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Research Paper



Afghanistan: Socio-Economic Landscape

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1 Executive Summary

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Under the de facto authorities, Afghanistan stands at a difficult juncture where political instability, economic contraction, and widespread poverty intersect to define the daily reality of millions of households. The decline of international support, combined with restrictive governance and limited access to global markets, has left families highly vulnerable to both immediate shocks and long-term uncertainties. This brief report offers a comprehensive overview of the socio-economic landscape in Kabul city, Nangarhar province, and Hazarajat regions. These contrasts highlight not only the structural limitations of the Afghan economy but also the vulnerability of families when dominant income sources face disruption from political, market, or environmental shocks.

Employment opportunities across all three regions are increasingly constrained. In Kabul, educated professionals face shrinking prospects due to restrictive government policies and declining NGO opportunities, while in rural areas like Hazarajat and Nangarhar, most households depend on low-paying skilled and unskilled labor. The absence of large-scale private investment and the reduction of international donations have further weakened the labor market, leaving many Afghans underemployed and reliant on unstable forms of income. This erosion of opportunities has deepened household insecurity and limited pathways for economic mobility.

At the same time, household expenditures have risen sharply, creating a widening gap between income and basic living costs. While food remains available in local markets, high prices relative to wages prevent families from affording diverse and nutritious diets, contributing to widespread nutritional vulnerability. Rising rents, chronic electricity shortages, fuel price hikes, and high communication costs have further intensified household struggles.

Overall, Afghanistan's socio-economic trajectory is hindered by structural weaknesses, political isolation, and the absence of large-scale development assistance. Looking ahead, uncertainties remain significant: agricultural dependence exposes families to climate variability; the lack of formal employment perpetuates cycles of poverty; and the rising costs of essential goods and services undermine household resilience.

2 Introduction

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The current socio-economic landscape of Afghanistan reflects the profound challenges and transformations that communities across the country continue to face. The daily lives of families are shaped by a combination of structural constraints, fluctuating markets, and the gradual shifts in local livelihoods. To capture a clearer picture of these dynamics, this report is organized around five interrelated thematic areas that together illustrate the conditions under which Afghan households strive to meet their basic needs and secure their futures.

The first thematic area, 'Main Sources of Income of Afghans'. Livelihoods in Afghanistan are highly diverse and context-specific, ranging from agriculture and small-scale trade to daily wage

labor, formal employment, and remittances. Comparing regions such as Kabul, Nangarhar, and Hazarajat demonstrates how geography, market opportunities, and migration all shape income structures.

The second thematic area examines 'Employment and Labor,' shedding light on opportunities and constraints within the Afghan labor market. Employment is one of the most pressing socio-economic concerns, particularly given the limited availability of formal jobs and the reliance on informal or seasonal work. Understanding employment patterns provides key insights into poverty, migration, and the prospects for sustainable livelihoods.

The third thematic area explores the 'Monthly Food Basket' for families which is focused on the cost and accessibility of essential food items. Since the food basket serves as a critical measure of household vulnerability, it highlights the extent to which rising prices of staples such as flour, rice, cooking oil, and vegetables weigh on family budgets. The variations in affordability across regions underscore both localized economic realities and broader national trends.

Finally, the fourth and fifth thematic areas, 'Housing & Rent' and 'Energy & Communication Costs', highlight the non-food expenditures that significantly burden Afghan households. While housing costs and rental prices fluctuate with market conditions and political developments, energy and communication remain essential for survival and connectivity. These expenditures reveal the financial pressures beyond food security that families must balance to maintain even a modest standard of living.

3 Methodology

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The data for this report was collected using a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture both statistical patterns and lived experiences of Afghan households. Primary information was gathered through structured questionnaires administered to target samples, including university lecturers and NGO employees, to provide insights into employment, income, and living conditions. In addition, informal conversations were conducted with local stakeholders such as butchers, grocery shop owners, property dealers, and community members, which helped illustrate household-level challenges in accessing food and basic services. Supplementary information was also obtained through friendly talks and hearsay with relevant individuals, allowing the study to capture perceptions and community narratives that may not appear in formal datasets. The statistics and information presented in this report are primarily drawn from inputs provided by university lecturers, NGO employees, and other educated individuals based in Kabul, Nangarhar, and Hazarajat (Daikundi). These figures reflect the personal perceptions and lived experiences of these respondents and are not to be interpreted as nationally representative data.

4 Socio-economic Landscape of Afghanistan

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Afghanistan has been struggling severely from widespread poverty, limited economic diversification, and persistent dependence on external support. According to international assessments,

over 90 % of the population are impacted by poverty, with millions dependent on urgent humanitarian aid for food and basic needs.¹ Agriculture continues to account for nearly one-quarter of the country's GDP and remains the backbone of rural livelihoods, yet it is constrained by outdated practices, weak infrastructure, and vulnerability to climate shocks. Industry is underdeveloped, providing few large-scale employment opportunities, while the services sector, once supported by international aid and NGO operations, has sharply contracted since 2021.² Unemployment is particularly high among youth and educated graduates, with little space for private sector growth under current conditions.³ In addition, the country faces one of the world's lowest human development rankings, with limited access to healthcare, education, and reliable electricity, further curbing opportunities for upward mobility. As a result, Afghanistan's economy is highly fragile, reliant on subsistence farming, informal trade, and remittances, leaving its people vulnerable to both domestic political instability and external shocks.⁴

5 Main Sources of Income in Afghanistan

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The data collected represent that the sources of income in Afghanistan vary considerably across provinces, reflecting the diversity of economic activities, access to markets, and the overall socio-political environment. This study, conducted in Kabul, Nangarhar, and the Hazarajat regions, highlights how local economies are structured and the challenges faced by families in sustaining their livelihoods.

An interview conducted by the author with a university lecturer and education expert during September 2025 in Kabul shows that the majority of people depend on formal and informal employment. He estimated that nearly 40 % of households rely on salaried jobs, primarily within government institutions, private companies, NGOs, and services such as education and health-care. However, this reliance on employment is precarious, given the shrinking opportunities in the aftermath of the political changes of 2021 and the remarkable decline of international assistance. Alongside formal employment, he thinks that daily wage labor seems to constitute around 20 % of household income, with workers engaged in construction, transportation, and other physically demanding sectors. Similarly, he also feels that small trade accounts for another 20 %, reflecting the role of local markets, shop-keeping, and informal vending in sustaining families. Last but not least, he emphasized that remittances seem to remain a vital lifeline for many, making up between 10 to 15 % of household income, as many families rely on financial support from relatives working abroad.⁵

1 IRC - International Rescue Committee (9/8/2023): Afghanistan: An entire population pushed into poverty, <https://www.rescue.org/article/afghanistan-entire-population-pushed-poverty>, accessed 2/10/2025

2 Sharifi/Karim - Sharifi, Mohammad Shafi / Karim, Abdul Qaium (23/11/2024): Agriculture in Afghanistan: A Journey from Livelihood to Development, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/386079592_Agriculture_in_Afghanistan_A_Journey_from_Livelihood_to_Development, accessed 17/10/2025

3 TN - Tolonews (18/2/2025): Afghan Youth Struggle with Unemployment, Urge Govt for Solutions, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-193122>, accessed 17/10/2025

4 UN - United Nations (6/5/2025): Human Development Insights - Afghanistan, <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/AFG>, accessed 24/10/2025

5 Interview conducted by the author with a university lecturer and education expert in September 2025 in Kabul

On the other hand, a university lecturer at Nangarhar University believes that the economy of Nangarhar, an Eastern province of the country, is strongly rooted in agriculture, which supports around 60 % of the households. With fertile land and irrigation systems, farming, particularly that of wheat, maize, and seasonal fruits, remains the backbone of livelihoods. However, formal employment seems to be limited to about 10 %, leaving few alternatives for steady income, he added. Daily wage work contributes another 10 %, primarily through construction and casual labor in urban centers like Jalalabad. He said that small trade plays a more visible role than in the past, accounting for 15 % of income, as local markets expand to meet household and community needs. According to him, remittances contribute about 5 %, usually sent from family members in Pakistan, Gulf States, and Western countries, providing supplemental rather than primary support for households struggling with volatile agricultural incomes.⁶

An NGO employee in Daikundi province mentioned that in Hazarajat regions (central zone), the overwhelming majority of people rely on agriculture, which makes up nearly 75 % of household income in the region. Families depend heavily on livestock herding and the cultivation of staple crops such as wheat, barley, and potatoes, though harsh winters and difficult terrain often limit productivity. Moreover, employment opportunities are extremely scarce, with only 3 % of households engaged in regular salaried jobs, mostly in education and health projects or small-scale local administration. He further added that daily wage labor is modest at 7 %, reflecting the limited demand for casual work in the region's largely rural and mountainous context. Small trade contributes about 5 %, primarily through village-level markets. Based on his perception, remittances form 10 % of income, reflecting the reliance of households on family members working abroad or in other parts of Afghanistan, a crucial coping mechanism given the fragile agricultural base.⁷

6 Employment and Labor

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The labor market in Afghanistan has undergone severe stress since the Taliban's return in 2021, with shrinking opportunities in both public and private sectors. The atmosphere of uncertainty, combined with political restrictions, has created significant barriers for educated youth and professionals in securing stable employment.⁸ Kabul, Nangarhar, and Hazarajat regions present distinct realities, yet they all reflect the broader crisis of unemployment and underemployment in the country.

In Kabul, the unemployment rate is rising steadily as opportunities within government institutions become increasingly restricted. A PhD scholar in Islamic Jurisprudence and lecturer at a private university said: 'Even highly qualified candidates face barriers unrelated to merit.' He recounted how he was rejected from a teaching position at Kabul University despite securing a high score in the selection process, simply because of his appearance and the length of his beard.⁹ Such

6 Interview conducted by the author with a university lecturer at Nangarhar University in September 2025 in Jalalabad

7 Interview conducted by the author with an NGO employee in September 2025 in Daikundi

8 Tawazon - Tawazon (15/8/2025): Afghanistan's Economic Situation: Four Years After the Taliban's Return to Power - Tawazon, <https://tawazon.media/archives/6304>, accessed 17/10/2025

9 Interview conducted by the author with a PhD scholar in Islamic Jurisprudence and lecturer at a private university in August 2025 in Kabul

accounts highlight how political and social factors increasingly determine recruitment, discouraging many educated Afghans. At the same time, the NGO sector, once considered the most dynamic employment hub in Kabul, has shrunk considerably due to fundraising challenges and the suspension of large-scale donor projects, particularly following Donald Trump's shrinking of USAID.¹⁰ According to the data collected through a questionnaire, for those who remain employed, average monthly salaries for some fresh undergraduate-level employees with more than three years of experience range between 250 and 450 Euro, depending on the position. Outside the formal economy, daily wage labor somehow continues to absorb the workforce to some extent. Skilled laborers in Kabul typically earn 800-1,000 AFN (€10-€14) per day, while unskilled laborers earn between 300-400 AFN (€4-€5) reflecting a sharp gap in income and job security.¹¹ However, securing daily labor has turned into a nightmare for every single laborer. An Afghan laborer, said: 'I've been struggling to find daily work, and in the past month I was only able to get jobs for two days. In Shahr-e-Naw, the heart of the capital, many laborers are unable to earn enough to feed their families. The situation has become unbearable.'¹²

As highly evident and observable from Kabul city and many other major provincial capitals, many turn to street vending by hand or with a cart for survival, which is a difficult job to sustain on, given the very low income it can generate. An economics graduate, adds: 'No job opportunities have been created for the youth. I am now a street vendor. The private sector is inactive, and the government has no programme for employment.'¹³ Nevertheless, it is a coping mechanism that needs no or little capital, has no cost such as rent or utility and in most cases no tax. However, street vendors face constant chase and obstruction by the municipality, the police, and traffic department.

In Hazarajat regions, opportunities for formal employment are far more limited. In response to the questionnaire, an NGO employee in Daikundi province replied that: 'Only about 2 % of the population is estimated to have been employed in NGOs.' Such a situation highlights the region's isolation from major development programmes and investment. He also added that salaries for NGO employees with a bachelor's degree range from €200 to €400 per month, depending on the organization and the role.¹⁴ A Master trainer in Daikundi province said that: 'For the majority of workers, however, the labor market revolves around daily wage work. Skilled workers in the region typically earn around 700-800 AFN (€9-€11) per day, while unskilled workers earn about 250-350 AFN (€3-€5).'¹⁵ Therefore, given the region's heavy reliance on subsistence agriculture, the labor sector is small and provides only supplementary income for most households.

A similar pattern is found in Nangarhar, where formal employment opportunities remain scarce. A university lecturer at Nangarhar University said that: 'Only around 2 % of the population works

10 AAN - Afghanistan Analysts Network (9/5/2025): The End of US Aid to Afghanistan: What will it mean for families, services and the economy? - Afghanistan, <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/end-us-aid-afghanistan-what-will-it-mean-families-services-and-economy>, accessed 17/10/2025

11 This information was collected through a questionnaire developed for data collection purposes in Kabul

12 A laborer, interviewed by TOLONews on 26.9.2025

13 Tawazon - Tawazon (15/8/2025): Afghanistan's Economic Situation: Four Years After the Taliban's Return to Power - Tawazon, <https://tawazon.media/archives/6304>, accessed 17/10/2025

14 Interview conducted by the author with an NGO employee in September 2025 in Daikundi

15 Interview conducted by the author with a Master trainer in September 2025 in Daikundi

with NGOs, with bachelor's degree holders in these organizations earning between €200 to €400 per month.' 'The bulk of the labor force is engaged in casual and wage-based work, with skilled workers earning approximately 900 AFN (€12) per day and unskilled workers 400 AFN (€5)', he added.¹⁶ Despite being one of Afghanistan's more fertile agricultural provinces, the limited growth of the non-agricultural sector has left much of the workforce dependent on either farming or insecure day labor.

I once heard from one of my friends that his neighbor was severely struggling to make ends meet. A father of six from western Kabul, explained: 'We used to cook rice twice a week for my children, but now we cannot afford it. My children cry when they see rice in the neighbor's house. Most days, we only eat bread with tea or onions.' Similarly a daily wage laborer, shared: 'I leave home every morning to find work, but some days I return with nothing. My children ask for meat, but I cannot even afford eggs for them.' Such testimonies highlight how families are being forced to strip their diets down to bare survival, with serious consequences for their children's health and development.¹⁷

7 Monthly Food Basket

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The cost of a basic monthly food basket is a crucial indicator of household well-being in Afghanistan, particularly when compared to the declining income and limited labor opportunities available to most families. For a 5-member household, access to staple food items is increasingly difficult as prices remain high while wages and employment opportunities stagnate. A closer look at Kabul, Hazarajat regions, and Nangarhar demonstrates the daily struggle of Afghan families to balance food needs with scarce resources.

In Kabul, food prices are among the highest in the country. Based on the questionnaire, it was figured out that wheat flour, a staple for most families, costs between 30-40 AFN (€0.3-0.5) per kilogram, while rice ranges from 100-120 AFN (€1.2-1.5) per kilogram. Cooking oil, beans, peas, and lentils all fall between 100-140 AFN (€1.2-€1.8), further straining household budgets. A loaf of bread in local bakeries costs 10 AFN, which, for a family consuming multiple loaves daily, quickly accumulates into a significant expense. Meat is prohibitively expensive for most families, with chicken costing 280 AFN (€3.5) per kilogram, beef 450 AFN (€5.7), and mutton up to 500 AFN (€6.4). Eggs are sold at 10 AFN each, while vegetables and fruits cost between 30-100 AFN per kilogram depending on the item and season. For a 5-member household, meeting the minimum daily requirement of bread, vegetables, and occasional protein requires a budget far exceeding the income of a daily wage laborer earning 300-400 AFN per day. Even skilled workers earning 800-1,000 AFN daily struggle to purchase meat or fruit on a regular basis. Families often rely heavily on wheat, rice, and seasonal vegetables while reducing protein intake, which raises concerns over nutrition and health.¹⁸

¹⁶ Interview conducted by the author with a university lecturer at Nangarhar University in September 2025 in Jalalabad

¹⁷ This information was obtained in conversations with acquaintances of the author

¹⁸ This information was collected through a questionnaire developed for data collection purposes in Kabul

In Hazarajat regions, food prices are slightly lower for some items but still burdensome given the overwhelmingly agrarian and low-income economy. Wheat flour costs 30-35 AFN per kilogram, and rice is priced similarly to Kabul at 100-120 AFN. Beans and pulses reach up to 145 AFN, and cooking oil remains at 100-110 AFN per liter. Bread is more expensive than in Kabul at 15 AFN per loaf, increasing the cost of daily consumption for large families. Meat is somewhat cheaper than in Kabul, with chicken costing around 210-220 AFN per kilogram, beef 340 AFN, and mutton 380 AFN, but these prices remain high relative to local incomes. Skilled laborers typically earn nearly 700 AFN per day, while unskilled workers earn around 400 AFN, leaving little room for purchasing meat or fruits regularly. Vegetables and fruits are cheaper (20-70 AFN per kilogram), but access remains uneven, especially during winter when transport routes are cut off. Households often compensate with self-produced potatoes and grains, but these are insufficient to meet balanced dietary needs.¹⁹

In Nangarhar, families face a different price structure. Wheat flour is the most expensive among the three regions at 40-50 AFN per kilogram, pushing up the cost of the staple bread-based diet. Rice costs around 110 AFN per kilogram, while beans and pulses are priced between 100-120 AFN. Sugar is relatively cheaper at 50 AFN per kilogram, and salt ranges between 20-30 AFN. A loaf of bread costs 10 AFN, but when multiplied across a family of five, this still represents a daily burden. Meat is more affordable than in Kabul, with chicken priced at 240 AFN, beef at 350 AFN, and mutton at 400 AFN. Eggs are sold at 8 AFN each, while vegetables and fruits are somewhat cheaper, costing between 20-60 AFN per kilogram. Despite these relatively lower prices, household affordability remains limited. Skilled workers earn 700 AFN per day, and unskilled laborers earn 400 AFN, making it difficult to secure a balanced diet for a 5-member family. In many cases, families reduce consumption of meat and fruits and rely primarily on wheat, rice, and potatoes as coping mechanisms.²⁰

8 Housing and Rent

Last modification 2025-10-25 11:26

The housing market in Afghanistan has been marked by dramatic fluctuations in recent years, reflecting the broader socio-political and economic instability of the country. Immediately after the collapse of the Republic in 2021, the demand for housing declined, leading to a temporary fall in rents and property values. However, this trend was quickly reversed. Within more than a year, rental prices for apartments and houses began to rise sharply, and the cost of purchasing property also escalated.²¹ In response to growing public frustration, the Taliban authorities have recently issued a decree warning property dealers against increasing rent beyond 10 percent of the previous year's rate.²² Nevertheless, the decree has had limited effect, as market dynamics and rising demand have driven costs upward as landlords continue to bypass the rule, exploiting the growing demand for housing.²³

19 This information was collected through a questionnaire developed for data collection purposes in Hazarajat

20 This information was collected through a questionnaire developed for data collection purposes in Nangarhar

21 KT - The Kabul Times (11/5/2025): Rising rents and hidden cost of housing instability in Afghanistan, <https://thekabultimes.com/rising-rents-and-hidden-cost-of-housing-instability-in-afghanistan>, accessed 17/10/2025

22 KP - Khaama Press (12/8/2025): Justice Ministry: Rent Increases Limited to 10 Percent, <https://www.khaama.com/justice-ministry-rent-increases-limited-to-10-percent>, accessed 17/10/2025

23 The author gained this insight through conversations with tenants.

Particularly due to the mass deportation of more than 2 million of Afghans from Iran and Pakistan,²⁴ the author of this report believes that the start of 2025 brought a new wave of pressures. The sudden influx of returnees has significantly increased demand for housing, especially in urban centers like Kabul, leading to a surge in rental prices. At present, the average rent for a three-room apartment in downtown Kabul is around 18,000 AFN (€230), while similar apartments in the outskirts cost approximately 10,000 AFN (€128). However, in rural areas, a three-room house is relatively more affordable, ranging between 5,000 (€64) and 7,000 AFN (€90) per month. Yet even at these levels, many families cannot meet the costs.²⁵

A Kabul resident explained to the author that he has been searching for housing for more than two months without success. His landlord, responding to the influx of returnees, asked him to vacate the property, leaving him unable to find a suitable alternative.²⁶ Similarly, an employee at the Ministry of Higher Education under the Taliban administration, told me that his monthly salary of approximately 20,000 AFN (€256) barely matches the cost of a small apartment, leaving him with no capacity to cover other household needs.²⁷ These personal accounts illustrate how rental inflation is directly undermining household stability, even for employed individuals.

9 Energy, and Communication Cost

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Energy is another critical area of daily life that has become increasingly burdensome for Afghan households. According to Amu TV, despite Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS), the state owned power utility company, claims that electricity has improved, the country's electricity infrastructure remains inadequate and Kabul residents continue to express frustration over persistent power outages.²⁸ Frequent power outages disrupt daily routines, education, and small businesses, forcing some households to rely on costly alternatives such as solar energy, fuel, and firewood. On the other hand, the situation is compounded by rising energy prices – a crucial item for local transportation. In September 2025, one liter of petrol is sold at 72 AFN (approximately €0.9) in Kabul, further straining the already tight budgets of ordinary families who depend on fuel for transport and heating (in the looming winter). For many, the rising energy costs are not only an economic burden but also a major obstacle to maintaining a basic standard of living.²⁹

Alongside housing and energy, communication has become a significant expense for Afghan families. With the expansion of mobile networks and internet services, even low-income households prioritize communication as a necessity for social and economic survival. On average, an ordinary 5-member household spends between 2,000 to 3,000 AFN (€25-\$38) per month on mobile phone usage, data, and related communication costs. While this expense might appear

24 UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (8/8/2025): Afghanistan Situation: Afghan Returns from Iran and Pakistan Emergency Update #4, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/117989>, accessed 17/10/2025

25 Based on the author's observation and understanding

26 This information is derived through an informal conversation in Kabul in September 2025

27 This information is derived through an informal conversation in Kabul in September 2025

28 AMU - Amu Tv (30/9/2024): DABS claims improvements in Kabul's power supply amid residents frustration, <https://amu.tv/127007>, accessed 17/10/2025

29 This information was collected through a questionnaire developed for data collection purposes

secondary compared to food or rent, it plays a vital role in accessing information, job opportunities, and online education in a country where restrictions are imposed on females. Recently, there were moves by the state to restrict the usage of internet and mobile coverage. In early September fiber optic internet services across the country were suspended indefinitely. Also from September 29 to October 1st 2025 there was a three-day unprecedented total communication blackout across Afghanistan for unspecified reasons. There are strong rumors that internet access in Afghanistan shall be either totally terminated or heavily restricted. If applied, this will be another layer of challenge in the socio-economic outlook of people's lives in the country as internet has become an important part of daily life, particularly for staying connected to those who have relatives living abroad.³⁰

10 Conclusion

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This brief study revealed a fragile and uneven socio-economic landscape in Afghanistan, where both rural and urban households struggle to secure the basics of life under mounting pressures. Kabul demonstrates a relatively diversified economy reliant on employment and remittances, yet faces severe unemployment and shrinking opportunities due to political restrictions and reduced NGO activities. In contrast, Nangarhar and Hazarajat remain overwhelmingly dependent on agriculture, but people reliant on farming can no longer meet their needs due to climate change, flash floods, and recurrent droughts. As a result, many have become dependent on remittances or are making their way to the capital, further complicating Kabul's ability to cope with its growing population. However, those already living in Kabul find it equally difficult to secure jobs in the face of severe levels of unemployment, leaving many without reliable income. At the same time, high living costs, rising rents driven by repatriations, housing shortages, and persistent power outages further erode household resilience. While food remains available in markets, stagnant wages and limited job opportunities undermine affordability, preventing families from maintaining diverse or nutritious diets. Together, these dynamics reveal a troubling cycle: rural fragility pushes households into Kabul, while urban unemployment and high living costs prevent families from achieving stability, reinforcing a pattern of vulnerability that threatens the resilience of Afghan society as a whole.

³⁰ This information was collected through a questionnaire developed for data collection purposes

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