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REVIEW ARTICLE

Analysis of the Human Development Index Trend in Afghanistan from 2000 to 2022

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ABSTRACT

This study employs a qualitative-documentary methodology with an analytical-descriptive approach to examine the trajectory of the Human Development Index (HDI) trend in Afghanistan from 2000 to 2022. The research defines human development through the HDI, considering its core dimensions: life expectancy, expected years of schooling, and standard of living (GNI). The results indicate that, after a period of moderate positive growth, Afghanistan's HDI has experienced a declining trend in recent years. Furthermore, an analysis of the Gender Development Index (GDI) shows that while there has been some relative improvement in women's development over the past decade, gender disparities remain, with men continuing to exhibit higher levels of development. Given the observed fluctuations in HDI, this study emphasizes the need for sustainable policy interventions that focus on long-term development and targeted support for vulnerable groups. The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, aiding the formulation of comprehensive and evidence-based strategies to enhance human development in Afghanistan.

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Introduction

Human development discussions are among the most significant and challenging socio-economic issues, receiving considerable attention from the United Nations to promote global development. Human capital development not only serves as a fundamental driver of sustainable growth but also accelerates economic expansion. Prior to the 1970s, per capita income was the primary measure of a country's level of development. However, as it failed to encompass all essential aspects of life, the Human Development Index (HDI) was introduced as a more comprehensive indicator.

The Human Development Index (HDI), emphasizing the enhancement of quality of life, extends beyond per capita income by systematically incorporating three fundamental dimensions: capabilities, education and training, and health status. These dimensions collectively encompass the level of knowledge, health standards, and overall standard of living (Sadeghi, 2007).

Among the dimensions of human development, education is regarded as the most effective means of overcoming absolute poverty. Consequently, nations that prioritize skill acquisition over general education and literacy often experience a decline in overall economic returns. Literacy, in a broader sense, yields significant societal benefits, as education directly enhances family nutrition and

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indirectly contributes to the reduction of child mortality rates (Rao, 1950).

The study of human development index (HDI) in Afghanistan is a key priority for policymakers in the pursuit of sustainable development. The simultaneous promotion of efficiency and equity plays a crucial role in reducing developmental inequalities. A comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon through internationally recognized indicators provides valuable insights for policymakers and governmental institutions. Accordingly, this research aims to critically analyze human development in Afghanistan by examining its fundamental indicators.

The Concept of Human Development and Its Indicators

Human development is inspired by and owes much to Amartya Sen's "Capabilities" approach, which is a capacity-building framework focused on fostering individual talents (Behrami, 2012). However, critics such as Desgasper have argued that Sen's theory lacks an ethical dimension, asserting that it fails to address the needs of individuals who are disabled, vulnerable, or otherwise possess human traits that cannot be converted into economic resources (Nederveen, 1946; pp. 45-70). In fact, the concept of human development, rooted in human capital theory, forms part of the neoclassical economic paradigm. With the hypothesis that "the individual is the unit of human development," it reflects the intellectual foundations of liberalism (Griffin, 1996). In this approach, the primary focus of human development is the realization of individuals' full potential and the ability to achieve what they are capable of (HDR, 1994; HDR, 2023).

Human development, due to its combination of elements such as productivity, equity, sustainability, and empowerment, can serve as a bridge between growth and justice, as a higher degree of human equality is likely to foster faster growth (Nederveen, 1946; pp. 165-177). Human development, through its policies and mechanisms, seeks to enhance well-being, but if these policies are not tailored to the specific human context, they may result in catastrophic consequences. For example, welfare expenditures focused on heavy investment in human resources and public interventions aimed at supply-driven education, without considering demand-driven approaches, could potentially decrease the literacy rates among girls relative to boys. Consequently, this would increase the number of illiterate women and mothers marginalized from society, leading to a rise in fertility rates and ultimately exacerbating poverty, especially the "feminization of poverty" (Banerjee, 2016; pp. 115).

The United Nations, in its effort to analyze and summarize the concept of human development, developed a framework called the Human Development Index (HDI), which includes the dimensions of health, education, and standard of living, or gross national income. These dimensions reflect the social and economic well-being of a society, effectively representing life expectancy, adult literacy rates, and adequate living standards. Over time, with advancements in empirical observations, additional indices such as the Adjusted Human Development Index, Gender Development Index, Gender Inequality Index, and Empowerment Index were also formulated and introduced by the UNDP.

The Human Development Index (HDI) was pioneered by Mahbub ul Haq, a Pakistani economist, who is recognized as the "Father of Human Development[1].Introduced in 1990, the HDI was conceived as an effective tool for measuring well-being and served as an alternative to income-based indicators that dominated the 1980s (Ghatak, 1993; 15-35). Since its inception, the HDI has been subject to criticism regarding the selection of its components, the methodology used for its calculation, and the determination of the weights for its dimensions, as well as the high correlation among the composite indices (Sagar, 1997; Klugman, 2011).

The measurement of education within the Human Development Index, alongside other dimensions and components, has undergone significant changes. Research conducted by the UNDP reveals that the use of school enrollment rates as an indicator of educational level was criticized for underestimating the importance of the actual learning process. Consequently, the educational completion rate was adopted as a more accurate measure. With the focus of the Millennium Development Goals on skills and competencies, the emphasis in educational measurement shifted toward assessing the real progress in learning, with quality and educational outcomes being prioritized over enrollment and completion rates (Kovacevic, 2010).

Although the health level of a society is measured using life expectancy, this indicator does not fully capture the public health situation. As a result, "healthy life expectancy" was introduced as a replacement, though it has not yet been widely applied due to data limitations. Gross National Income (GNI) or standard of living is considered the third component, reflecting control over resources. However, this aspect has been criticized by scholars due to the lack of data on factors such as access to natural resources, leisure time, and other hidden costs, as well as the neglect of inequalities or distribution. Despite these limitations,

[1] For the calculation of the Human Development ndex (HDI), refer to the article by (Mehlberg, 2001).

the Human Development Index remains a more comprehensive measure compared to traditional indices (Bagolin, 2008).

The method of measuring the Human Development Index (HDI) involves calculating all dimensions with equal weight in an arithmetic manner. However, the weights assigned to each of these dimensions are uniformly applied across all countries (UNDP, 2021). Researchers have consistently suggested that the determination and allocation of weights should vary according to the specific region, and that using a geometric mean instead of an arithmetic one would reduce the potential for substitution. The most recent method introduced is the Displaced Idea approach. This method posits that by placing greater emphasis on dimensions with lower values, a more balanced development trajectory can be outlined for the near future (Nathan, 2008).

Research Methodology

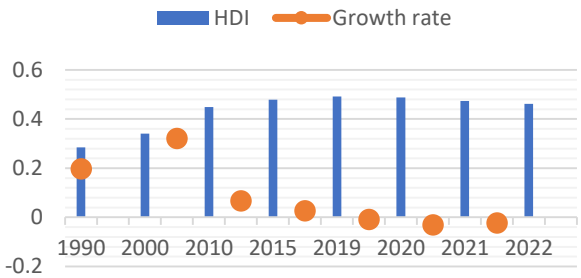
This review study examines the status of human development in Afghanistan by analyzing recent scientific literature, reports from reputable international organizations, and case studies related to the Human Development Index. The data collection was conducted using sources such as Google Scholar, the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Afghanistan Statistics and Information Authority. Keywords such as human development, Human Development Index, per capita income, gender-related human development, and education were used to search for relevant articles and resources over the past 40 years. The studies were selected based on their relevance to Afghanistan, particularly focusing on the significance, challenges, and trends in development indicators.

The Human Development Index2 (HDI) in Afghanistan

The Human Development Index (HDI) is one of the most significant indicators of development, derived through the arithmetic mean of weighted dimensions (UNDP, 2023). The trend of the HDI in Afghanistan, as presented in Figure 1, shows that despite the low level of human development in Afghanistan up to 2019, there was growth, and an observable improvement in the situation. However, in the last three years, particularly in 2022, this trend has been declining, exhibiting a decrease in growth.

The HDI is a numerical value ranging from 0 to 1, where a value closer to 1 indicates a higher level of human development, implying a society with greater well-being. The statistical results for this index in Afghanistan indicate that, overall, it has remained below 50%. In the first decade of the 2000s, Afghanistan experienced its highest growth rate of 32%, demonstrating clear improvement. It is important to note that the highest level of human development in Afghanistan was achieved in 2019. Despite the positive trend from 2000 to 2020, the index exhibited a declining trajectory from 2020 to 2022. Specifically, in 2021, Afghanistan ranked 181st in the HDI, while in 2022, it ranked 182nd.

Figure (1) HDI Trend in Afghanistan



Source: UNDP, 2023

The Trend of the Dimensions of the Human Development Index (HDI)

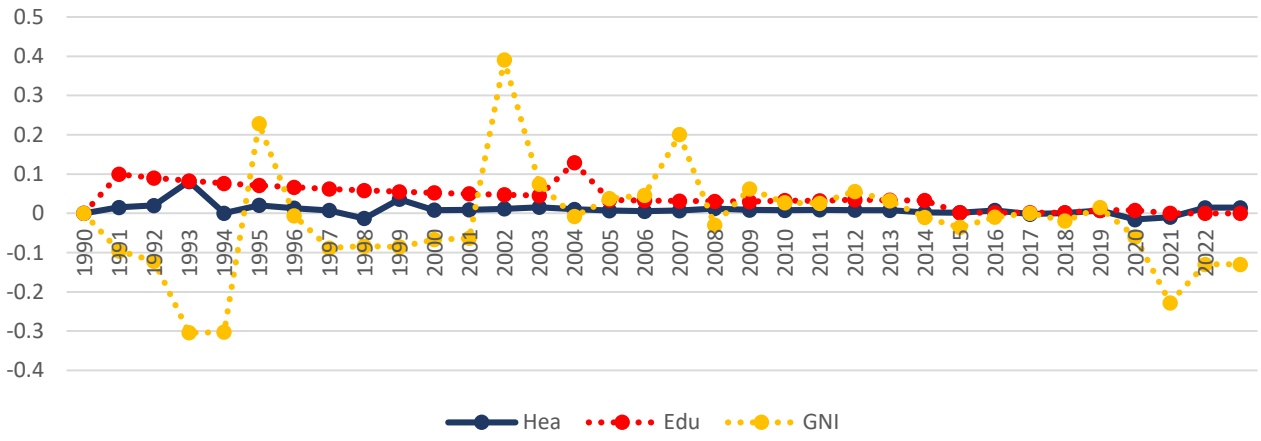
Figure 2, which illustrates the growth rate of the dimensions of the Human Development Index in Afghanistan, reflects a lack of significant progress in human development. Upon examining the trends in the dimensions of human development, it is observed that the standard of living, or Gross National Income (GNI), which represents income or livelihood, has experienced more substantial growth and greater volatility compared to other dimensions of the index. Notably, this indicator exhibited a negative trend prior to the republican period, but upon the commencement of the republican era, it immediately shifted to a positive trajectory, marked by considerable fluctuations.

[2] The HDI of countries is divided into 5 groups:

Group 1: Countries with high equality in human development achievements between women and men (with a difference of less than 2.5%). Group 2: Countries with moderate to high equality (with a deviation of 2.5%-5%). Group 3: Countries with moderate equality (with a deviation of 5%-7.5%). Group: Countries with moderate to low equality (with a deviation of 7.5%-10%). Group: Countries with low equality or complete inequality (with an absolute deviation of 10%).

During the latter half of the republican era, all dimensions showed a concurrent upward trend, as an increase in income led to improvements in education and health. While income growth can indeed contribute to human development by enhancing education and health, the significant fluctuations in income have not consistently accelerated the positive or negative growth of the other dimensions. In this context, the health index remains lower than both the education and income indices.

Figure (2) Growth rate of indices



Source: UNDP, 2024

Based on the rankings of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Afghanistan has consistently been categorized as a country with low human development throughout the years assessed.

Gender Differences in Human Development in Afghanistan

Despite the criticisms directed at the Human Development Index (HDI), this index continues to be regarded as a valid and appropriate measure at the global level and by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Reports and statistics based on this index are published annually and are widely used (Sadeghi, 2007). Since the HDI fails to explain the inequality of achievements between women and men in development, indicators such as the Gender Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Inequality Index (GII) have been introduced.

This section of the research focuses on the GDI to examine the relative development status of women and men. The GDI is measured on a scale from 0 to 1, with values closer to 0 indicating a greater development gap between women and men (Dijkstra, 2002). The GDI is the result of the ratio between the human development index of women and men, requiring the separate calculation of the HDI for both women and men before computing the GDI. All statistical calculations are available on the UNDP website.

Table 1 presents the results of the GDI calculations for the past twelve years. The data clearly indicates that gender disparities in Afghanistan over the last twelve years have been relatively moderate. Although men's development level has been higher than that of women throughout the decade, the growth rate of women's development has exceeded that of men from 2012 to 2021. However, the past three years (2020, 2021, and 2022) have shown a declining trend in women's developmental achievements.

Table (1) HDI and GDI 2000-2022

Year	HDI_f	HDI_m	HDI	GDI	Standard of Living	Education	Health		
					GNI (PPP)	Expected Years of Schooling	Long And Healthy Life	growth rate	growth rate 2000-2022
1990	-	-	0.284	-	3115.67	45.967 2.9364 3115.67	2.9364 2.9364 3115.67	19.7%	20.70%
2000	-	-	0.34	-	1047.343	5.8564	55.298	32.05%	
2010	0.3533	0.5167	0.449	0.684	2006.789	9.1808	60.851		
2011	0.3527	0.5258	0.457	0.671	2059.012	9.4731	61.419		

2012	0.3423	0.5397	0.467	0.634	2174.351	9.8036	61.923	2.89%	
2012	0.3645	0.5469	0.475	0.667	2244.209	10.1341	62.417		
2014	0.3636	0.5531	0.48	0.657	2222.094	10.4646	62.545		
2015	0.3752	0.55	0.479	0.682	2142.689	10.4829	62.659		
2016	0.3781	0.5523	0.483	0.685	2122.363	10.5012	63.136		
2017	0.382	0.4588	0.485	0.696	2123.676	10.5195	63.016		
2018	0.3838	0.5478	0.486	0.701	2082.114	10.5378	63.081		
2019	0.3871	0.5534	0.492	0.7	2112.986	10.6212	63.565		
2020	0.3813	0.5487	0.488	0.695	1986.804	10.7053	62.575		
2021	0.3791	0.5285	0.473	0.717	1534.135	10.7053	61.982		
2022	0.3324	0.5341	0.462	0.622	1335.206	10.7053	62.879		

Source: HDR, 2023

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite the widespread global acceptance of the Human Development Index (HDI), it continues to face extensive criticism. The findings of this study indicate that Afghanistan ranks among the lowest in terms of HDI. While there was positive growth and an improving trend until 2019, the trajectory has shifted to a downward and negative trend after 2020. This decline in human development may be influenced by the prevailing political, social, and economic changes, which have led to a shift in Afghanistan's rank from 181st to 182nd.

The findings, in line with previous studies, show that the income dimension is more volatile than other dimensions. Over the long term, this volatility has contributed to improvements in health and education. However, this progress has not been stable, and the lack of fundamental support for the education and health sectors has led to significant challenges in the development of these dimensions. A further key finding is that the health dimension in Afghanistan remains at its lowest level. This could be due to insufficient healthcare services for the general population and vulnerable groups, as well as a shortage of qualified healthcare professionals.

One of the important aspects of this study is the examination of the Gender Development Index (GDI), which indicates that the achievements or development of men are higher than those of women, with a noticeable gap of approximately 30-45% in statistical results. Despite this discrepancy, the development of women has experienced a rapid growth rate, especially after 2012, and continued until 2021. The halt in this pace may be attributed to the educational and employment restrictions faced by women. The lack of women's participation in economic, social, and educational activities in recent years has raised widespread concerns regarding human development and progress, which aligns with the findings of other studies. The results confirm that the absence of sustainable policies has impeded the continuity of women's relative development. Moreover, Dijkstra (2000) in his research on factors influencing gender gaps asserts that policies and sustained social support can reduce this gap.

The unavailability of human development data by province has made it difficult to assess and analyze this index effectively. Additionally, the lack of interest and research by scholars on human rights and legal issues has diminished the importance of this subject, and the insufficient exploration of these topics presents a significant challenge to advancing human development research. Given the findings, it is recommended that future research focus on adjusting the weight of the dimensions in calculating development indicators based on the cultural and social context. Additionally, the study advises policymakers to provide sustainable support while considering the indicators of equitable human development.

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