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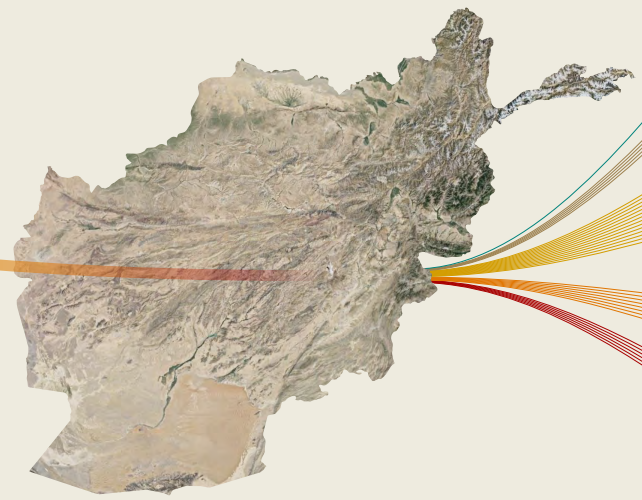
Spatial Disparities in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's recent development has been marked by stark spatial disparities



These disparities persisted through periods of economic progress and slowdown. The assessment aims to understand the divergence in the development outcomes of Afghan provinces, identifying potential sources of growth and resilience as well as areas of deterioration and distress.

CONTEXT

Slowing economic growth

6.9% → 2%

From 2007 to 2012, the country witnessed unprecedented economic growth, primarily due to foreign assistance.

From 2011 to 2017, Afghanistan's economy expanded by 2% per year – slower than the rate of population growth.

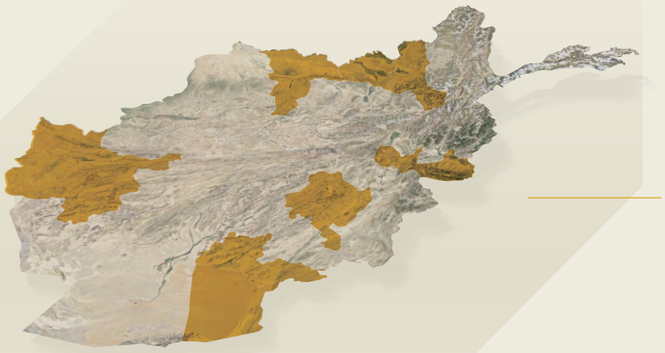
Increase in poverty rate

34% → 47%

Poverty rates rose from 34 to 47 percent and inequality increased.

The economic contraction due to the novel coronavirus outbreak could further aggravate this delicate situation.

Key dimensions of spatial disparities



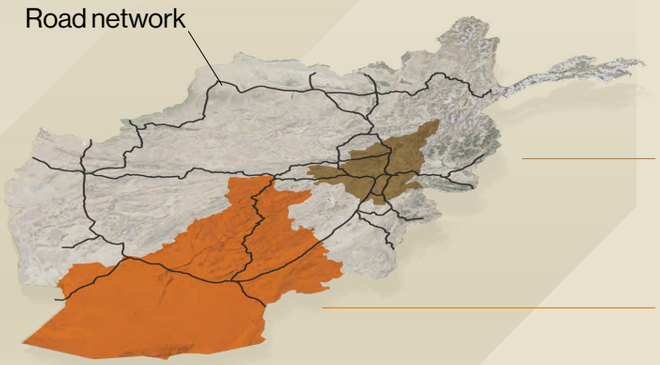
Population distribution

19% of the territory concentrates

50%

of the national population

The population remains unevenly distributed, eight (out of 34) most populous provinces accounted for 50% of the national population.



Human capital

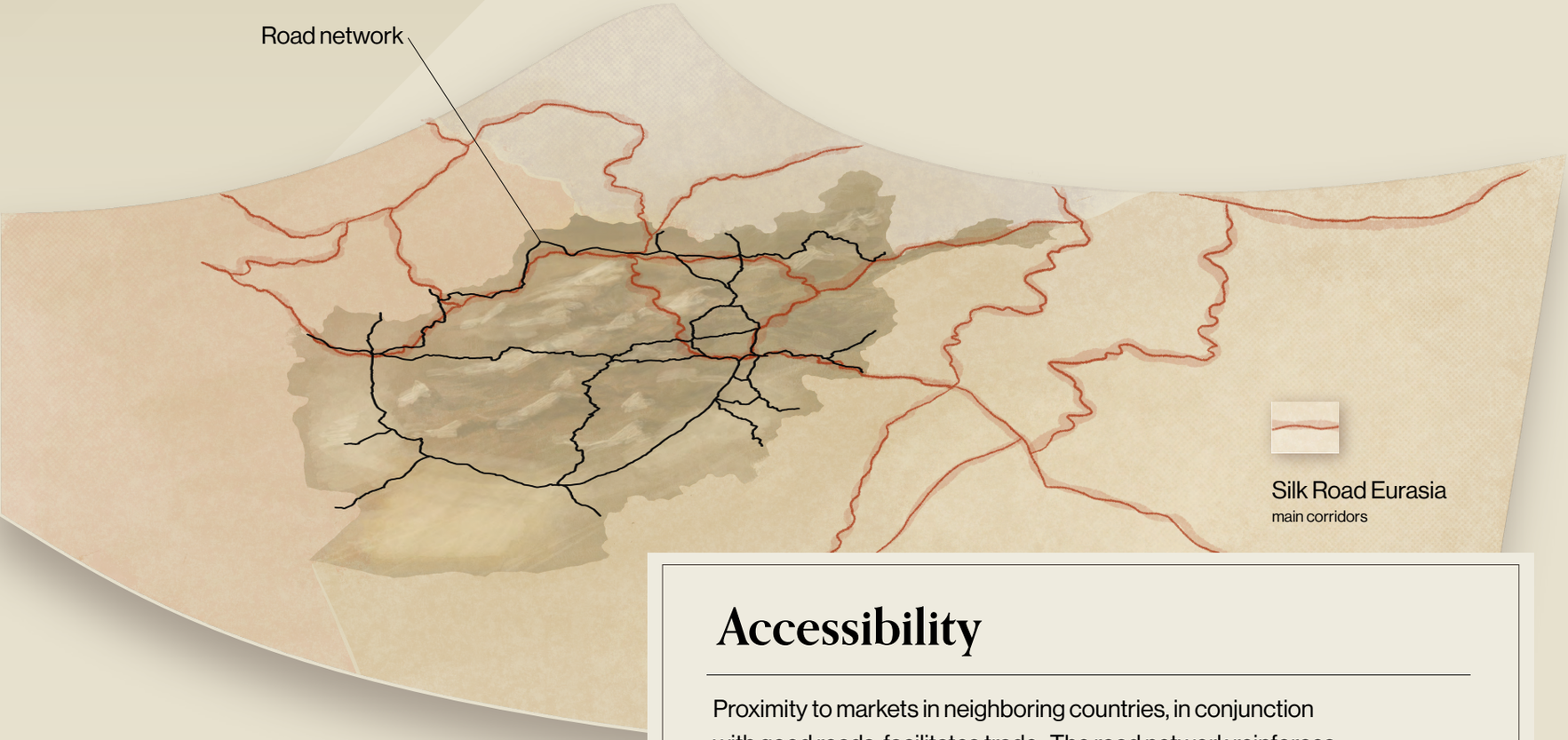
50%

literacy rate

20%

literacy rate

Access to the road network correlates with large disparities in terms of human capital outcomes. It also facilitates access to public services, most notably schools. Literacy rates reflect this disparity.

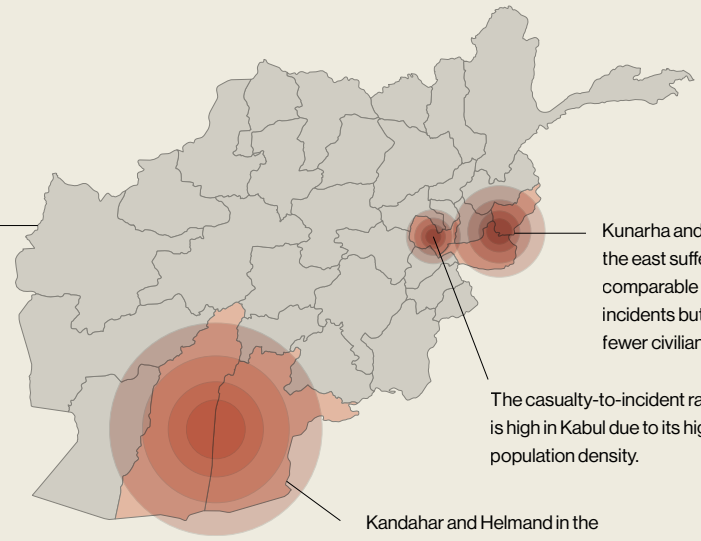


Accessibility

Proximity to markets in neighboring countries, in conjunction with good roads, facilitates trade. The road network reinforces ancient trade links that date back to the silk-road, creating disparities that endure to this day.

Conflict incidence

Provinces in Afghanistan experienced varying intensities of conflict incidence and associated numbers of civilian casualties between 2007 and 2017.



Kunarha and Nangarhar in the east suffered a comparable number of incidents but lost relatively fewer civilian lives.

The casualty-to-incident ratio is high in Kabul due to its high population density.

Kandahar and Helmand in the southwest had the highest rate of conflict incidents and civilian casualties in aggregate during this period.

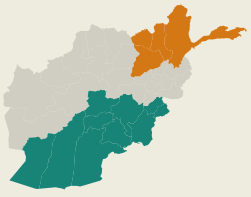
Labor markets

The performance and composition of labor markets has varied substantially with differential access to economic opportunities and a continued reliance on agriculture in most provinces.

Average employment-population ratio

33%

in the northeast



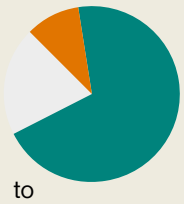
52%

in the south

The share of agriculture in male employment stands at 36% nationally but varies widely: from...

10%

in Kunarha



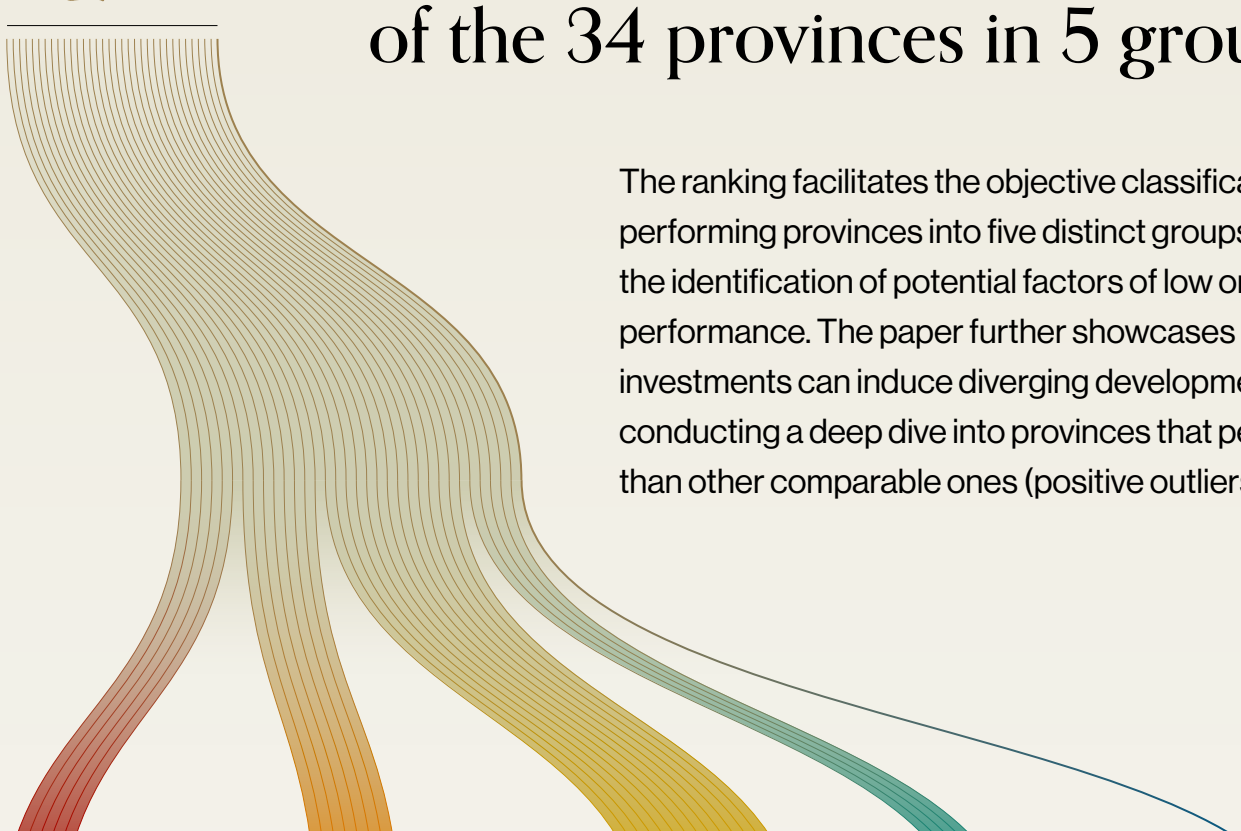
to

70%

in Wardak, Bamyan, and Ghor

Ranking the economic performance of the 34 provinces in 5 groups

The ranking facilitates the objective classification of similarly performing provinces into five distinct groups and consequently, the identification of potential factors of low or high economic performance. The paper further showcases how key investments can induce diverging development trajectories by conducting a deep dive into provinces that performed better than other comparable ones (positive outliers).



Group 1

6
provinces

Characterized by inaccessibility and conflict, with high levels of poverty and low human capital outcomes

Group 2

8
provinces

Concentrated in the central and northeastern highlands, these provinces have high levels of poverty and food insecurity, but lower levels of conflict, allowing provision of certain basic services

Group 3

14
provinces

At the median of consumption level, these provinces hold the largest share of the population. They have neither prospered nor seen significant declines in the past decade

Group 4

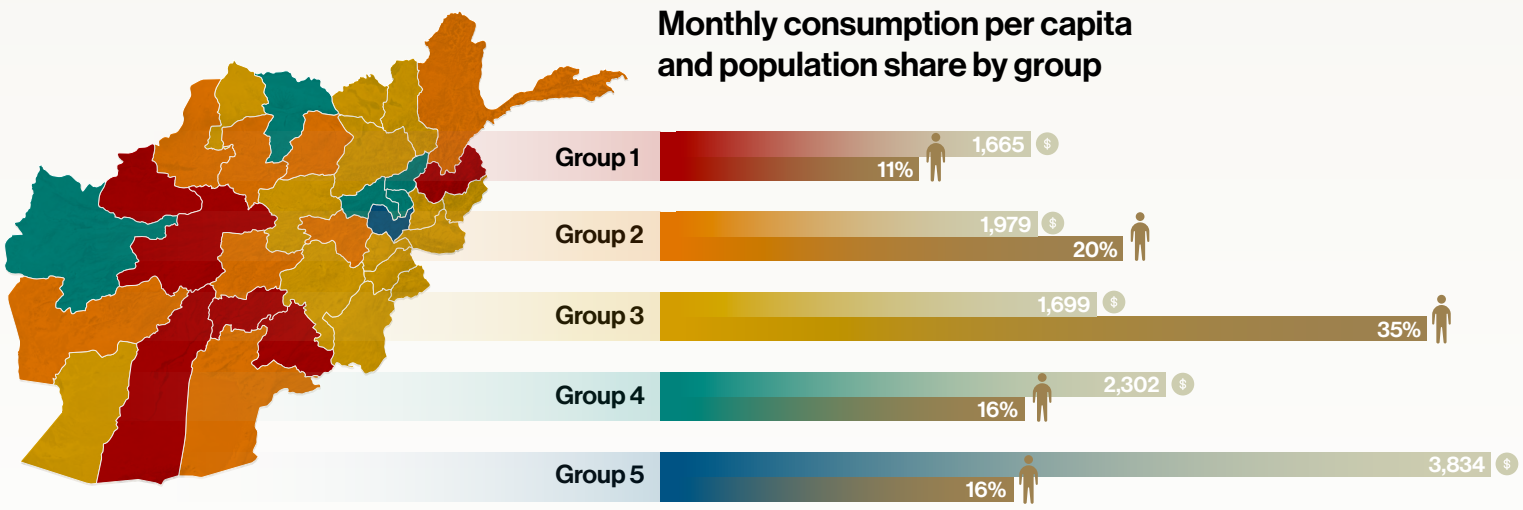
5
provinces

Clustered either around the economic zone centered on Kabul or major border crossings, these provinces have benefited from increased economic activity driven by trade and urbanization

Group 5

1
province

Kabul province, the capital, which has grown rapidly and has the highest levels of literacy and educational attainment in the country



Comparing two provinces with similar initial conditions

Panjsher saw improvements in its development outcomes, while neighboring Nooristan experienced stagnant or worsening results.

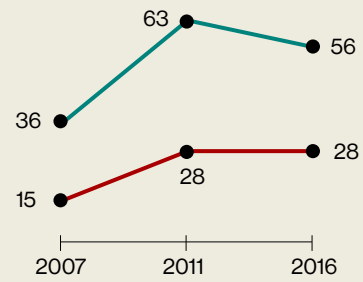
The rate of progress on factors positively affecting economic performance—including educational outcomes, population density, and asset ownership—was much slower in Nooristan than in Panjsher. With respect to negative factors for economic performance, Nooristan experienced a relatively large increase in poverty, stagnation of living conditions and access to food markets, and continued reliance on agriculture.

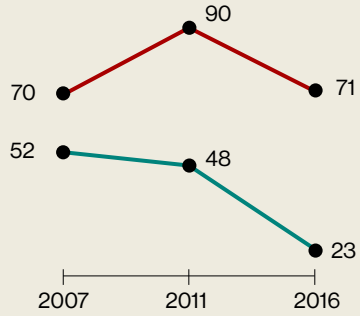
Percentage of population older than 5 years of age that are literate

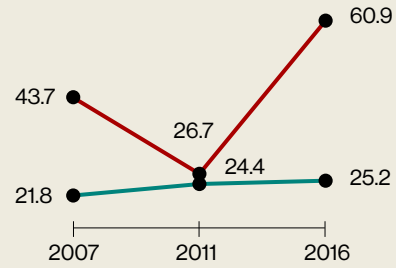
Percentage of population with no access to food market within an hour on foot

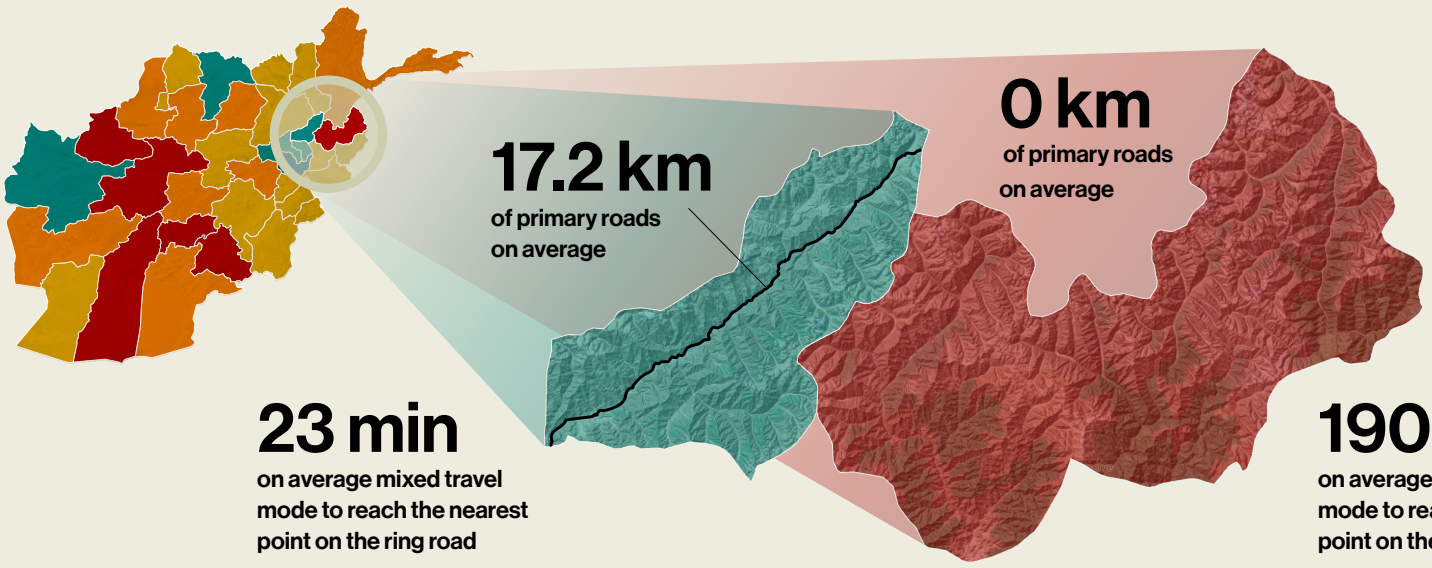
Poverty rate

Panjsher
Nooristan









This divergence in socioeconomic development in Panjsher and Nooristan is attributable in part to Panjsher's stronger links to the country's road infrastructure, Kabul, and medium-large border points. Panjsher consists of seven districts, six of which are connected by the same primary road network which links directly to the ring road and onwards to Kabul. A secondary road connects the remaining district. Nooristan, which has eight districts, is fragmented into three clusters that are largely disconnected from each other.

Key policy take-aways

Improve connective infrastructure to strengthen access to population centers and markets in provinces and districts that remain relatively isolated. This directly enables trade and internal labor migration, while indirectly enhancing the population's access to health, education and administrative services.

Provinces' economic paths were not set in stone. Some provinces that began in weak positions in 2007 were able to raise their development trajectories in the ensuing decade, relative to their peers.

Explicitly emphasize improved service delivery in "hard-to-reach" areas, characterized by insecurity and lack of accessibility, when planning investments and during peace negotiations.

Balance the trade-off between targeting resources to improve conditions in lagging areas vs. enhancing connectivity so that people can take advantage of opportunities elsewhere. Prioritize improving economic outcomes in lagging areas by better linking them to leading areas, while expanding the reach of safety nets and public services.

Improve food security and resilience by investing in social protection and labor-intensive public works, given the dependence on agriculture for subsistence across much of the country.

Source: Afghanistan Spatial Disparities Assessment
Identifying drivers of differential development

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