



The Youth Bulge in Afghanistan: Challenges and Opportunities

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Comprehensive Information on Complex Crises

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This report briefly discusses the 'youth bulge' within Afghanistan and explores the ways in which the Afghan government, international organisations and NGOs are working to address this issue. Further information is available online at www.cimicweb.org. Hyperlinks to source material are highlighted in blue and underlined in the text.

The United States Agency for International Development ([USAID](#)) estimates that there are currently [1.3 billion people](#) worldwide between the ages of 12 and 24, which is roughly equivalent to 18% of the global population. In addition, USAID anticipates that this number will increase to 1.5 billion by 2035. According to the United Nations Population Fund ([UNFPA](#)), developing countries, including Afghanistan, are experiencing population [booms](#). In fact, Afghanistan is the world's fastest growing country at an annual rate of [2.8%](#), according to the 2011 Population Reference Bureau ([PRB](#)) dataset. The rapid increase in youth population produces what is often referred to as a "[youth bulge](#)". This is a key concern in the development and stability of poor nations states Henrik Urdal in a 2004 report for the [World Bank](#).

This thematic report discusses the nature of Afghanistan's current youth bulge and the reasons why the large youth population in Afghanistan has been described as a source of concern. Finally, this document reviews a selection of initiatives that have been undertaken in response to the "young bulge" in order to better serve the needs of Afghanistan's children and young adults.

The Youth Bulge: What Is It and Why Is It Important?

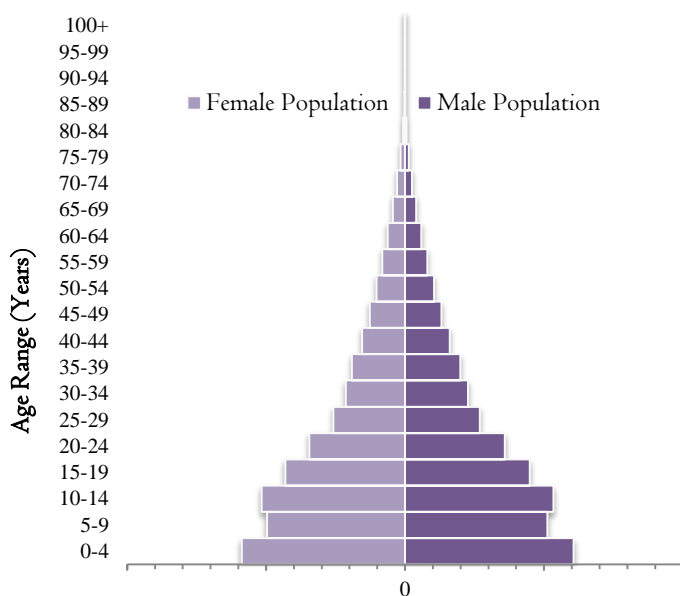
"[Youth bulge](#)" is the demographic terminology commonly used to describe a population in which the proportion of young people is significantly large in comparison to other, older age groups. According to the UN-affiliated *Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN)*, UN agencies define the youth bulge as [large cohorts](#) (in excess of 20%) between the ages of 15 and 24 relative to the total adult population. Other definitions expand the range to include the 15 to 29 age group. Research conducted in the 1990s found that a correlation exists between countries prone to [civil wars](#) and those with unusually large youth populations, says a 2007 Council on Foreign Relations ([CFR](#)) background paper by Lionel Beehner. The CFR paper posits that a lack of jobs or development within a country may lead to the disillusionment of the youth and could possibly result in societal unrest (see [Arab Spring](#)). "It all depends on whether the expectations of youth are met," says Carl Haub, senior demographer at the PBR and co-author of the 2009 World Population [Data Sheet](#). By the mid-2000s, however, a more nuanced understanding of youth and conflict emerged, according to a 2010 USAID [technical brief](#). Further research suggested that [political and economic conditions](#) (and not the youth population in and of itself) were significant determinants of conflict. Urdal's 2004 report for the [World Bank](#) found that it is the combination of a country's poor [economic performance and a youth bulge](#) that could be potentially "explosive." Urdal found, as did Haub, that youth bulges can amplify existing social tensions and unrest to the point of conflict.



It is important to note, however, that youth bulges are not viewed in a wholly negative manner. A [2011 article by Richard Mabala](#) argues that large youth populations in low and middle-income countries, particularly those living in urban areas, have been unfairly characterised as potential threats to stability and development. Mabala asserts that many scholars are increasingly viewing youth bulges as producing a “demographic dividend”; the notion of a “demographic dividend” suggests that a large and young workforce with fewer dependents may generate strong economic growth within a country.

Figure 1. Afghanistan Population Pyramid

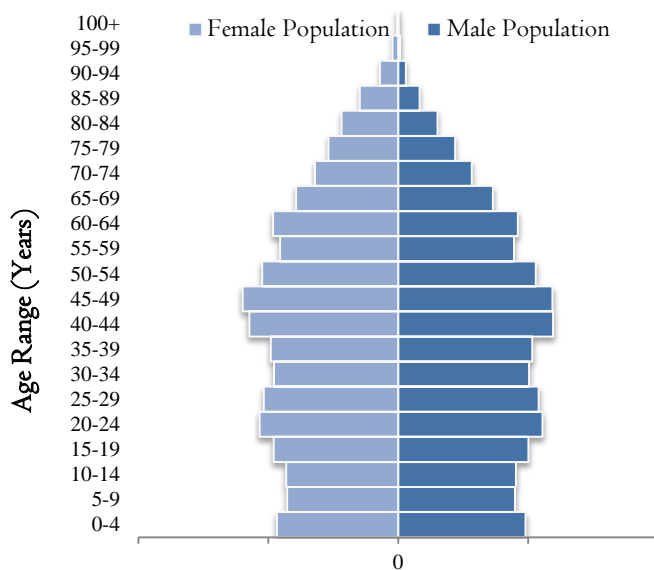
Source: US Census 2011



Afghanistan, in particular, is experiencing a significant youth bulge. According to the CIA World Factbook, [42.3%](#) of Afghanistan’s population is under the age of 15. A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report states that [68% of the Afghan population](#) is under the age of 25 with an average [life expectancy](#) of 44.6 years. (see Figure 1). Figure 1 presents the Afghan population distribution through a “population pyramid”. The largest bars at the base show the large youth population while the top show the low number of Afghans in the older age ranges. Afghanistan’s population pyramid has the classic appearance of a country with a significant youth bulge. To provide an example from one developed country, Figure 2 presents the population pyramid for the United Kingdom. It portrays a nation without a youth bulge. The UK’s population has a more even distribution of population among the various age groups from top to bottom of the graph. Many highly industrialised countries have population growth that has slowed and in some cases has become [negative](#) as depicted by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD).

Figure 2. United Kingdom Population Pyramid

Source: US Census 2011



The 2010 [USAID technical brief](#), noted above, reports that the burgeoning population in Afghanistan places stress on the state’s capabilities. According to a 2010 article by Elizabeth Cutler published by the [Stimson Centre](#), meeting the [education, health and employment needs](#) of the large youth population will prove critical in Afghanistan. The current population imbalance, says Cutler, will exacerbate the already high unemployment rates, currently



estimated at 40%, and could potentially lead to high levels of social and political dissatisfaction. This concern is corroborated by UNDP, which describes the Afghan population as feeling [disenfranchised](#) over the lack of educational and employment opportunities.

Societal Challenges Facing Afghan Youth

A 2011 article published by the *Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR)* found that there are [serious implications](#) associated with Afghanistan's youth bulge both for Afghan youth and for the country as a whole. Hafiz Ahmed Miakhel notes that the challenges of drug use and trafficking, radicalisation and high unemployment create a number of possible negative outcomes for the country and youth.

Drug Use & Trafficking

Drug use creates health risks for young Afghans. A survey conducted by the Ministry of Public Health ([MoPH](#)) and Johns Hopkins University ([JHU](#)) found that [HIV](#) was present in 7% of the drug user population. A paper by Catherine Todd, published in the *Harm Reduction Journal*, reports that countries bordering Afghanistan are experiencing concentrated epidemics of HIV and [hepatitis C](#) among injection drug use (IDU) populations. Todd asserts that Afghanistan could be at risk for a similar destabilising event. A 2009 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime ([UNODC](#)) survey found that the combination of easy access to inexpensive drugs and three decades of war-related psychological and physical trauma have resulted in [drug-use among 8% of the Afghan population](#) between the ages of 15-64. This level of drug use within this age range translates into twice the global average and can have potentially devastating impacts on individuals, families, communities and the country, says UNODC. Furthermore, a 2010 *UN News Centre* article found that a growing number of parents give [opium to their children](#) in order to soothe their hunger. According to a *CNN World* article parents, without knowing the serious health implications, give children opium when they [fall ill](#). These practices place the next generation of children at risk of drug addiction and other health problems.

A 2009 US Congressional Research Service ([CRS](#)) report by Christopher Blanchard, entitled "Narcotics and US Policy in Afghanistan," points out that Afghanistan is the world's [largest producer and exporter of opium](#). During the 2006-2007 poppy growing seasons, Afghanistan produced world record opium poppy crops that yielded 8,200 tonnes of opium, an estimated 93% of the world's supply. A *BBC News* article reported that 2010 opium product dropped sharply due to a [plant infection](#). Production levels were at its lowest level since 2003 with an estimated 3,600 tonnes. Still, the article notes, Afghanistan produced 90% of the world's opium according to the UNODC's [2010 Afghan Opium Survey](#). "Unemployment in Afghanistan" by Abid Amiri asserts that in [opium-producing areas](#), youth have few viable alternatives to make a living other than to work for drug dealers. According to UNDP's [National Youth Programme](#) paper from 2007, the [labour-intensiveness](#) of drug production means that many young people work in family-owned poppy farms. Moreover, youth are also involved in the trafficking of narcotics, functioning as carriers to neighbouring countries, from where the drugs are then smuggled to the West. A 2006 article by Richard Rudd found that [20% to 30% of Afghans](#) are employed in the illegal drug industry.

Insurgency & Terrorism

Beyond drug cultivation and trafficking, an *IWPR* report states that joining the insurgency is another [employment option](#) for Afghan youth. A [2009 paper](#) by Sarah Ladbury for the UK Department of International Development ([DFID](#)), found that [unemployment, poverty and inequality](#) are among the main reasons for radicalisation within Afghanistan. The paper explains that young men join Taliban groups for a variety of reasons, including but not solely "to earn an income and to increase their status." A 2010 *IRIN* article also suggests that [lack of employment opportunities](#) is a motivating factor for youth to join the Taliban. For example, one head of family told *IRIN* "[my



son] joined the Taliban out of desperation because he looked for a job for several months but got nowhere.” A September 2011 article in *The Washington Post* also indicates that some youth join the Taliban due to economic need rather than to [ideological reasons](#). Nonetheless, the article added that economic explanations of the Taliban’s recruitment ability are, on their own, insufficient and that a range of additional factors, including ideology, play crucial roles.

Employment Prospects

Only 49% of Afghan men (15-24 years old) are literate reports the United Nations Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)). Female rates for the same age bracket are even lower at, 18% for 15-24 year olds. Given unemployment rates of 40%, finding a job in Afghanistan is challenging, reports UNICEF. According to the *IRIN*, [joblessness](#) is not just impacting the least educated youth but also university-educated youth. Recently, the [Miakhel](#) article shares that out of [83 students](#) graduating with a degree from Nangarhar University, only a few had jobs. The remaining graduates were unemployed. Afghan’s Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, Wasel Nur Mohmand, told *Miakhel* that young people were frequently left outside the job market because they had little to offer, in terms of skills and experience, to potential employers. The Deputy Minister stated: “[B]oth government and the private sector employ people who have skills, many of our young people don’t have these skills, which is why they are unemployed.” As will be discussed later in this report, steps are increasingly being taken to overcome challenges such as those noted by the Deputy Minister.

Additionally, the 2007 UNDP’s [National Youth Programme](#)’s Joint Programme Document suggests that serious policy gaps have been partially responsible for the current state of youth unemployment. For one, the Joint Programme Document reports that as of 2007, vocational and business training opportunities for young people had been in short supply. A 2010 Committee on Education & Skills Policy ([CESP](#)) technical paper recognises that the current number and quality of [vocational schools](#) are underserving the young population. Also, many of the returning youth, who were educated and trained in other countries while displaced by fighting and political conditions in Afghanistan were unable to receive official recognition for their qualifications from Afghan authorities. Many such repatriated refugees were thus prevented from working in their respective fields.

Migration & Urbanisation

An *IRIN* article, entitled “[Coming of age in the 21st century](#)”, reported that, for the first time in world history, urban populations exceeded rural populations. In addition, the article noted that youth comprised a disproportionately large portion of migrants moving from rural to urban populations. In developing countries, urban populations are growing at a rate four to five times faster than urban populations in developed countries. This trend, which can be seen in Afghanistan, is largely attributed to young people seeking to move away from [economically limited or stagnant rural areas](#), notes *IRIN*. The CIA World Factbook reports that, as of 2010, 23% of the Afghan population lived in urban areas and that [urbanisation](#) was growing at an annual rate of approximately 4.7%. A [Woodrow Wilson](#) International Centre for Scholars report by Alison Garland explains that youth populations face limited options beyond crime, drugs and, in some instances, gangs within [urban settings](#). This, in turn, gives rise to violence which is one of the most serious problems in cities. The UNODC finds that, worldwide, most crimes are [committed by males](#) between the ages of 15 and 30. According to the [UN World Youth Report 2005](#), “crime rates tend to be higher in urban areas than in rural areas.”

A Taste of “Spring”

A March 2011 *National Public Radio (NPR)* article found that after witnessing protests that ultimately led to the toppling of regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, [political change](#) is on the minds of some Afghan youth. According to



the *NPR* article, one 19-year-old university student said the following: “I am counting the seconds for the day when 20 of my friends call me and ask me to go out on the streets to protest against the notoriously corrupt government and the violence of the Taliban.” *NPR* reports that the youth of Afghanistan have been closely following developments across Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Another youth told *NPR* that, while Afghans are not Arabs and while realities are different in Afghanistan than in Egypt, Afghans have similar grievances that have arisen because of corruption, violence, unemployment and nepotism. *NPR*’s article revealed that the youth are pessimistic about their futures and that they believe the Afghan government has failed to address their needs and expectations. A *Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)* article also notes a [restlessness](#) among youth who want government to address their needs. Recently, Sanjar Sohail, editor-in-chief of a major Afghan newspaper, [8AM](#), told *NPR* that the youth may pose a threat to the current Afghan government if their concerns and interests are not more fully addressed. Sohail told *NPR* the following: “[W]e have seen increasing debates among the youth on Facebook. More than 50 Facebook groups have been created under different titles calling for peaceful protests.” According to *NPR*, calls for protests have alarmed some officials. In a recent *Tolo News* article, President Karzai, addressing the [Afghanistan Youth Conference](#), urged attendees to become educated and added that the youth should resist becoming involved in political activities¹.

The Way Forward: Addressing the Needs of the Youth

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, a dramatic inflow of aid dollars to the country resulted in an initial surge of youth groups and civil society organisations. By 2003, UNDP reported [105 youth organisations](#) had been established within Afghanistan. In 2002, the first youth civil society conference was held in Kabul followed by the establishment of the Afghan Youth Coordination Agency ([AYCA](#)) in 2003. Subsequent regional youth conferences were held in [Herat](#) and [Bamian](#) provinces in 2005. The establishment of the AYCA was short lived however. A UNDP report found that in-fighting among NGO sponsors and others rendered the organisation ineffectual and the organisation was eventually disbanded. In 2005, the Afghan government created the Afghan [Ministry of Youth Affairs](#) within the Ministry of Information and Culture ([MoIC](#)) with the task of coordinating programmes for youth.

Over the past decade, government agencies and the international community have identified [job creation and youth empowerment](#) as paramount youth issues that must, according to a 2011 UNESCO Report, be addressed if Afghanistan is to move towards stability. “The National Youth Programme: Joint Programme Document” states that given the sheer number of youth, the need for [youth-focused programmes](#) is apparent. What makes the addressing of youth issues most pressing is that the youth are a cross-cutting constituency within society. The Joint Programme Document went further stating that the youth were a vital demographic in the achievement of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy ([ANDS](#)), Afghanistan Compact, United Nations Development Assistance Framework ([UNDAF](#)) and the Millennium Development Goals ([MDGs](#)). To adopt a unified approach to youth issues, the Afghan government and nine UN agencies joined in order to develop the Joint National Youth Programme ([JNYP](#)).

Joint National Youth Programme (JNYP) and Other Youth Initiatives

The JNYP commenced in 2007 and is a joint UN-Afghan government initiative. It is currently being implemented by nine UN agencies² as well as eight Afghan government ministries. A 2007 UNDP Press Release indicates that the programme would be under the [leadership](#) of the Office of the Deputy Minister for Youth Affairs ([DMoYA](#)) at the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture ([MoIC](#)). The main goals of the JNYP are to ensure that Afghan

¹ President Karzai’s remarks were not intended to deter youth from performing civic duties such as voting within the country.

² The nine UN agencies are [UNAMA](#), [UNICEF](#), [UNDP](#), [UN-HABITAT](#), [UNESCO](#), [UNV](#), [UNFPA](#), [FAO](#) and [ILO](#).



youth participate effectively in socio-political process, with emphasis on national and local governance, democracy, reconstruction and peace-building. It also aims to provide young Afghan women and men with access to education, skills development and employment opportunities. In order to achieve these goals, the 2007-2008 [JNYP](#) objectives included the following: “(i) strengthening capacity of the Afghan government to respond to the needs of youth”; “(ii) providing livelihood skills and training for youth”; and “(iii) engaging with the youth on the local, regional and national levels to ensure a voice in the development of Afghanistan and to promote volunteerism for peace and development with the creation of a youth volunteer corps”.

There are numerous [programmes](#) currently operating under the umbrella of the JNYP.³ Capacity workshops addressing the MDG and the ANDS are conducted by the UNDP and the DMoYA. Additionally, these agencies offer workshops addressing proposal writing, report writing, office management, peace building, leadership skills and conflict resolution. English and computer courses continue to be offered as well. Television and media campaigns have been implemented to discuss health, drugs and other important issues relevant to youth. The UNDP continues to hold regional youth conferences to elicit youth input and participation.

“A [2009 UNDP Quarterly Report](#) on the Joint National Youth Programme” reports that UN agencies have robustly engaged in youth initiatives. The legacy of the JNYP is evidenced in the numerous youth resource centres, literacy centres, vocational training centres, employment centres, microcredit initiatives, educational support, youth organisations and peace-building initiatives throughout the provinces. In efforts to address high unemployment rates among the youth populations, The International Labour Organisation ([ILO](#)), working in conjunction with the Afghan Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled ([MoLSAMD](#)) and DMoYA, have created Employment Services Centres ([ESC](#)). These Employment Services Centres, instituted in 2004, reports *IRIN*, attempt to [match jobs with applicants](#). The ESC is a “mixture of job placement services, referral services to vocational training and a labour market information database that is to be established.” According to the ANDS, there are currently 12 ESCs operating in Afghanistan with plans in place to establish 15 more. Initial statistics reported in the 2010 ANDS report show that 20% of those who register with the ESC are successfully finding employment.

United States Initiatives

The United States, along with a number of other countries⁴ have engaged with the Afghanistan government to help cultivate civil society. USAID has numerous programmes addressing youth needs. A [youth and workforce development program](#) called Skills Training for Afghan Youth ([STAY+](#)) began in April 2010. The programme is designed to offer basic education, life skills and workforce readiness training. The project also fosters government capacity among a cross-sector of Afghan government ministries. STAY+ is developing two vocational training organisations, the Afghanistan Vocational Training Institute ([ATVI](#)) and the Kunar Vocational Organisation. Both schools are seeking to develop skills that translate to jobs for the youth sector.

Learning for Community Empowerment Program ([LCEP-2](#)) is another USAID programme helping to promote literacy, numeracy education, vocational and business development skills to older youth (and adults). The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan ([UNAMA](#)) states that the programme is implemented by UN-Habitat and is the continuation of the [initial programme](#) begun in 2004. This most recent phase is a four-year project and is operational in 20 provinces. So far LCEP-2 has established 9,234 learning centres in 20 provinces, covering 2,495 communities in 103 districts. LCEP-2 enrolment is approximately 223,000 students.

³ The discussion of programmes undertaken in this section is by no means exhaustive, but is addressed to give the reader a representative sampling of the types of youth programmes currently being implemented in Afghanistan.

⁴ Japan, UK, Russia, India, Norway and a host of other countries have engaged in reconstruction efforts within Afghanistan.



Civil Society Initiatives

The legacy of the JNYP, along with other donor nation and UN agency programmes, has helped to spur civil society initiatives focused upon youth. An example of this is the Afghan [Youth Voices](#) Festival that was officially launched across 16 provinces in 2010 as a lead up to the International Youth Day on 12 August 2010. The goal of Afghan Youth Voices was to provide an opportunity for the country's youth to [express their ideas](#) and dreams about their future through the media. The festival fostered youth awareness to the power of their ideas as they learned to express their thoughts through radio, television, the Internet, blogging, photography, posters, art and music. The festival is an on-going Internet-based project with a focus on Internet skills development. The Festival delivered training to over 1,000 young people across Afghanistan and provides grants and awards to promote and build youth journalism in Afghanistan.

Youth In Action Association ([YIAA](#)) is a grass roots youth organisation that carries out activities with additional objectives related to policy advocacy, sustainable employment generation and peace-building. YIAA has been very active in organising youth events such as [World Blood Donor Day](#), [World Environment Day](#), [Global Youth Service Day](#), "[Cricket Against Narcotics](#)" and career planning and goal setting workshops. Additionally YIAA has launched a youth writing project that continually promotes peace-building activities within the country.

Economic Development with an Eye Toward Youth Employment

A *Christian Science Monitor* opinion piece, by Graciana del Castillo, asserts that Afghanistan needs [job creation](#) and economic growth in order to create any form of long-term stability in Afghanistan. In support of this assertion, the 2011 Miakhel article notes that some youth have indicated that the Afghan government has provided [insufficient support for fledgling industries](#) and that unchecked foreign competition has limited growth of Afghanistan's industrial sector. Sayed Masud, an economist at Kabul University, told Miakhel that "[t]he government has to turn a consumption economy into a productive one." Wasel Nur Mohmand, the Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Affairs told Miakhel in early 2011 that efforts were being made to create [jobs in both the public and private sectors](#) and insisted that joint strategies were being developed which would reduce unemployment.

Potential Sectors for Job Creation

The World Bank identifies Afghanistan's vast [mineral resources](#) as an area where economic growth and job creation can occur. From a long term perspective, the [mineral sector](#) has the potential to create jobs, develop infrastructure, generate domestic revenues and ensure economic growth that benefits all Afghans. However, the World Bank cautions that the development of a mining sector is a process that will take some time. A 2010 *Foreign Policy* article by Michael Ross indicates that many of Afghanistan's rich mineral deposits are in areas of [Taliban control](#). [Infrastructure](#) must also be developed in order to extract and transport the minerals to markets and labour policies need to be implemented in order to protect Afghan workers from exploitation. Although there are concerns that developing the mining sector will create jobs for foreign workers, Ross indicates that the type of jobs created in the mining sector will be for unskilled male workers and could provide a means for Afghans to become self-sufficient. In the Aynak copper and Hajigak iron-ore mines of Afghanistan, the World Bank reports that up to [90,000 jobs](#) and approximately USD 500 million in revenues could unfold within six years. Additional economic growth by small businesses that would support the mining industry would have further impacts upon the Afghanistan economy.

Agro-processing may also translate into job creation and economic development within Afghanistan says the Afghanistan Investment Support Agency ([AISA](#)). Understood as one of Afghanistan's investment priority sectors,



the AISA reports the processed fruits and vegetables market amounts to approximately USD 28 to 60 million annually. The processing of snack foods, fruit concentrates, pickles and fruit jams has significant potential adds AISA. Again, infrastructure constrains agro-processing growth, states a United States Department of Agriculture ([USDA](#)) Foreign Agricultural Service report. The 2011 report finds that limited technical capacity, [electricity](#) and raw materials are factors impeding sector growth.

Blanchard's previously discussed CRS report identifies [agricultural-sector job creation](#) as an essential first step to undercutting the appeal of al Qaeda and its allies. Clearly, the international community recognizes job creation in the agricultural sector as a strategy that has benefits beyond youth employment. In an effort to showcase Afghanistan's agricultural competencies and to attract international business, the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock ([MAIL](#)), with financial support from USAID, hosted the [Kabul International AgFair](#) 2010. The agricultural fair attracted almost 35,000 visitors. International business representatives from Argentina, India, Singapore, Hong Kong, Tajikistan, the United States, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, China, Singapore, Australia, the Netherlands and the United Arab Emirates participated in the AgFair to identify business opportunities in Afghanistan. The Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries ([ACCI](#)) reported that the AgFair involved a series of seminars on a wide variety of agricultural topics, allowing farmers, students, [businesspeople](#) and the general public to learn about new agricultural technologies and techniques that will help improve agricultural productivity and increase sales. A preliminary report shows that [10 confirmed business deals](#) totalling USD 1.9 million were negotiated at the Kabul International AgFair, and 15 potential business deals totalling USD 12.1 million were in discussions.

The International Monetary Fund's ([IMF](#)) Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) for Afghanistan states that [economic development](#) will take time. This sentiment is reflected in the Afghan National Development Strategy ([ANDS](#)) and states that Afghanistan's [commercial connections](#) to regional and global economies over the past decade, has been severely disrupted, and the establishment of a competitive private sector will be a long-term process.

Conclusion

Waheed Ahmad Jalalzada, as part of the Joint Training of Pakistan-Afghanistan journalists on Conflict Reporting, writes: "[youth play the key role](#) in the trend of structuring and development of a country; conversely, they can have a powerful hand in the destruction of a nation as well." How effectively the government of Afghanistan addresses the needs of their burgeoning population may help determine the level of peace and stability Afghanistan will experience. What is increasingly clear, however, is that a purposeful approach to turning youth bulges into demographic dividends must be instituted over the course of decades if not generations.

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