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A Decade of Afghans Improving Their Lives

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May 2012

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IDA Document D-4606

Log: H 12-000591

INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENSE ANALYSES
4850 Mark Center Drive
Alexandria, Virginia
22311-1882



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About this Publication

This work was conducted by the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) under contract DASW01-04-C-0003, CRP C8099 "Transition & Withdrawal," for the Institute for Defense Analyses. The views, opinions, and findings should not be construed as representing the official position of either the Department of Defense or the sponsoring organization.

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IDA Document D-4606

**A Decade of
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Executive Summary

Since 2001, Afghans have seized the benefits of modernity to dramatically improve their lives. They are enrolling their children in schools in record numbers. They are taking advantage of public health clinics, which is reducing the death rates of mothers in childbirth, of newborns, and of children younger than five years old. It is also dramatically increasing life expectancy across Afghanistan. Afghans are incorporating mobile phones into daily life, giving them a new freedom of communication. They are acquiring motorcycles and cars in record numbers to take advantage of the rebuilt roads, giving them freedom of mobility.

Individual Afghans have seized on these improvements despite many obstacles. Insurgents oppose each of these improvements with violence directed against the Afghan people. The country's economy remains largely dependent on agriculture, providing little growth in jobs and family income, and too little income for the national government. Afghans generally perceive the government institutions for security, Rule of Law, and service delivery as corrupt and ineffective.

This paper offers evidence from Afghan government statistics and polling data that Afghans have improved their lives during the last decade in the face of these obstacles. It does not attempt to explain why, offer lessons learned from the improvements during the last decade, or to make policy recommendations for future action in Afghanistan.

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1. Introduction

Since 2001, Afghans have seized the benefits of modernity to dramatically improve their lives. They are enrolling their children in schools in record numbers. They are taking advantage of public health clinics, which is reducing the death rates of mothers in childbirth, of newborns, and of children younger than five years old. It is also dramatically increasing life expectancy across Afghanistan. Afghans have incorporated mobile phones into daily life, giving them a new freedom of communication. They have acquired motorcycles and cars in record numbers to take advantage of the rebuilt roads, giving them freedom of mobility.

Individual Afghans have seized on these improvements despite many obstacles. Insurgents oppose each of these improvements with violence directed against the Afghan people. The country's economy remains largely dependent on agriculture, providing little growth in jobs and family income, and too little income for the national government. Afghans generally perceive the government institutions for security, Rule of Law, and service delivery as corrupt and ineffective.

This paper offers evidence from Afghan government statistics and polling data that Afghans have improved their lives during the last decade in the face of these obstacles. It does not attempt to explain why, offer lessons learned from the improvements during the last decade, or to make policy recommendations for future action in Afghanistan.

These improvements in education, health care, communications, and mobility have not overcome the big problems with Afghanistan's governance, nor have they reduced the seriousness of the threat from insurgents, nor led to better short-term economic outcomes. But these improvements are desirable in themselves, and it is important to acknowledge and protect them. Individual Afghans have chosen to risk their own well-being and the security of their families for these benefits. No one should doubt their willingness to take risks to keep them.

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2. Dramatic Increases in School Enrollment

During the last decade, Afghans have increasingly enrolled their children in GIROA schools—approximately 1M students (with virtually no girls) in 2001 to approximately 8M students (with about 37% girls) in 2011.¹ The Afghan Ministry of Education (MoEd), which provides the statistics, reports, “Demand for education has continually exceeded expectations and the supply.” Sarah Chayes, author and head of an Afghan non-governmental organization (NGO), has said, “Afghans are almost universally enthusiastic about educating their children.” TAF polling in 2011 reports that 70% of Afghans are satisfied with education for children, and 85% see GIROA doing a good job in education.²

Over the last decade GIROA has made a concerted effort to meet the people’s demand. There’s been a rapid growth in schools and teachers, and there are now teacher training centers in all provinces. More than 60% of GIROA civilian employees are in the MoEd. And approximately 60% of all of GIROA college-trained civilian employees are in the MoEd—a large commitment of this valuable human capital into public schooling.

Afghanistan has never had a period of universal student education, which makes the last decade’s surge even more remarkable. Figure 2-1 illustrates that from 1940 through 1960, total student enrollment never exceeded 0.2M. Enrollment peaked at approximately 1.2M in 1980, and then dropped off in the years of Soviet control. Figure 2-2 shows that under the Taliban, from the late 1990s to 2001, enrollment in primary school stayed at less than ~1M through 2001, at which point it surged. The surge from 2002 through 2010 (see Figure 2-3) shows large gains for girls and secondary school students (nominally 12–18 years of age). Today there are more students in secondary school alone than were enrolled in all grades in 2001.

¹ Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2005–2010, Central Statistics Organization of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

² Annual Polling, The Asia Foundation, 2006–2011.

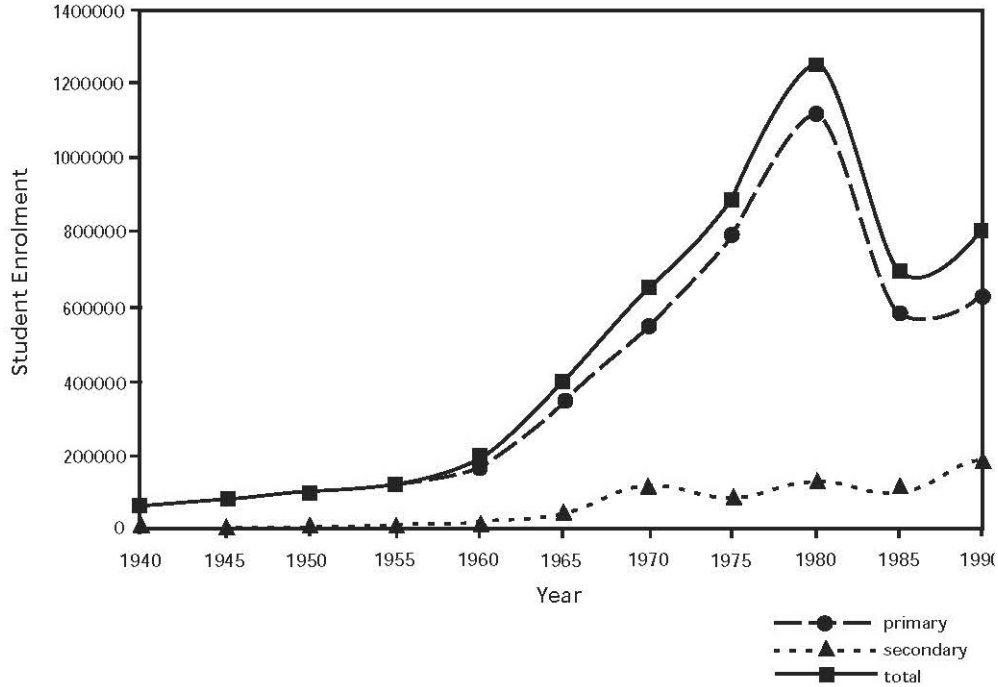


Figure 2-1. Growth of General Education in Afghanistan, 1940–1990³

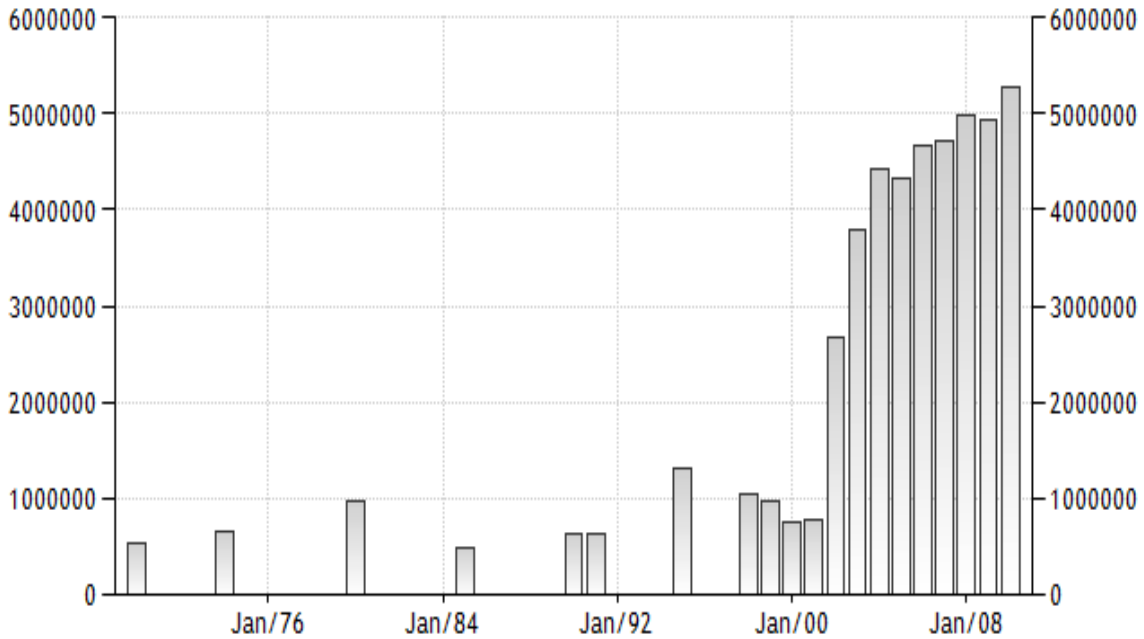


Figure 2-2. Growth of Primary Enrollment in Afghanistan, 1970–2010⁴

³ Said R. Samady, *Education and Afghan Society in the Twentieth Century* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, November 2001), p 20.

⁴ Trading Economics website, Primary education; pupils in Afghanistan customized data search, <www.tradingeconomics.com/afghanistan/primary-education-pupils-wb-data.html>.

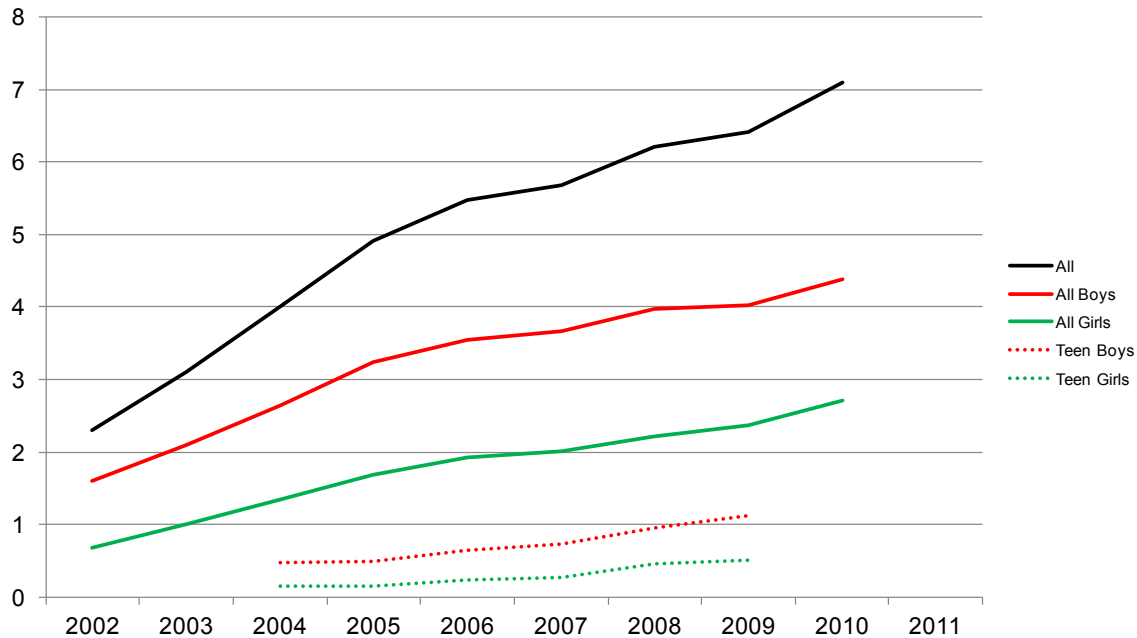


Figure 2-3. Growth in School Enrollment for Girls and Boys (in millions), 2002–2011⁵

The gains in school enrollment have not been uniform across all the provinces of Afghanistan. The Ministry of Education’s mid-2009 school survey showed that four Pashtun-majority provinces in the south—Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzghan, and Zabul—suffered major drops in enrollment during the prior year and had less than 18% of the total population in each province enrolled, compared to 20–37% for the other 30 provinces. As seen in Figure 2-4, by mid-2010, enrollment had increased in almost all the provinces, including the four in the south, though these still lagged behind. Several provinces were enrolling almost all of their school-age students (estimated at approximately 50% of the province population).

⁵ Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2005–2010, Central Statistics Organization of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

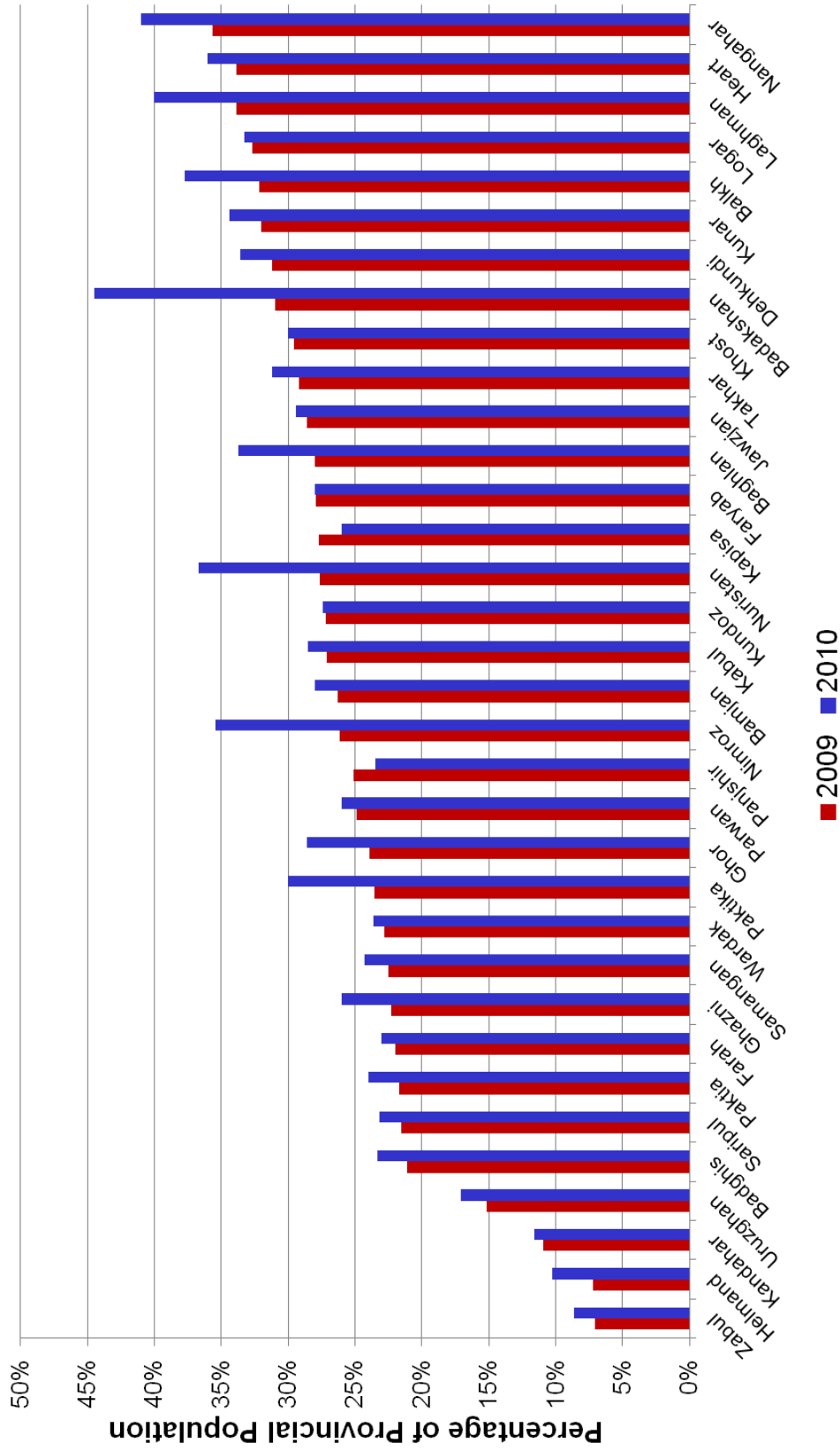


Figure 2-4. School Enrollment in Afghanistan by Province, 2009–2010⁶

⁶ Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2005–2010, Central Statistics Organization of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

All of these gains have occurred despite the violent insurgent opposition to schooling. For example, from January through August 2011, insurgents attacked students, staff, and schools about 600 times. The insurgents are opposed to girls in school and to schools teaching both boys and girls (even if they are not in the same classroom). The concern with this opposition is clear in the appeal to the Taliban in the Ulema Shura Declaration of 19 March 2009:

The Council calls upon the Taliban to allow the closed madrassas and schools to reopen for the Muslim children of Afghanistan. Children are involved neither in war nor in politics. Let them learn to move out of obscurity into the light. Closing down schools is a grave hostility against the Muslim people of Afghanistan. It is against the Holy Quran order that has allowed education. We are hoping for a positive response as this is the voice of the Council of Ulema, Ministry of Education and the entire nation.⁷

The increases in enrollment and the Ulema Shura Declaration reflect the will of the people, individually and collectively, to get education for their children in the face of Taliban opposition.

⁷ Text of Ulema Shura Declaration, Kabul, 19 March 2009. This text was obtained indirectly from Conrad Jennings, who received this document from Kandahari religious elders in March 2009, Kandahar City.

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3. Accessible Public Health Care: Revolution in Outcomes

The Afghan government moved quickly to support a country-wide public health care system. In 2002, the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) developed a strategy to deliver a basic package of health services (BPHS), with a focus on women and children. In 2003, the Ministry decided to contract out the delivery of BPHS to NGOs (currently in 31 provinces) with the Ministry itself delivering BPHS in three provinces. By 2011, there are about 10,000 small Health Posts (operating from the home of a community health worker) and almost 1,300 Health Sub-Centers or Basic Health Centers (facilities providing health care) in Afghanistan. Today, most of the Afghan public health facilities are run by NGOs, with the US Agency for International Development (USAID) paying a large part.

Afghans have embraced public health care with astonishingly good results. Table 3-1 shows maternal health care progress from 2002–2003 to 2010. Data from 2010 is from the Afghanistan Mortality Survey—a survey of about 48,000 women from about 22,000 households in Afghanistan.

Table 3-1. Maternal Healthcare Progress, 2002–2003 and 2010⁸

Indicators	2002–2003	2010
Mortality		
• Maternal (per 100,000 births)	1,600	327
• Under 5 (per 1,000 births)	172	97
• Infant (per 1,000 live births)	257	77
Modern contraceptive prevalence (%)	10	16
Total fertility per woman	6.3	5.1
Prenatal care coverage (%)	16	60
Skilled attendants at birth (% deliveries)	14	34

Notes: Data for 2002–2003 is from the UN-supported Reproductive Age Mortality Survey, 2002 and Statistics & Monitoring Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey. Data for 2010 is from the Afghanistan Mortality Survey conducted by USAID. Source: USAID, “Afghanistan Mortality Study,” accessed 1/6/2012

⁸ SIGAR, *10 Years of Reconstruction: 2001-2011* Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, (Arlington, VA: Quarterly Report to the US Congress, 30 January 2012).

The results of the 2010 survey show major drops in mortality for mothers, infants, and children younger than five. All of these are due, in part, to the greatly expanded use of skilled pre-natal care in both urban and rural areas, as shown in the comparison of various surveys shown in Figure 3-1. In the TAF 2011 poll, 57% of Afghans said they were satisfied with health care, and 68% saw GIRoA as doing a good job in health care.

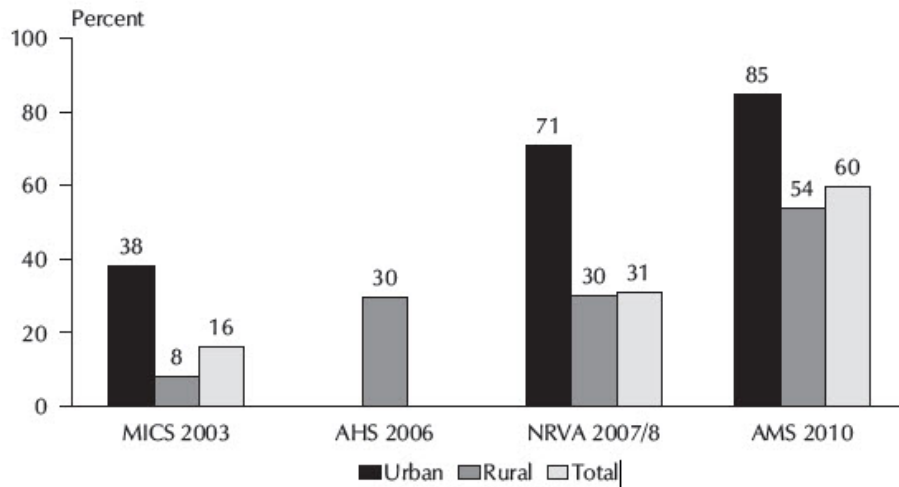


Figure 3-1. Trends in Antenatal Care from a Medically Skilled Provider in Afghanistan, 2003–2010⁹

A measure of the impact of the reduction in deaths in childbirth and in children younger than five is the increase in the life expectancy of a newborn Afghan—from 45–47 years a decade ago, to 62–65 years today.

These gains have been made despite threats and acts of violence. In response to a 2008 suicide attack in Kandahar Province, the MoPH put out a notice acknowledging this:

Although MoPH is an impartial organization and provides health care and services to all Afghans without any discrimination, its staff and clinics are targeted by opposition. Doctors are kidnapped and killed. This time, unfortunately, [a] suicide attack has taken lives of two doctors and one driver.¹⁰

More recently, the Minister of Public Health, in a speech to the 64th World Health Assembly in Geneva in May 2011 acknowledged the continued impact of insecurity:

⁹ “Afghanistan Mortality Survey 2010,” Afghan Public Health Institute, Ministry of Public Health, Kabul Afghanistan, November 2011. Note: AMS 2010 based on the last live birth in five-year period prior to the survey; NRVA 2007/8 and MICS 2003 based on last live birth in the two years prior to the survey; AHS based on the last live birth to currently married women in the two years prior to the survey.

¹⁰ “Three Staff Of Ministry Of Public Health And WHO Killed By A Suicide Attack,” Ministry of Public Health, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan website, 14 Sept 2008 <<http://moph.gov.af/en/news/290>>.

Insecurity in parts of the country remains a challenge that affects access to health care especially for women and children. While insecurity undermines our outreach to the population and their access to the health care, delivering health care in insecure areas provides a sense of responsiveness...which in turn contributes to stability and peace.¹¹

The Taliban has reason to feel threatened by the public health care system and to oppose it with threats and acts of violence. These health facilities are extensions of GIRoA services that the people welcome. The Taliban oppose the employment of Afghan women as health care workers in these facilities. And they could view these facilities as the locus for spying on the Taliban by ISAF and Afghanistan National Security Forces.

Afghan women's access to health care is impacted by fears about security. In the 2010 Afghan Mortality Survey, approximately 13–14% of women in rural areas gave *concern for security* as the reason for not seeking pre-natal care or for not delivering in a health facility, and approximately 32% of them gave the same reason for not accessing health care for themselves when they felt sick.

The significant reductions in mortality for women in child birth, for babies, and for young children reflects the determination of individual Afghans to get better health care for pregnant women and their children in the face of Taliban threats and attacks.

¹¹ “Speech of Minister of Public Health, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan at 64th World Health Assembly, Geneva, May 17, 2011,” Ministry of Public Health, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan website, 23 May 2011 <<http://moph.gov.af/en/news/1364>>.

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4. Freedom of Communication

Shortly after the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the new Afghan government enabled the private sector to offer new kinds of communications and information systems. It licensed the first cell phone provider in November 2002—today there are four. It licensed the first Internet provider in January 2003—today there are seven.

Afghans have been selective with the information and communications systems in which they have invested (see Figure 4-1). Cell phone access quickly rose to 67% of households in 2011. But computers are available in less than 10% of households. And the number of households with televisions has increased only slightly during the last several years. As seen in Figure 4-2, based on the TAF 2011 poll, texting has become increasingly common and important. By 2010, texting had become a more important source of information than newspapers or magazines, though still less important than either TV or radio.

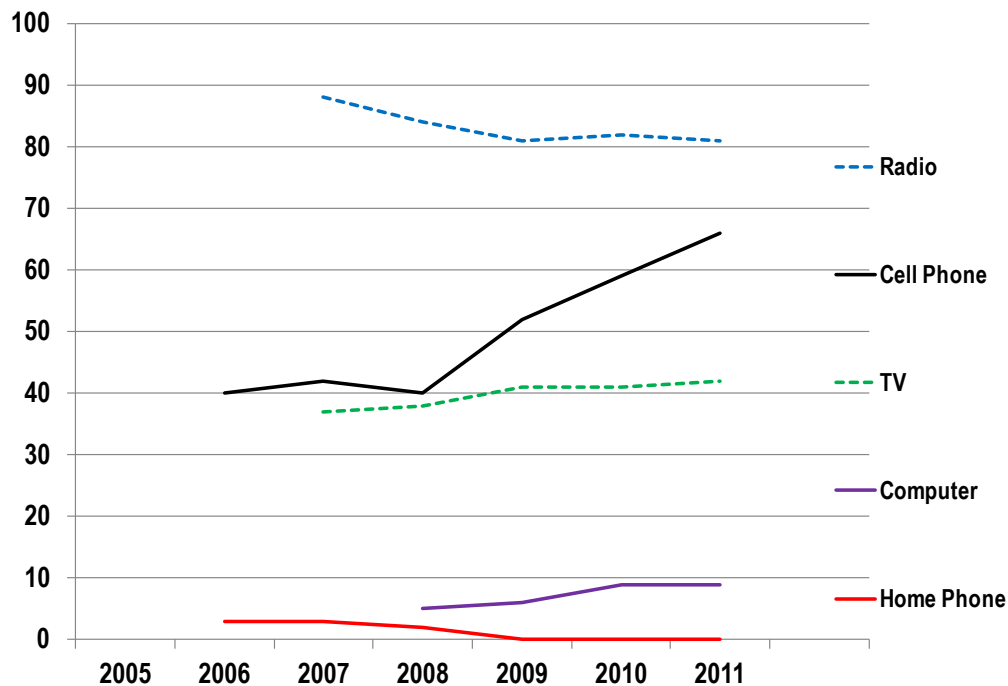


Figure 4-1. Percentage of Afghan Families with Information and Communication Systems, 2006–2011¹²

¹² Data from Annual Polling courtesy of The Asia Foundation, 2006–2011.

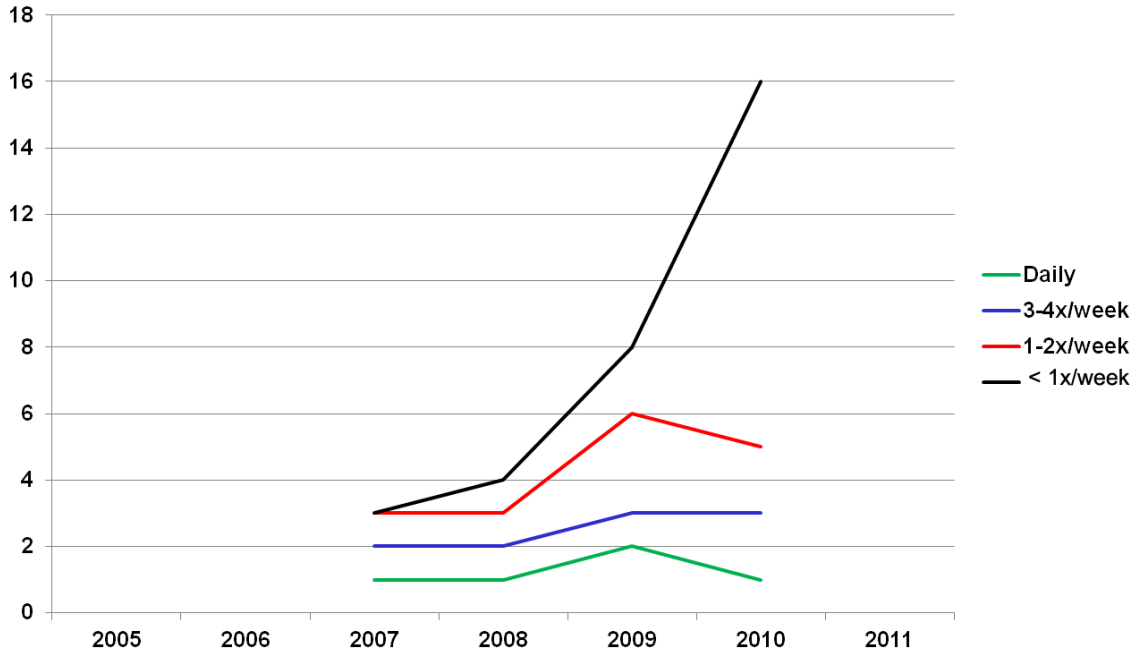


Figure 4-2. Frequency of Texting via Mobile Phone, 2007–2010¹³

The Afghan government’s actions in this area have been recognized internationally. In 2011, at the annual Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, GIRA was given the Annual Leadership Award, with the following citation:

In just ten years the Afghan government has taken a country with no mobile infrastructure to a point where 80% of the population is now covered by the telecommunications networks. It has licensed four GSM [mobile phone] operators and has created an environment of healthy, transparent competition and low-cost, broad accessibility. By leading this transformation, Afghanistan’s government is driving economic growth; the mobile industry now directly employs more than 50,000 people, and accounts for 12% of all government revenues. Telecommunications has become the single largest source of foreign investment, bringing more than \$1.2B into the national economy.¹⁴

People’s lives are changing now that they have a more flexible way to communicate. The US Institute for Peace Report in November 2010 on cell phone use in Afghanistan saw this happening: “Mobile money transfer applications have proved to be a powerful mechanism for helping to reduce corruption, foster security sector reforms, and promote economic development.”¹⁵

¹³ Data from Annual Polling courtesy of The Asia Foundation, 2006–2011.

¹⁴ “The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Wins GSMA Government Leadership Award,” 15 February 2011, GSMA website, <www.gsmworld.com/newsroom/press-releases/2011/6048.html>.

¹⁵ Sheldon Himelfarb with contributions from Cecilia Paradi-Guilford, “Can You Help Me Now? Mobile Phones and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan,” US Institute of Peace Special Report, November 2010.

This new freedom of communication has been achieved despite the Taliban being threatened by it and violently opposing it. In 2008, the Taliban attacked 10 cell phone towers in southern Afghanistan, shutting down service to 250,000 people. In many provinces today, mobile providers are coerced to switch off service at night. Reports have described the Taliban's opposition to mobile phones as due to them being used by their enemies to track their communications.

The major increase in Afghan communication freedom reflects an economic decision by individual Afghans to buy (or get shared access to) a cell phone, despite the Taliban's efforts to disrupt its use.

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5. Freedom of Mobility

Since 2002, the 2000-mile Ring Road has been rebuilt by funds from the United States, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Iran, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the Islamic Development Bank. About 50% of the US development funds in Afghanistan (USAID funds and DoD's Commanders Emergency Response Program) have been spent on transportation projects. Beyond re-building the Ring Road, much of these funds have been spent on roads connecting provincial and district centers to the Ring Road and to each other.

As Figure 5-1 shows, the number of private vehicles in Afghanistan has increased significantly during the last decade. In 2001, less than one in ten households had access to "wheels." In the 2010 Afghan Mortality Survey, approximately one third of households reported having a motorcycle, car, or truck. In the 2011 TAF polling, approximately half of households report having a motorcycle or car. Despite the sizable difference between one third and one half (and no basis yet for resolving the difference), both figures are much greater than the 2001 figure of less than one in ten. This is a sizable increase in access to private vehicles, but it isn't evidence of their use.

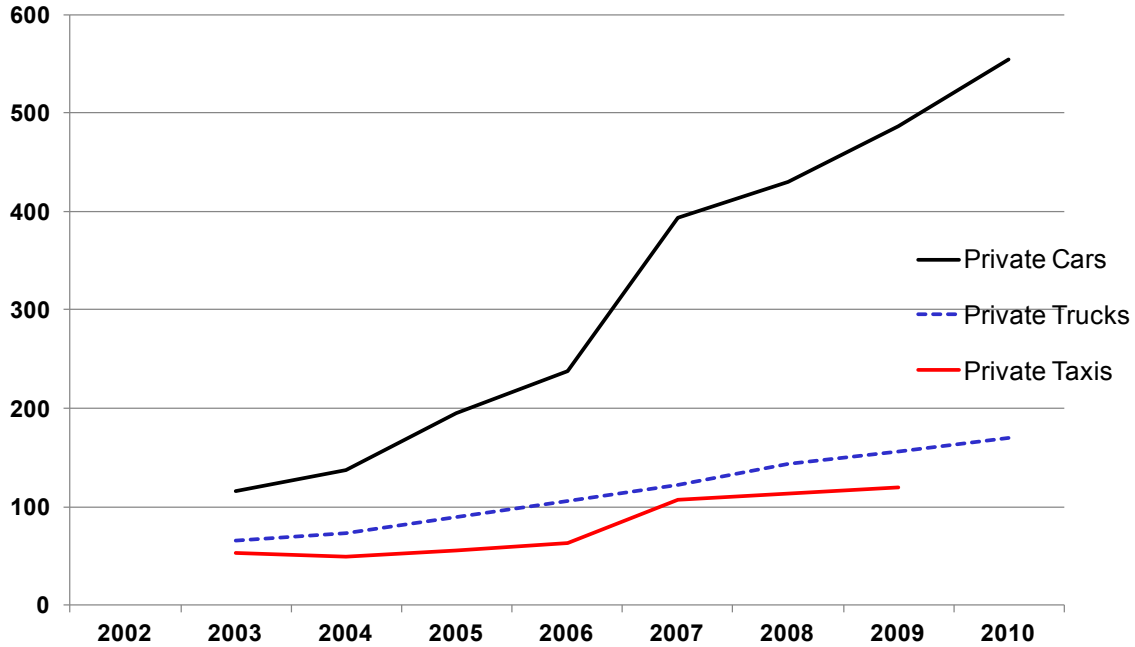


Figure 5-1. Private Vehicles in Afghanistan (in thousands), 2003–2010¹⁶

There are no direct measures of the use of vehicles by Afghans on their roads, but there is indirect evidence of a significant increase in use. Figure 5-2 shows two indirect measures. One is the Afghan Ministry of Transportation report on vehicle accidents. Shown in this figure in the solid lines are the accidents reported—excluding Kabul—with major increases evident during the last several years. The dotted line in the figure shows the petroleum imports reported by the Ministry of Energy—again with major increases during the last several years. According to GIRoA reports, little of this petroleum is used for power generation. So the rise in accidents and petroleum imports suggests more traffic and more use of the larger number of private vehicles.

¹⁶ Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2005–2010, Central Statistics Organization of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

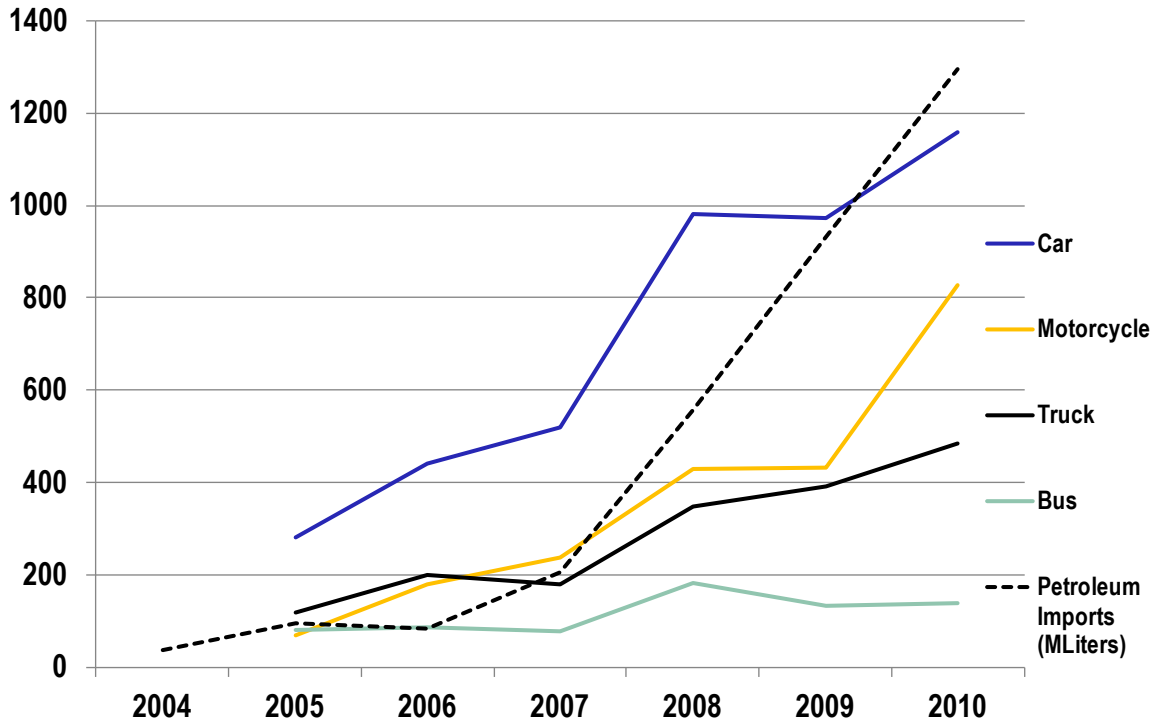


Figure 5-2. Vehicle Accidents (excluding Kabul) and Petroleum Imports in Afghanistan¹⁷

The Taliban has waged a major campaign to deny freedom of mobility. This has involved using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) buried in the roads used to connect district and provincial capitals and to bring goods from villages to markets. These IED attacks have killed Afghans as well as ISAF personnel. About 60% of all the Afghans killed by the Taliban in 2011 were killed by IEDs. So it is by exercising their freedom of mobility, to move beyond their local area, that the majority of Afghans are killed by the Taliban.

¹⁷ Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2005–2010, Central Statistics Organization of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

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6. Sustaining the Improvements after 2014

The improvements in the lives of Afghans during the past decade are a good-news story. Does it matter that they have gotten so little attention? Yes. Sustaining these improvements after 2014 will require money and public support.

The international community (mainly NATO) has committed to provide the funds needed to sustain the security forces—namely the Afghan National Army and Police. Reports from the recent NATO meeting said that approximately \$4B annually is needed, with GIRoA expected to pay about \$0.5B of that.

But no international community commitment exists to continue to pay teachers' salaries. The shortfall here can be estimated as between the approximately \$0.6B per year currently paid for teachers' salaries by the international community, and the approximately \$0.3B that would be needed to pay 170,000 teachers at \$150 per month.

And no international community commitment exists for the funds to operate and maintain these systems. Based on a World Bank Report, the estimated annual costs (calculated for 2014) for operations and maintenance are \$235M for education, \$77M for public health, and \$394M for mobility.¹⁸ (In recent years, the figure of \$200M has been used as the minimum for maintaining the Ring Road.)

Unless the American people are made aware of the major gains in the lives of Afghans—a real legacy of the war—and the risks that individual Afghans have taken for them, Americans can hardly be expected to support them after the 2014 drawdown of US forces.

¹⁸ “Transition in Afghanistan: Looking Beyond 2014,” The World Bank and the Islamic republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Finance, 21 November 2011.

Postscript

Two decades ago, when the Soviets left Afghanistan, the *Time* magazine image of the “Afghan man” would have been an old illiterate man, with an AK-47 in each hand, riding on a horse.

Today the image would be better portrayed by a middle-aged, semi-literate man, with an AK-47 in one hand and a cell phone in the other, driving a motorcycle or a car.

Two decades from now, could it be a young literate man, with the latest Apple device in one hand, and a tenth generation smart phone in the other, sitting at a desk?

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.				
1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YY) May 2012	2. REPORT TYPE Document, Draft Final	3. DATES COVERED (From - To) February 2011–May 2012		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <i>A Decade of Afghans Improving Their Lives</i>		5a. CONTRACT NO. DASW01-04-C-0003		
		5b. GRANT NO.		
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NO(S).		
6. AUTHOR(S) Joel B. Resnick, Jack A. Jackson		5d. PROJECT NO.		
		5e. TASK NO. C8099		
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Joint Advanced Warfighting Division (JAWP or JAWD) Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) 4850 Mark Center Drive Alexandria, VA 22311-1882		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NO. IDA Document D-4606 Log no. H 12-000591		
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) 4850 Mark Center Drive Alexandria, VA 22311-1882		10. SPONSOR'S / MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) IDA		
		11. SPONSOR'S / MONITOR'S REPORT NO(S).		
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.				
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES (U)				
14. ABSTRACT Since 2001, Afghans have seized the benefits of modernity to dramatically improve their lives in healthcare, education, mobility and communication despite many obstacles. Insurgents oppose each of these improvements with violence directed against the Afghan people. The country's economy remains largely dependent on agriculture, providing little growth in jobs and family income, and too little income for the national government. Based on evidence from Afghan government statistics and polling data, the paper asserts that Afghans have improved their lives during the last decade in the face of these obstacles. It does not attempt to explain why, offer lessons learned from the improvements during the last decade, or to make policy recommendations for future action in Afghanistan.				
15. SUBJECT TERMS Afghanistan, education, healthcare, health care, communication, cell phone use, mobility				
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:		17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NO. OF PAGES 38	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Joel B. Resnick
				19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include Area Code) jresnick@ida.org
a. REPORT U	b. ABSTRACT U	c. THIS PAGE U		

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