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Obstacles and challenges of rural development in Afghanistan: examining problems and solutions: a comprehensive study

Fayaz Gul Mazloun Yar^{1*}, Janat Gul Zazia²

¹ Geography Department, Education Faculty, Nangarhar University

² Geography Department, Education Faculty, Paktia University

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***Corresponding author:** Fayaz Gul Mazloun Yar
Geography Department, Education Faculty, Nangarhar University

Abstract

The article investigates the multifaceted challenges hindering rural development in Afghanistan, a nation where rural communities constitute 71% of the population and are predominantly engaged in agriculture. Employing a theoretical approach, the study identifies and critiques the institutional, socio-cultural, economic, environmental, and physical infrastructure challenges that act as barriers to rural development. The research methodology includes document analysis, critical review, and literature review.

Key findings reveal that Afghanistan's rural development is constrained by widespread poverty, insecurity, poor infrastructure, low agricultural productivity, high population growth, inadequate education, and healthcare access. Socio-cultural challenges such as migration, cultural barriers, and limited entrepreneurship further complicate the situation. Economic obstacles include weak private sector participation, limited market access for agricultural products, and a lack of economic diversification. Environmental concerns encompass land degradation, water scarcity, and inefficient resource management. Physical infrastructure challenges are manifested in inadequate roads, technology access, and urban-rural connectivity.

The discussion underscores the necessity of a holistic approach to rural development that encompasses effective planning, community participation, and investment in infrastructure and education. The study concludes that addressing these challenges is crucial for achieving sustainable development in Afghanistan's rural areas, emphasizing the need for comprehensive strategies that prioritize rural development in the national agenda.

The innovation of the research is its theoretical examination of the multifaceted challenges to rural development in Afghanistan, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing these barriers through strategic interventions.

Keywords: Development Barriers, Rural Areas, Rural Development, and Afghanistan.

Corresponding author: Fayaz Gul Mazloun Yar

Introduction

The rapid increase in the global population has led to mounting pressure on resources and has triggered a food crisis, necessitating a reconsideration of the importance of agriculture and rural spaces. Rural areas are exposed to demographic, commercial, and technological transformations, and rural households face challenges related to weak economic competitiveness, low productivity, poverty, and a declining rural population (Headey et al., 2022). The focus on rural development (geography), human capital, advancements in science and technology, cultural and political organizations, trade, and international colonialism highlights the reasons for the disparity between developed and developing countries. Today, rural development is recognized as a comprehensive policy for sustainable development across all regions, and among developing countries, Afghanistan is still facing numerous challenges and obstacles in rural areas as it strives to achieve sustainable development. Rural areas are the main economic hubs of Afghanistan, with approximately 71% of the population engaged in activities and living in these areas (NSIA, 2020).

Currently, Afghanistan is grappling with widening income disparities, increasing poverty, food shortages, inefficient participation, and weak investment in rural areas, inadequate infrastructure, and deficiencies in rural settlement planning. This is despite a significant portion of Afghanistan's population continuing to reside in rural areas. Therefore, Afghan authorities and policymakers need to review their rural development strategies, focusing on developing rural areas and reducing inequalities and deficiencies affecting the rural poor. Presently, 80% of Afghanistan's rural population is engaged in agriculture, livestock, or both (Weinhold & Gurtner, 2014). In the past, adequate scientific research has not been conducted in this area. It is worth noting that Afghanistan's rural areas are exposed to multiple challenges, including economic and social challenges, making it imperative to focus on rural development. This underscores the need for providing appropriate services to increase productivity in the agricultural sector, as well as improving population management and ensuring effective infrastructure in these areas. The importance of these actions is heightened to improve the rural development path and achieve regional balance in Afghanistan (Hartinger et al., 2024). Given the significance of development in Afghanistan's rural areas and its positive impact on overall national development, it is increasingly evident that examining the challenges and barriers in this context is crucial. In the past, Afghanistan's rural areas enjoyed relatively stable conditions, but the transformations of the 20th century gradually, and then more rapidly, altered the landscape of rural life and social relations. These changes also affected the traditional relationship between cities and rural areas. With the growth of urban labor markets and trade, coupled with the rapid increase in the rural population, migration from rural areas to cities intensified. The influx of urban goods and foreign products into rural areas gradually eroded their relative self-sufficiency, and with the relative growth of commercial agriculture, conditions for rapid changes in Afghanistan's villages were set (Abdullah et al., 2020). Given Afghanistan's current conditions, the declining rural population and increasing migration toward cities indicate the consequences of underdeveloped rural areas, such as widespread poverty, increasing inequality, rapid population growth, unemployment, migration, urban slums, and similar issues. These factors have drawn attention to the necessity of prioritizing rural development, with many scholars considering rural development as even more critical than urban development, believing that national

development hinges on rural development. Rural development is a strategy that, in recent years, has been adopted by many countries (Kwiringira et al., 2021). 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.

Literature Review

Rural development in Afghanistan faces a multitude of challenges, exacerbated by decades of conflict, political instability, and a fragile economic base. As a predominantly agrarian society, with approximately 80% of the population residing in rural areas, the effective development of these regions is critical for national stability and prosperity. However, various structural, institutional, and environmental obstacles hinder progress, creating significant bottlenecks in rural development efforts.

- Agriculture, the backbone of Afghanistan's rural economy, suffers from several fundamental issues, including poor access to modern agricultural technologies, weak institutional support, and inadequate agricultural education and training. These problems significantly hinder productivity and sustainable development in rural areas (Saleem & Raouf, 2011). The underdevelopment of agricultural systems further exacerbates food insecurity and economic instability.
- The lack of basic infrastructure, particularly in energy access, is a critical bottleneck. About 70% of the Afghan population lacks access to electricity, with rural areas being the most affected. The energy sector is plagued by institutional barriers, fragmented planning, and inadequate investment, which collectively stifle efforts to

improve electrification in rural regions (Amin & Bernell, 2018).

- Water scarcity and inefficient irrigation practices are significant barriers to agricultural productivity. The Kabul River Basin, which supports millions, faces governance and management challenges that result in inequitable and unreliable water distribution. These challenges are intensified by a lack of proper infrastructure and the prolonged effects of droughts (Akhtar et al., 2018) - Rural entrepreneurship, a key driver for economic diversification and development, is hampered by a lack of financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-cultural barriers. These obstacles prevent the rural population from fully engaging in entrepreneurial activities that could significantly improve local economies (Yar & Hajinejad, 2023).
- The ongoing insecurity in many rural areas, coupled with weak governance, severely disrupts development initiatives. Areas under limited or no government control experience conflicts over land and water resources, further destabilizing rural livelihoods. The lack of a coordinated approach between the central government and local institutions aggravates these issues (Yar et al., 2022) The development of rural Afghanistan is a complex challenge influenced by a range of socio-economic, institutional, and environmental factors. The key obstacles include weak agricultural support systems, inadequate infrastructure, water management issues, barriers to rural entrepreneurship, and ongoing security concerns. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that integrates agricultural reform, infrastructure development, effective resource management, and enhanced governance.

Theoretical Framework

Definitions of Development: Development, as a modern concept frequently mentioned in recent decades, has been defined by various scholars. The development signifies positive change. When referring to the development of a society or a social and economic system, it means the improvement of the general condition of each of its constituent elements. Development pertains to the material quality of life as well as the processes of change and improvement that lead to increased living standards. It is not merely an economic phenomenon but encompasses a wide range of issues such as health, education, inequality, and poverty (Rice et al., 2022). The contemporary concept of development, which has a more relative aspect, emerged in the 1960s. Before that, concepts such as colonization, reform, improvement, modernization, and ultimately, growth were prevalent. However, with the rapid growth of industry and technology worldwide and the expansion of urbanization, the backwardness of rural areas became more apparent. Since rural inhabitants earned less income than urban dwellers and had limited access to social, welfare, and educational services, the discussion of rural development arose to address severe poverty, improve living standards, create employment, and enhance productivity in rural areas (Ya-Feng et al., 2020).

Underdevelopment: Underdevelopment does not mean a lack of development but rather refers to varying levels of development. Underdevelopment is a means of comparing the level of development and also reflects the exploitation of one country by others (Gonçalves, 2023).

Indicators of Development:

- Poverty: Poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon. It refers to the lack of essential public consumption needs, meaning there is an inadequate level of food, clothing, and shelter, as well as a lack of specific capacities, such as the ability to participate with dignity in society.
- Unemployment: Unemployment is the state in which a person of working age is unable to find a job despite actively seeking employment (Yar & Nasih, 2024).
- Inequality: Inequality manifests in various forms, including income inequality, unequal access to public amenities such as health and education, unequal voting rights, and disparities in power.
- National Income: National income is the total value of goods and services produced within a country over a specified period (typically one year).

Rural Development: In the early 1990s, rural development was synonymous with agricultural development. As Rivera and Qamar explain, rural development is a comprehensive and multidimensional topic that includes agricultural activities. According to Madu Izary, rural development involves helping rural inhabitants prioritize their needs by utilizing existing organizations. He also states that rural development enhances the socio-cultural environment of rural areas and strengthens individuals' abilities to achieve sustainable income and welfare (Zhang et al., 2019).

Sustainable development strategies for rural areas

Particularly in the agriculture and food sectors, involve establishing guidelines for agriculture and food as a core component of economic growth recovery, under the conditions of ensuring national food security and guaranteeing the safety of food for rural populations. This strategy involves utilizing natural, material, and human resources in agriculture, with environmental sustainability ensuring the supply of high-quality agricultural and food products for domestic and foreign markets. The national strategy framework, agricultural programs, and projects focus on sustainable rural development as a key factor for economic growth, guaranteeing a strong rural economy. This is based on modern rural infrastructure, adequate technological support for rural areas, and the use of renewable local natural resources for economic, environmental, and landscape protection, thereby achieving an acceptable rural living standard and reducing severe poverty in rural areas (Yang et al., 2022). Sustainable economic development can be achieved primarily through medium- and long-term investments in strengthening agricultural resources, cultivation, processing units, advanced technologies, and adequate infrastructure in rural areas through constructed irrigation, land drainage, anti-erosion systems, forest shelterbelts for proper protection, flood control systems, and so on. Given the significant global emphasis on agricultural activities, a series of actions is required to revive and make this sector profitable:

- Developing models that are suitable for small-scale farming, considering the unique characteristics of agriculture, Actions to increase the competitiveness and profitability of small Indigenous farms, Increasing levels of financial support, Maintaining and encouraging entrepreneurship, Attracting a larger share of traditional products to the market, providing a greater amount of free advisory services tailored to the real needs of small farms, Simplifying the processes related to providing information (Jat et al., 2019).

Materials and Methods

The research methodology for this study on the challenges and barriers to rural development in Afghanistan is primarily based on a theoretical approach. The study utilized the following methods to collect and analyze information:

1. **Document Analysis:** Extensive review and analysis of existing documents, including government publications, academic journals, conference proceedings, and reports from international organizations, were conducted to gather data on the current state of rural development in Afghanistan.
2. **Critical Review:** A critical examination of the literature was undertaken to identify the major challenges and constraints faced by rural communities in Afghanistan. This review aimed to understand the root causes and implications of the identified challenges.
3. **Literature Review:** A comprehensive literature review was performed to synthesize findings from various studies and research articles related to rural development challenges in Afghanistan. This review included both qualitative and quantitative studies, providing a broad perspective on the issues at hand.

The study focused on analyzing the theoretical frameworks of development and underdevelopment, as well as the indicators of development such as poverty, unemployment, inequality, and national income. It also examined the theoretical definitions of rural development and sustainable development strategies for rural areas.

The research specifically addressed the following areas:

- Institutional and planning challenges
- Socio-cultural challenges
- Economic challenges
- Environmental and ecological challenges
- Physical and infrastructural challenges

The findings from these analyses were integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of rural development challenges in Afghanistan. The study aimed to inform policymakers and planners about the critical factors that need to be addressed for the successful implementation of rural development initiatives in the country.

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 et al., 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 et al., 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).

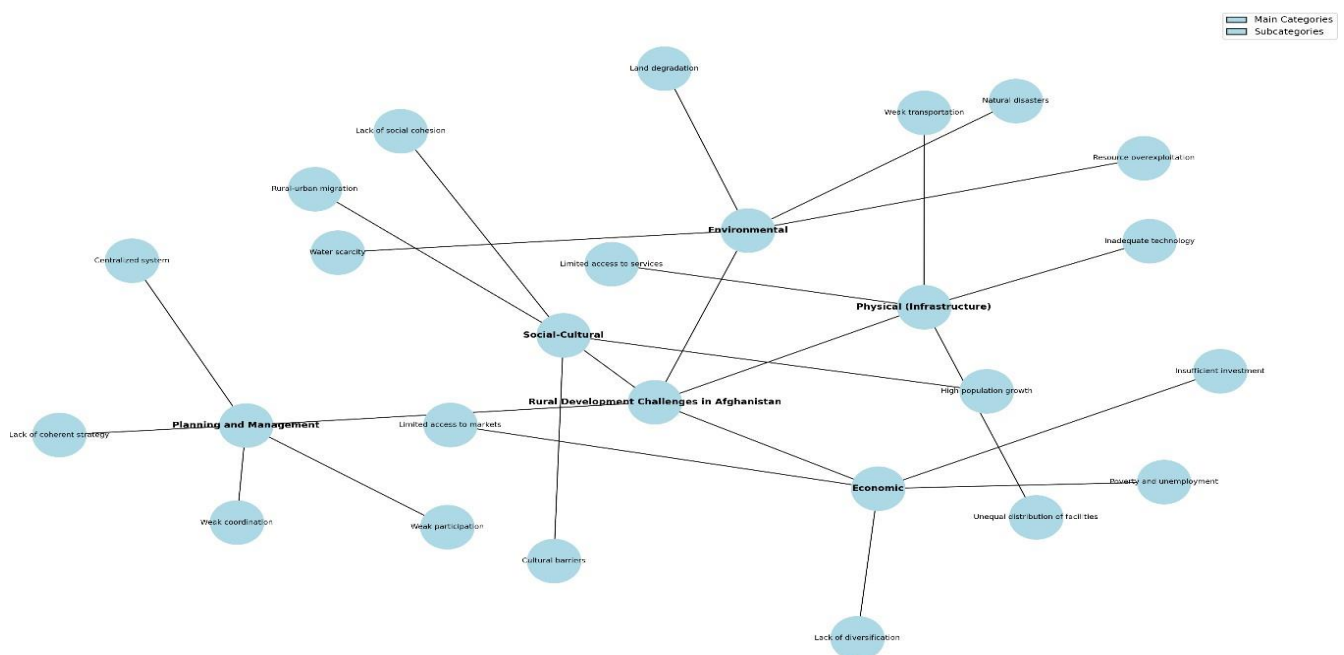
Low Productivity: Today, agricultural development is key to improving welfare in many developing countries. Approximately 71% of Afghanistan's population lives and works in rural areas, and 61% of households derive income from agriculture. Agriculture is a major component of rural development in Afghanistan 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 et al., 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 et al., 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).



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:

- Lack of a coherent strategy for sustainable rural development.
- Politicization of rural development and lack of accountability.
- Theoretical weaknesses and the absence of a suitable practical model for rural development.
- Lack of coordination in rural development programs in planning, implementation, and evaluation.
- Weak management within governmental structures.
- Lack of an independent oversight institution and a specific organization for rural development.
- Centralized planning and decision-making system for rural development.
- Interference by various government organizations in rural development programs.
- Minimal community participation in the implementation and support of rural development projects.
- Lack of involvement of NGOs and local private sector institutions in planning and executing rural development projects.
- Insufficient attention to sustainable rural development.
- Weak communication between local communities and the government.
- 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 et al., 2022).

Social Challenges

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

- 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 et al., 2020).

- 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.

- High population growth rates in rural areas.
- Lack of entrepreneurship and creativity among rural populations.
- Lack of institutional and social capacity-building in rural communities.
- Cultural and traditional barriers are prevalent in rural areas.
- Limited participation and local collaboration (among farmers).
- Low levels of education and computer illiteracy in rural communities.
- Lack of precise and accurate understanding among rural communities of their needs and rights, and neglect of indigenous knowledge.
- Limited job opportunities and high unemployment among rural people and youth.
- Lack of awareness among rural populations about methods and principles for achieving sustainable development.
- The dominance of unskilled labor in rural economic activities.

- Limited access to welfare services (inequality and imbalance in the provision of economic and social amenities between rural and urban areas).
- Low self-confidence among rural residents.
- 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:

- Ineffective cooperation and micro-economy in rural areas.
- Rural development programs that are unaligned with international economic issues.
- Weak participation of the private sector in rural development activities.
- Rural poverty.
- Limited access to agricultural markets and challenges in marketing.
- Inadequate government investment in rural sectors and lack of financial support.
- Lack of diversification in non-agricultural activities, such as tourism.
- Low income levels.
- Lack of commercialization of agricultural products.
- Challenges in the mechanization of the agricultural sector.
- Low productivity in the rural economy.
- Lack of adequate infrastructure for developing rural industries.
- Unemployment among rural youth.
- Insufficient focus on rural entrepreneurship.
- Presence of intermediaries in the sale of agricultural products.
- Weakness in industry and a lack of new technologies for processing agricultural products.
- Fragmentation of agricultural lands.
- High dispersion of rural population centers, with many being small and unstable.
- Lack of capable and mobilizing non-governmental organizations to engage rural communities in development.
- Unfavorable land ownership and agricultural exploitation systems.
- Lack of social cohesion among small-scale rural producers.
- Imbalanced urban-rural relationships, leading to rural underdevelopment.
- Lack of community organizations and institutions to participate in rural development.
- Difficulty in retaining populations in rural areas due to economic and social challenges.
- 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:

- Conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses,
- Unfavorable ecological conditions for sustainable rural development,
- Weak management of natural disasters in rural areas, leading to reduced production due to floods, droughts, and cold weather,
- The imbalance between population and natural resources,
- Over-exploitation of groundwater resources,
- Use of inappropriate technology in agriculture and soil erosion,
- Sanitation and wastewater pollution issues in villages,
- Overuse of fertilizers,
- Overgrazing of pastures,
- 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

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

Institutional and Structural Challenges

Institutional and structural challenges affecting rural development include:

- The dominance of sectoral thinking (despite the emphasis on comprehensive and spatial programs) over the overall planning process,
- Lack of cohesive and effective communication between executive organizations in achieving program objectives,
- The existence of a centralized (top-down) management structure despite the acceptance of regional and provincial program decentralization,
- The presence of a centralized spatial structure in the country's spatial planning system, prioritizing urban centers over rural settlements,
- Lack of belief in rural development among some decision-makers within the country's planning structure,
- Absence of a comprehensive rural development plan,
- Lack of coordination between organizations responsible for rural development and the overlap of their duties,

- Mismanagement of land and land use,
- Absence of long-term and practical plans for the systematic organization of rural centers and spaces,
- Lack of a clear legal framework for rural planning,
- Absence of a specific model or framework for rural development,
- 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 study undertaken to examine the challenges and barriers to rural development in Afghanistan has revealed a complex and multifaceted set of issues that impede progress in the nation's rural areas. Through a theoretical approach, employing document analysis, critical review, and literature review, the research has identified key challenges in the domains of institutional planning, sociocultural dynamics, economic structures, environmental sustainability, and physical infrastructure.

The findings indicate that rural Afghanistan is beset by widespread poverty, insecurity, inadequate infrastructure, low agricultural productivity, high population growth, and limited access to education and healthcare. These challenges are compounded by socio-cultural issues such as migration, cultural barriers, and a lack of entrepreneurship. Economic barriers include weak private sector engagement, limited market access for agricultural products, and a lack of economic diversification. Environmental concerns revolve around land degradation, water scarcity, and inefficient resource management. Physical infrastructure challenges are manifested in deficiencies in transportation, technology access, and urban-rural connectivity.

The study concludes that to achieve sustainable rural development in Afghanistan, a comprehensive and inclusive approach is essential. This approach must prioritize effective planning, community participation, investment in infrastructure and education, and the adoption of sustainable agricultural practices. The integration of these strategies is crucial for addressing the identified challenges and unlocking the potential of rural communities in Afghanistan. Without such a concerted effort, rural development will remain a distant goal, and the country's rural areas will continue to face underdevelopment and its associated hardships.

Suggestions for Rural Development in Afghanistan

Based on the comprehensive analysis of the challenges and barriers to rural development in Afghanistan, the following strategies are suggested to facilitate the development of the nation's villages:

1. **Effective Planning and Management:** Implement decentralized planning and management systems that involve local communities and stakeholders in decision-making processes. This will ensure that development initiatives are aligned with the actual needs and aspirations of rural populations.
2. **Infrastructure Development:** Invest in rural infrastructure, including roads, schools, healthcare facilities, and energy access. Improved infrastructure will enhance connectivity, stimulate economic activities, and improve the delivery of essential services.
3. **Agricultural Enhancement:** Introduce modern agricultural technologies, provide training and education to farmers, and improve irrigation systems to enhance agricultural productivity. Diversify agricultural production to reduce dependency on a few crops and to increase resilience to market fluctuations.
4. **Economic Diversification:** Encourage the establishment of rural industries, such as agro-processing, handicrafts, and tourism, to create employment opportunities and reduce reliance on agriculture. Promote rural entrepreneurship and support small-scale businesses.
5. **Education and Capacity Building:** Expand educational facilities and improve the quality of education in rural areas. Implement vocational training programs to equip

the rural workforce with the necessary skills for modern economic activities.

6. **Healthcare Services:** Improve access to healthcare by establishing rural clinics and health centers. Train local health workers to provide basic healthcare services and raise awareness about health and sanitation.
7. **Environmental Sustainability:** Implement sustainable land management practices, protect natural resources, and promote the use of renewable energy. Address issues such as deforestation, soil erosion, and water pollution to ensure the ecological balance necessary for rural livelihoods.
8. **Community Empowerment:** Foster a sense of ownership and participation among rural communities in development projects. Support local institutions and organizations that can play a role in the implementation and monitoring of development activities.
9. **Gender Inclusion:** Ensure the active participation of women in rural development processes. Provide opportunities for education and employment that empower women and contribute to the overall development of rural areas.
10. **International Cooperation:** Leverage international aid and cooperation for technical, educational, research, and financial support. Engage with global institutions to access resources and knowledge that can benefit rural development in Afghanistan.

By adopting these strategies, Afghanistan can address the multifaceted challenges facing its rural areas and pave the way for sustainable development that improves the livelihoods of its rural population and contributes to national stability and prosperity.

Future Researches

To advance the understanding and practice of rural development in Afghanistan, future research should focus on several key areas. Impact evaluation studies are needed to assess the effectiveness of existing rural development policies and programs. This will provide valuable insights into the successes and failures of these initiatives, guiding future interventions. Moreover, there is a need for research that adopts participatory approaches, involving local communities in the research process to ensure that the findings are relevant and actionable. Interdisciplinary research that spans various fields such as economics, sociology, environmental science, and agriculture is essential to develop holistic solutions to rural development challenges. Longitudinal studies will be crucial for tracking the progress of rural development over time and evaluating the long-term impacts of various strategies.

Technological innovations offer new avenues for addressing rural development challenges and research into the application of digital tools and renewable energy solutions could be transformative. Gender perspectives are often overlooked in rural development research, and future studies should incorporate gender analysis to understand the differential impacts on men and women. A critical examination of current policies in light of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is necessary to identify policy gaps and to advocate for policy reforms that align with international development goals. Finally, comparative studies that benchmark Afghanistan's rural development challenges against those of other developing nations could illuminate shared issues and successful strategies that could be adapted to the Afghan context.

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