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Ten Investments to Defuse the Afghan Demographic Time Bomb After 2014



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Although fraught with danger and uncertainty, the 2014 security transition deadline in Afghanistan offers an important window of opportunity for the international community. It provides us with the possibility to disconnect civilian efforts from the military approach that has dominated since 2001.

The boost to civilian power should focus especially on reaching out to Afghanistan's next generation: the millions of young men and women who will ultimately determine the long-term effect and sustainability of our international efforts. More than 68 percent of the Afghan population [is under the age of 25](#) - potentially an enormous demographic time bomb if we don't invest in this important group now.

The ongoing training of mostly young, [often illiterate](#), police and army recruits shows the restricted engagement the international community has had so far with Afghan youth. By focusing on the security forces, and by pouring millions of dollars into training about 300,000 young men, the much broader group of young Afghans who will become neither police officers nor soldiers in the Afghan army has been neglected.

The potentially destabilizing effects of disenfranchised youth are known from many other settings, not least in countries affected by the Arab Spring. Therefore, the shift towards more civilian power should be accompanied by a reinforced effort to reach out to Afghanistan's youth and to turn them into an important stabilizing factor. Based on recent conversations with the Afghan youth in various cities around the country, the following investments should be prioritized to prevent an Afghan demographic time bomb from exploding in coming years.

1. Information and communication infrastructure and networks

On top of traditional media such as radio and television, Internet and mobile phone technology are increasingly popular. More investments are needed to expand the use and coverage of information and communication networks, while not forgetting about the traditional media which continue to dominate in rural areas as people's only source of information.

2. Foreign language and social media

Foreign languages and social media are already popular and have huge potential in the country, not only as a window on the world for young Afghans, but also as a way to reach them through targeted cultural diplomacy. Online media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are used extensively by the youth. The need for blogging, photojournalism and Twitter workshops and courses is stressed repeatedly.

3. Communication about norms and values

As young Afghans increasingly connect to the Internet, the international community should also support the creating of online content that can foster a better understanding of common values, intercultural differences and the motives behind aid and support programs implemented in Afghanistan. A respectful, two-way dialogue could make up for the lack of effective communication in the past ten years between the international community and the Afghan youth.

4. Bridge the rural/urban divide

Investment is urgently needed in literacy programs, language and IT courses in the rural areas. Promoting mobile phone technologies present one way to reach rural youth, especially if these enable them to connect to the Internet and to their counterparts in urban centers. Focusing on the urban youth is not enough, especially because of the danger of illiterate or disillusioned rural youth being recruited by insurgent groups.

5. Afghan-to-Afghan communication

Contact between Afghans abroad and Afghans at home already exists within (extended) families, but broader communication is necessary and should be supported to foster international understanding and intercultural exchange. Afghans abroad tend to use social media more extensively, but its use in Afghanistan, although growing, is still limited. Stimulating Afghan-to-Afghan communication across borders can help increase inter-cultural understanding.

6: Political participation and civil society

The international community should invest in long-term programs that foster active citizenship and young people's political participation, for example through empowering civil society organizations (CSOs) run by young Afghans. This will create the necessary platforms for youth to have a voice in the country, to debate issues of political and social change, and inform the political leaders of their views.

7. Education

Most young Afghans consider (higher) education to be a top priority for the international community, as it is considered the basis for all other progress. More scholarships, better (and faster) Internet connections and IT facilities at universities, better professional training for teachers, and schools and universities that are more 'plugged in' to the international academic system are needed.

8. Entrepreneurship

There is still very little entrepreneurship to be found among Afghan youth, and there are few possibilities for getting seed funding to set up small and medium-sized businesses. There is a need to invest in job-related skills, the English language, and to spread sector-specific knowledge, information about markets and entrepreneurial opportunities.

9: Young women

In general, young women should be a priority for foreign investment, especially when trying to increase the number of CSOs and to encourage entrepreneurship and political participation. At present, women are less connected to the Internet, mainly because of the fact that visiting an Internet café is often seen as inappropriate. Investing in special areas for women might be a solution.

10. Sports

Community-based sports programs can help spread the values of sports, and the corresponding healthy lifestyles. Sports like soccer and cricket are hugely popular, but more investments in sport facilities and infrastructure are needed across the country. Afghanistan Football Federation (AFF) president Keramuddin Karim already argued recently that we should not only focus on training soldiers, but recognize sports as the basis for peace and unity in Afghanistan. The heroic reception of second-time bronze Olympic medal winner Rohullah Nikpai in Afghanistan illustrates this point.

These are just some first priority areas coming from the Afghan youth themselves. Before the end of the security transition in 2014, a serious discussion should be started on how the international community can best serve the needs of the youth, and use its civilian power to turn them into our greatest asset and hope for long-term security and stability.

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