiving and applying tools and methods.
2. Educational, which could be for the direct learning of beneficiaries and educators.
3. Research, which could be aimed at understanding and solving problems using the knowledge and expertise of others, involving research institutions, universities, and consulting engineers.
4. Financial, including grants, loans, investments, and partnerships.

In the absence of international cooperation, the above opportunities for rural development in Afghanistan will not be accessible (Essar, Ashworth, & Nemat, 2022).

Social Challenges

The major social challenges of rural development in Afghanistan are as follows:

- a) Increased migration of rural populations to urban areas and insufficient population thresholds for many rural settlements, leading to the aging of rural communities: An analysis of the country's demographic data over the past half-century reveals that population growth in Afghanistan has been primarily focused on urban areas, with rural populations not increasing or even experiencing negative growth in some areas. In some cases, villages have been abandoned and turned into deserted areas (Rijal, Rimal, Stork, & Sharma, 2020).
 - b) The major causes for the population shift from rural to urban areas include rural-to-urban migration, the conversion of many villages into towns, and the integration of some villages into urban development areas. Migration from rural areas to cities is one of the main reasons for the aging of the rural population in Afghanistan. Despite the country's young population, migration plays a significant role in rural population aging. Additionally, the return of older migrants from urban areas to rural areas after spending their middle years in cities has contributed to the aging of the rural population.
- 1) High population growth rates in rural areas.
 - 2) Lack of entrepreneurship and creativity among rural populations.
 - 3) Lack of institutional and social capacity-building in rural communities.
 - 4) Cultural and traditional barriers are prevalent in rural areas.
 - 5) Limited participation and local collaboration (among farmers).
 - 6) Low levels of education and computer illiteracy in rural communities.
 - 7) Lack of precise and accurate understanding among rural communities of their needs and rights, and neglect of indigenous knowledge.

- 8) Limited job opportunities and high unemployment among rural people and youth.
- 9) Lack of awareness among rural populations about methods and principles for achieving sustainable development.
- 10) The dominance of unskilled labor in rural economic activities.
- 11) Limited access to welfare services (inequality and imbalance in the provision of economic and social amenities between rural and urban areas).
- 12) Low self-confidence among rural residents.
- 13) Distrust between rural people and government officials (Yar & Yasouri, 2024).

Economic Challenges

Researchers have identified the major economic challenges in rural development in Afghanistan as follows:

- 1) Ineffective cooperation and micro-economy in rural areas.
- 2) Rural development programs that are unaligned with international economic issues.
- 3) Weak participation of the private sector in rural development activities.
- 4) Rural poverty.
- 5) Limited access to agricultural markets and challenges in marketing.
- 6) Inadequate government investment in rural sectors and lack of financial support.
- 7) Lack of diversification in non-agricultural activities, such as tourism.
- 8) Low income levels.
- 9) Lack of commercialization of agricultural products.
- 10) Challenges in the mechanization of the agricultural sector.
- 11) Low productivity in the rural economy.
- 12) Lack of adequate infrastructure for developing rural industries.
- 13) Unemployment among rural youth.
- 14) Insufficient focus on rural entrepreneurship.
- 15) Presence of intermediaries in the sale of agricultural products.
- 16) Weakness in industry and a lack of new technologies for processing agricultural products.
- 17) Fragmentation of agricultural lands.
- 18) High dispersion of rural population centers, with many being small and unstable.
- 19) Lack of capable and mobilizing non-governmental organizations to engage rural communities in development.
- 20) Unfavorable land ownership and agricultural exploitation systems.
- 21) Lack of social cohesion among small-scale rural producers.
- 22) Imbalanced urban-rural relationships, leading to rural underdevelopment.
- 23) Lack of community organizations and institutions to participate in rural development.
- 24) Difficulty in retaining populations in rural areas due to economic and social challenges.
- 25) Rural urbanization threatens rural development (Zhang et al., 2022).

There is also a lack of attention to developing rural industries and utilizing solar energy and biomass energy.

Environmental (Ecological) Challenges

Environmental protection is the most crucial element of sustainable development. Environmental damage not only reduces the productivity of agricultural and non-agricultural activities but also poses health risks for humans, animals, and other forms of life. To ensure that economic and social progress is sustainable and institutionalized, preventing environmental degradation is paramount. Some of the environmental challenges facing rural development in Afghanistan include:

- 1) Conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses,
- 2) Unfavorable ecological conditions for sustainable rural development,
- 3) Weak management of natural disasters in rural areas, leading to reduced production due to floods, droughts, and cold weather,
- 4) The imbalance between population and natural resources,
- 5) Over-exploitation of groundwater resources,
- 6) Use of inappropriate technology in agriculture and soil erosion,
- 7) Sanitation and wastewater pollution issues in villages,
- 8) Overuse of fertilizers,
- 9) Overgrazing of pastures,
- 10) The emergence of animal epidemics (Essar et al., 2022).

Physical (Infrastructure) Challenges

The physical infrastructure challenges hindering rural development in Afghanistan can be summarized as follow

- 1) Weakness (proper infrastructure in rural areas) unavailability of roads, banks, schools, etc
- 2) Structural defects in operational systems in most rural areas such as small farmers
- 3) Limited access to appropriate technology in rural areas
- 4) Limitation of access to modern knowledge and technology in rural areas
- 5) Unequal distribution of income, prosperity and national facilities and opportunities between industry and agriculture.
- 6) Absence of formal education system.
- 7) Lack of connection between city and village to provide socio-economic services
- 8) Vulnerability of sometimes rural settlements to natural disasters
- 9) Lack of arrangement of space suitable for sometimes rural residence
- 10) Imbalance and growing inequality between urban centers and rural communities
- 11) Weakness in the transportation system (Bagambilana & Rugumamu, 2023)

Institutional and Structural Challenges

Institutional and structural challenges affecting rural development include:

- 1) The dominance of sectoral thinking (despite the emphasis on comprehensive and spatial programs) over the overall planning process,
- 2) Lack of cohesive and effective communication between executive organizations in achieving program objectives,
- 3) The existence of a centralized (top-down) management structure despite the acceptance of regional and provincial program decentralization,
- 4) The presence of a centralized spatial structure in the country's spatial planning system, prioritizing urban centers over rural settlements,
- 5) Lack of belief in rural development among some decision-makers within the country's planning structure,
- 6) Absence of a comprehensive rural development plan,
- 7) Lack of coordination between organizations responsible for rural development and the overlap of their duties,
- 8) Mismanagement of land and land use,
- 9) Absence of long-term and practical plans for the systematic organization of rural centers and spaces,
- 10) Lack of a clear legal framework for rural planning,
- 11) Absence of a specific model or framework for rural development,
- 12) Deficiencies in planning at various levels, such as the absence of local-level planning and lack of clear delineation of planning responsibilities at national, regional, and local levels (Chen et al., 2022).

Planning that focuses on identifying central villages for providing necessary services, creating non-agricultural jobs, developing rural industries, consolidating agricultural lands, reducing rural migration, and developing human resources can address some of the existing challenges in rural development.

Discussion

The examination of rural development challenges in Afghanistan through a theoretical lens has yielded a comprehensive understanding of the intricate web of issues that hinder progress in the nation's rural areas. The study's findings underscore the interconnectedness of institutional, socio-cultural, economic, environmental, and physical infrastructure challenges, necessitating a multifaceted approach to rural development.

The discussion of institutional challenges highlights the critical role of effective planning and management in rural development. The top-down approach and centralized planning that have characterized rural development efforts in Afghanistan have often excluded local participation and failed to address the diverse needs of rural communities. This has led to inefficiencies and a lack of coordination, resulting in dissatisfaction among the rural population (Zhang et al., 2022).

Socio-cultural challenges, such as migration and cultural barriers, have contributed to the aging of rural populations and the erosion of traditional rural lifestyles. The study suggests that addressing these challenges requires an understanding of local contexts and the empowerment of rural communities to engage in development processes. Economic challenges, including low agricultural productivity and limited market access, are symptomatic of a broader lack of economic diversification and private sector involvement (Yar & Yasouri, 2024). The study indicates that stimulating rural entrepreneurship and improving market linkages are essential for enhancing rural economies. Environmental concerns, such as land degradation and water scarcity, are not only threats to agricultural productivity but also to the health and well-being of rural populations. The discussion emphasizes the need for sustainable management of natural resources to ensure the long-term viability of rural communities. Physical infrastructure challenges, including inadequate roads and technology access, underscore the necessity of investment in rural infrastructure to support economic and social development. The study argues that improved connectivity and access to technology are prerequisites for rural development.

In conclusion, the discussion points to the need for a holistic and integrated approach to rural development in Afghanistan that addresses the identified challenges in a coordinated manner. This approach must be inclusive, community-driven, and cognizant of the local context to ensure that rural development initiatives are effective and sustainable.

CONCLUSION

The conclusions of this study highlight the multifaceted challenges hindering rural development in Afghanistan, including institutional, socio-cultural, economic, environmental and infrastructural barriers. The research found that these challenges are interrelated, creating complex barriers to sustainable growth in rural areas. Some of the key constraints identified include ineffective governance, lack of a coherent development strategy, widespread poverty, low levels of education and inadequate infrastructure. To address these challenges, a holistic and integrated approach involving various parties is required. The research recommends decentralization of governance, increased infrastructure investment, development of sustainable agricultural practices, and community empowerment through education and vocational training. In addition, an emphasis on environmental conservation and strengthening collaboration between the government, local communities and international organizations is critical to creating meaningful change. The implementation of these strategies requires strong commitment and coordination from all stakeholders involved in rural development. This research makes a significant contribution to the development of rural development theory and practice in Afghanistan by emphasizing the importance of community engagement and sustainable infrastructure investment as key pillars for promoting sustainable growth in rural areas. Further research is recommended to evaluate the impact of existing policies and programs, use participatory approaches involving local communities, and expand interdisciplinary research.

Longitudinal studies and technological innovation, as well as gender-based analysis in the context of rural development, also need to be prioritized to strengthen understanding and better development practices.

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First publication right:

Journal Transnational Universal Studies (JTUS)

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