



# Afghanistan's environment 2008





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Robust data being difficult to obtain in Afghanistan, the State of the Environment report has used data from various sources and in some instances the data do not match.



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**Environment and Poverty**  
by Safya Saifi, Huma Jamshid, Niliab Habiby

From **Kabul's environment in pictures**, Afghanistan's first-ever environmental photo exhibition, December 2006



# State of the Environment – Key challenges and opportunities

کابل بی زر باشد و بی برف نه  
“Kabul can be without gold but not without snow”  
Afghan proverb

*This report provides readers with an overview of the key environmental issues, factors and drivers of environmental change in Afghanistan, and highlights the latest achievements and prospects ahead. It is the First State of Environment (SOE) Report for Afghanistan, produced by the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) with assistance from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), in accordance with section 9 (12) of the Environment Law, 2007. It is designed for both a national audience (Government officials, community leaders, and natural resource policy-makers at a central and local level) and the broader international community: donors and international organizations, policy-makers in neighbouring countries, people and institutes interested in Afghanistan. It provides in a consolidated format the best available information and also identifies gaps in data on the state of the environment.*

*Each chapter of the report gives an overview of the context, importance and use of natural resources, what is known about their current conditions, trends and linkages to regional or global factors. The report also reveals how Afghanistan's natural resources – if managed in an efficient and sustainable manner – could provide the basis for future economic growth and stability.*

## Environment at stake – what do we know?

Afghanistan's territory has been inhabited for thousands of years and has served as an important communication hub and cultural melting pot. As such it is home to many sites of great cultural importance. It is also the original home of many agricultural products (varieties of cereal,

breeds of sheep and goats, and forest products), minerals (gold, copper and semi-precious stones), and other natural resources. Since ancient times Afghanistan's natural resources, including land, water, minerals and forests, have serviced great and small empires, which have clearly had an impact on the shape and state of the country.

Managing livelihoods in the mountainous dry lands of Afghanistan has never been easy. The influence of more than three decades of conflict, compounded by years of drought and mismanagement of important resources, has made it that much harder, and has caused widespread human suffering as well as the devastation of almost all natural resources across the country. As in most countries in the world, environmental degradation affects the poor most. It is closely linked to human health and well-being, and in turn, to economic development. Social inequalities and inefficient use of resources perpetuate a vicious cycle of their degradation and pollution. This contributes to poverty and the erosion of livelihoods that were precarious from the outset. The period ahead offers a crucial opportunity to integrate environmental management into the country's social and economic strategies so that long-term peace, growth and increased prosperity can be secured.

The legacy of conflict that has plagued Afghanistan and its people for nearly 30 years has damaged not only the country's society and institutions, but also its environment. The main impacts are the depletion and overuse of important resources (forests, biodiversity, water), which exacerbates the stressful socio-economic conditions and

the impact of natural hazards; reduced access to natural resources; erosion of the rule of law; collapse of traditional governance systems and processes; pollution with toxic rocket fuel, spilled oil and land mines, making essential land and pastures unsafe to use.

Today almost 80 per cent of the country's population (19 million people) live in rural areas. That portion of the population relies heavily on productive natural resources, which makes it extremely vulnerable to the impacts of local and global phenomena (such as droughts, natural disasters, climate change and desertification) and the degradation of natural resources through erosion and pollution of soil and water. The influx of returning refugees, sheer population growth, and the creation of new environmental refugees and internally displaced persons – as a result of droughts, natural disasters, climate change and desertification – could exert additional stress on natural resources.

Afghanistan's fast growing urban centres consume increasing amounts of agricultural goods and energy. Due to over-population in many urban areas and the high concentration of pollution sources such as cars and industries, the residents suffer from severe air pollution, poorly organized collection and disposal of waste, lack of sanitation and access to safe drinking water. There is also a shortage of green open spaces.

The rich mineral resources of Afghanistan (gas, coal, copper, gold, rare metals), currently unexploited, could be the focus of major investment and development once stability and investment conditions improve. However this could



also bring adverse environmental and social impacts, if such projects are not designed and implemented within a proper, modern regulatory framework.

Overall the sustainable use and accessibility of natural resources are still key factors for achieving and maintaining social stability and sustainable development in Afghanistan.

There is an acute need for knowledge on the state of the environment: the amount of water available and used in Afghanistan, and shared with neighbouring states; existing biological species and their potential use in medicine, agriculture, recreation and tourism; the proportion of the land base that needs to be irrigated or can be used as rangeland.

An analysis of baseline information reflecting the pre-conflict environmental situation 30–50 years ago, of the post-conflict environmental assessment conducted by the United Nations Environment Programme, and of the most recent data gathered and synthesized for the purpose of Afghanistan's National Development Strategy 2008 (ANDS) reveals the following priority environmental issues needing further policy attention and action:

- Water resources
- Rangelands, forests and biodiversity
- Land use, agriculture and soils
- Urban environment
- Natural disasters and climate change

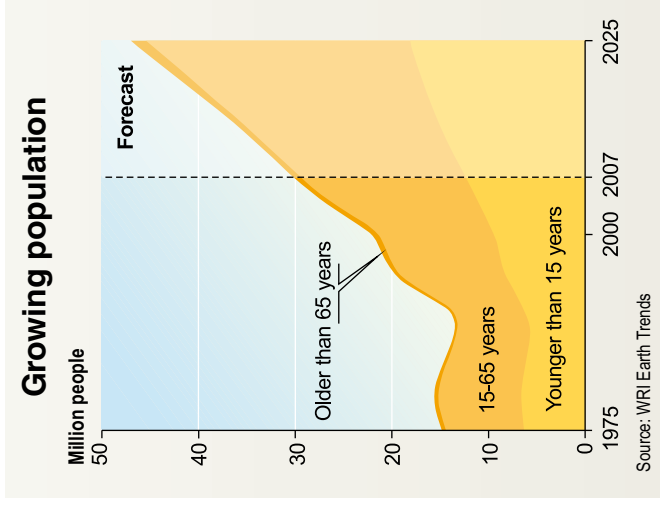
Given the lack of information it is difficult to obtain a clear picture of the current state of the environment in Afghanistan. The lack of systematic observation of rivers, forests, wildlife, lands, climate and atmospheric conditions in the past prevents comparison of present conditions to the situation 5, 10 or even 30 years ago. There is much uncertainty about the sources of environmental pollution, its extent and transfer as well as linkages to public health and diseases. Little is known about the scope of erosion and contamination of land, as well as their economic consequences. Without sufficient data it is difficult to predict

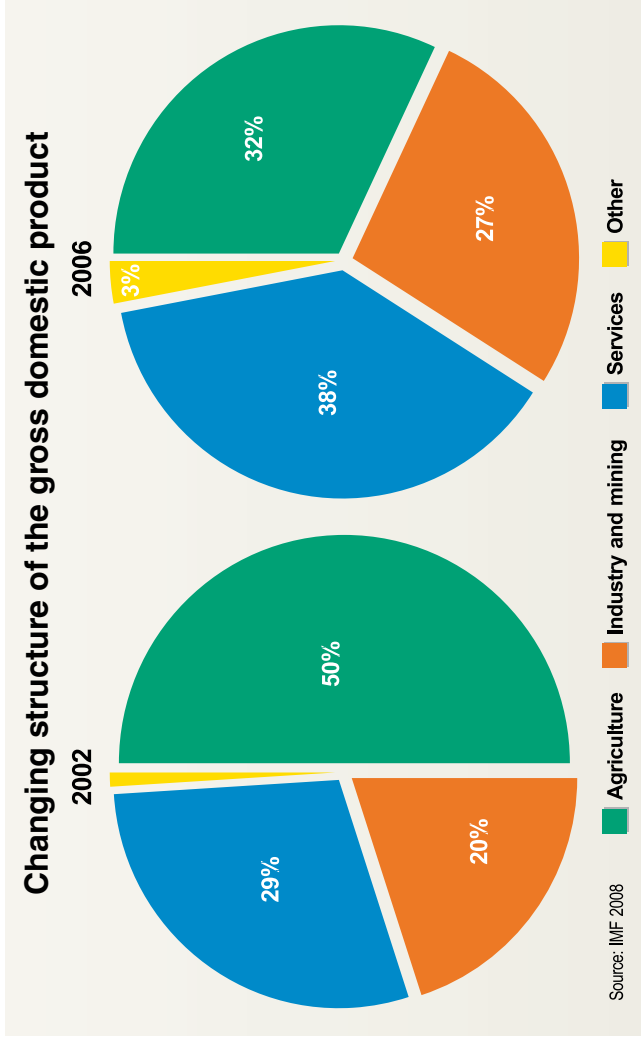
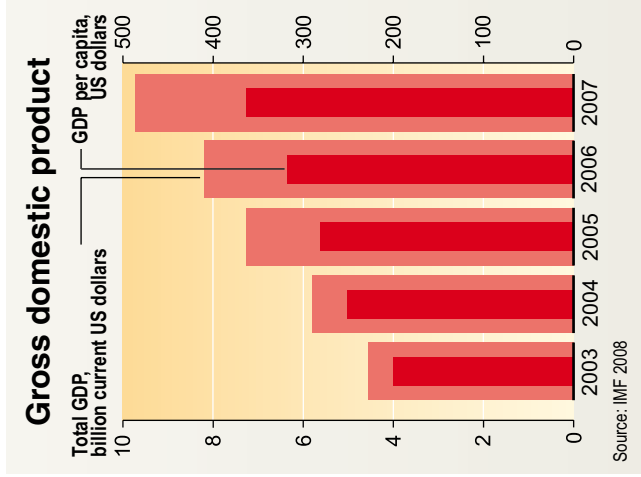
major floods, droughts and other natural hazards. Assessments of the quantity and quality of surface and ground water are varied and generally out of date. The need for data collection and exchange is consequently a major priority for effective environmental management.

With better knowledge and understanding of environmental conditions, and with careful planning and targeted implementation, it should be possible to overcome current socio-economic and environmental problems, and lay the foundations for a prosperous, peaceful Afghanistan. Putting the country back on a path towards sustainable development will nevertheless be an enormous challenge. Traditional systems for managing natural resources and existing strategies for adaptation and mitigation have been damaged by past and ongoing conflict, population pressure, the collapse of the rural economy, self-centred control by local groups, and the breakdown of law and order. To establish a sustainable development agenda, a community-based approach to natural resources is needed. Otherwise the current trend of environmental degradation may lead the country deeper into poverty and dependence on international aid, pushing the people of Afghanistan further into the abyss of human insecurity, social conflict and misery.

### Geography, economy and population

Afghanistan is a semi-arid land-locked country in the centre of Asia, covering an area of about 652 000 square kilometres. It extends about 1 300 kilometres from southwest to northeast, and about 600 kilometres from northwest to southeast. The country's climate is continental, with big differences in temperature from day to night, from one season or region to the next, ranging from 20–45°C in summer in the lowlands to minus 20–40°C in winter in the highlands. Severe, long-lasting droughts, such as the one in 1999–2001, have major impacts on the environment and society. In spring late frost affects agriculture (mainly fruit production), while rising temperatures cause flooding and increase the vulnerability of crops to natural disasters.





The overall average annual rainfall of about 250 millimetres conceals stark variations between different parts of the country, from 1 200 millimetres in the higher altitudes of the northeast to only 60 millimetres in the southwest. Annual evaporation varies from relatively low in the Hindu-Kush Mountains (900–1 200 mm) to high (1 400–1 800 mm) in the hot arid plains of the north and south. Due to its mountainous relief and the convergence of several climate systems, Afghanistan boasts an impressive diversity of ecosystems, land cover and water sources. Geographical features and the distribution of the country's natural resources are reflected in the specialization of economic activities: crop cultivation, livestock grazing, forest products and minerals.

Afghanistan has a wide range of neighbours, with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to the north; China

to the northeast; Pakistan to the east and south, and Iran to the west. Relationships with them and the broader global community largely determine the current and future use of national and transboundary natural resources, as well as the effectiveness of any response to common environmental challenges and hazards.

Afghanistan's economic outlook has improved since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Gross domestic product (GDP) has grown at a rate of 11 per cent since 2002, although in 2006–7, real economic growth was lower, about 7.5 per cent, which is nevertheless high for the region. Growth is largely due to reconstruction efforts supported by development assistance and recovery in the agricultural sector. Agriculture (32%) and services (38%) are the main contributors to Afghanistan's GDP. According to the International Monetary Fund, the opium sector represents about

40–50 per cent of GDP (as an illegal activity it does not register in economic calculations, but it has a significant overall impact on income and purchasing power). There are no large industries in the country but many small and medium enterprises. In particular the number of small shops is increasing.

During the fighting and period of severe drought (1990s–2005) some five million Afghans left the country because of insecurity and constrained livelihoods. Another five million were internally displaced. Most of the refugees were forced to live in Pakistan (3 million) or Iran (1.5 million). After the Interim Government was established, introducing relative stability, these refugees began to return home. More than three million Afghans have now returned, but in 2007 a significant number were still in host countries – Pakistan (two million) and Iran (900 000).