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Displacement Impacts on Urban Settlements: The Case of Kabul City

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Abstract

Internal displacement is an important urban-planning issue in Afghanistan, particularly in Kabul City, where displaced households interact with pre-existing pressures related to housing, infrastructure, basic services, livelihoods, land management, and environmental vulnerability. This study examines how internal displacement interacts with changing urban settlement conditions in Kabul and identifies planning responses supported by available evidence. The study uses a qualitative case-study design complemented by secondary quantitative and published geospatial evidence. The primary qualitative component consists of documentary evidence and direct field observations in selected displacement-affected areas of eastern Kabul and around Qanbar Crossroads; informal oral conversations are treated only as contextual evidence because they were not systematically recorded. Published spatial studies based on Landsat, Sentinel, GIS, and remote-sensing methods are used to contextualize urban expansion and land-use change. The evidence indicates recurring challenges in housing, basic services, livelihoods, infrastructure, and environmental resilience. The study does not interpret these patterns as evidence that displacement alone caused urban expansion. Rather, displacement is understood as one contributing process interacting with population growth, return migration, economic migration, informal urbanization, land-management constraints, and institutional capacity. The study concludes that displacement-sensitive urban planning should combine area-based settlement upgrading, equitable service provision, affordable and secure housing, livelihood support, resilient infrastructure, environmental risk management, and stronger institutional coordination.

Keywords: Internal Displacement Informal Housing, Social, Urban settlements, Urban resilience.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Internal displacement has remained one of the major humanitarian and urban challenges facing Afghanistan over the past four decades. Armed conflict, political instability, environmental hazards, and economic insecurity have contributed to the displacement of millions of Afghans within the country. Unlike refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) remain within national borders; however, they may face serious challenges related to housing, livelihoods, access to basic services, and social inclusion [1], [2].

Kabul City, as the capital and largest urban center of Afghanistan, has been an important destination for displaced populations. The expansion of the city since 2001 has been influenced by several interacting processes, including the return of refugees, rural-to-urban and economic migration, population growth, and internal displacement from conflict- and disaster-affected areas [3]. Therefore, the transformation of Kabul's urban landscape cannot be attributed to displacement alone. Nevertheless, the arrival and settlement of displaced households have added pressure to an urban system that already faces significant challenges in housing provision, infrastructure, land management, and access to basic services.

A significant proportion of urban expansion has occurred through informal and unplanned settlement processes. Such settlements may be characterized by inadequate infrastructure, limited access to essential services, insecure land tenure, and weak connections to formal urban systems [4]. For displaced households, these conditions can increase vulnerability and restrict opportunities for stable housing, employment, and integration into the wider urban environment.

From an urban-planning perspective, displacement therefore represents not only a humanitarian issue but also a spatial and governance challenge. The concentration of vulnerable households in underserved areas can increase demand for water, electricity, sanitation, transportation, housing, and other urban services. At the same time, these pressures interact with broader processes of informal urbanization, population growth, economic hardship, and institutional constraints. Understanding these interactions is essential for developing urban policies that respond to the needs of both displaced and host populations.

1.2 Problem Statement

The continuing settlement of displaced populations in Kabul has occurred within an urban environment already characterized by shortages in housing, infrastructure, and basic services. The growth of densely populated and underserved settlements can intensify existing inequalities in access to urban resources and create additional challenges for municipal and other responsible institutions. The original study identifies overcrowding, unregulated land use, limited resources, and difficulties in coordination among relevant institutions as important dimensions of this problem [5], [6].

However, it is important to distinguish the contribution of displacement from other factors shaping Kabul's urban development. Urban service deficiencies, informal settlement growth, congestion, environmental pressures, and socioeconomic inequality are influenced by multiple interacting processes. Consequently, this study does not assume

that displacement is the sole cause of Kabul's urban problems. Instead, it examines how internal displacement is associated with, and contributes to, existing pressures on urban settlements.

The problem is particularly important in areas where displaced populations are concentrated and where access to basic services is limited. The research therefore considers housing and settlement conditions, access to essential services, social relations, economic vulnerability, infrastructure, and environmental issues as interconnected dimensions of the urban impacts associated with displacement.

1.3 Research Gap and Contribution

Existing research and institutional reports have addressed different dimensions of displacement and urban vulnerability in Afghanistan, including informal settlements, housing insecurity, livelihoods, infrastructure, and social integration [3]–[7]. However, these dimensions are often considered separately, while their interaction within the urban-planning context requires further attention.

A particular gap concerns the connection between the everyday settlement conditions of displaced populations and the wider processes of urban development in Kabul. Understanding this relationship requires attention not only to documentary and institutional evidence but also to conditions observed within displacement-affected urban areas.

This study addresses this gap through a qualitative case-study approach that combines documentary evidence with direct field observations and informal oral conversations conducted in selected displacement-affected areas of Kabul. The field component provides contextual evidence concerning population concentration, housing and settlement conditions, access to basic services, economic circumstances, clean water, electricity, and infrastructure. Because the oral conversations were informal and were not systematically recorded or documented, they are treated as supplementary qualitative evidence rather than as a statistically representative survey.

The contribution of the study is therefore primarily contextual and integrative. It brings together different dimensions of displacement and urban settlement within an urban-planning framework and examines how displacement interacts with broader processes of informal urbanization, service inequality, and institutional constraints. The study does not claim statistical representation of all displaced populations in Kabul.

1.4 Research Aim and Objectives

The primary aim of this research is to examine the multidimensional impacts of internal displacement on urban settlements in Kabul City and to identify planning and policy measures that can support more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable urban development.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine housing and settlement challenges experienced by displaced populations in Kabul.

2. **Assess** challenges related to access to essential urban services and their implications for social inclusion and community relations.
3. Explore the economic dimensions of displacement, including livelihood opportunities and employment-related constraints.
4. Examine the relationship between displacement, urban infrastructure pressures, and environmental conditions.
5. Develop planning and policy recommendations that can support inclusive settlement development and improve the resilience of both displaced and host populations.

1.5 Research Questions

The main research question is:

How does internal displacement interact with the conditions of urban settlements in Kabul City, and what planning and policy measures can help address its associated impacts?
The study addresses the following sub-questions:

1. What are the primary housing and basic-service challenges experienced by displaced populations in Kabul?
2. How does displacement affect social relations and community integration between displaced and host populations?
3. What are the economic and infrastructural implications associated with displacement for urban settlements in Kabul?
4. How can inclusive urban-planning and policy approaches improve conditions and resilience for both displaced and host populations?

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Background

2.1 Internal Displacement and Urbanization in Afghanistan

Internal displacement has become an important humanitarian and urban development issue in Afghanistan. Conflict, insecurity, economic hardship, and environmental pressures have contributed to the movement of populations within the country. Unlike international refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) remain within national borders but may experience significant difficulties related to housing, livelihoods, access to basic services, and social integration. The increasing interaction between displacement and urbanization has made cities important locations for both short-term settlement and longer-term displacement-related vulnerabilities [1], [2].
Kabul City represents an important context for examining these processes because its urban development has been influenced by several overlapping forms of population movement and demographic change. Previous studies have associated Kabul's expansion with the return of refugees, rural-to-urban migration, economic migration, population growth, and internal displacement [3], [4]. Therefore, displacement should not be considered the only factor responsible for Kabul's urban transformation. Rather, displaced populations interact with pre-existing housing shortages, informal urban growth, limited infrastructure, and institutional constraints.

The relationship between displacement and urbanization is consequently multidimensional. Displaced households may settle in areas where land and housing are relatively accessible but where formal infrastructure and public services are limited. This can increase the vulnerability of displaced households while also placing additional demands on already constrained urban systems [2], [7].

2.2 Displacement, Housing, and Informal Settlements

Housing is one of the most significant dimensions of displacement-related vulnerability in Kabul. Previous research has documented the expansion of informal and unplanned settlements and the difficulties faced by households living in areas with inadequate infrastructure and uncertain tenure conditions [3], [4]. Displaced households may have limited financial resources and therefore face difficulties obtaining adequate and secure housing within the formal urban housing market.

The development of informal settlements is also associated with broader challenges in urban governance and land management. Inadequate planning capacity, limited availability of affordable housing, and weak tenure security can contribute to the expansion of settlements outside formal planning systems [4], [5]. These conditions can create a cycle in which households settle in areas with limited services and subsequently face difficulties obtaining infrastructure and formal recognition.

Housing vulnerability should therefore be understood not simply as a shortage of physical shelter but as a combination of housing quality, affordability, tenure security, accessibility, and access to urban services. Studies of Kabul's urban transition emphasize the importance of addressing these interconnected dimensions through more inclusive urban policies [5], [6], [20].

2.3 Access to Basic Urban Services and Infrastructure

Access to basic urban services is another important dimension of displacement-related urban vulnerability. Rapid population growth and informal settlement expansion can increase demand for water, electricity, sanitation, transportation, waste management, and other infrastructure. Where urban infrastructure has not expanded at the same pace as population and settlement growth, underserved communities may experience persistent service deficiencies [4], [6].

Previous studies and institutional assessments have identified infrastructure and service limitations as important challenges in Afghan cities. Humanitarian and urban development frameworks have emphasized the need to connect immediate assistance with longer-term urban development and recovery strategies [8]. Such approaches recognize that displaced households frequently become part of the permanent or semi-permanent urban population and therefore require access to services beyond short-term humanitarian assistance.

Infrastructure challenges are also connected to the spatial distribution of settlements. When households concentrate in peripheral or informal areas, extending formal infrastructure may become more difficult and costly. At the same time, inadequate infrastructure can reinforce spatial inequality by leaving certain communities with fewer

opportunities to access employment, education, health services, and other urban resources [6], [16].

2.4 Social Inclusion, Community Relations, and Livelihoods

Displacement affects urban life beyond physical settlement conditions. Social inclusion, community relations, access to employment, and economic security are important components of the integration of displaced households into cities. Research on displacement in Afghanistan has identified barriers to livelihoods and socioeconomic integration, particularly where displaced households have limited assets, insecure employment, or restricted access to economic opportunities [11], [18].

Social integration may also be influenced by relationships between displaced and host communities. Shared community institutions and local social networks can support interaction and cooperation, while economic inequality, competition for resources, and differences in living conditions may create barriers to integration. Gender can further shape access to employment, services, mobility, and social participation among displaced populations [9].

Livelihood conditions are closely connected to settlement vulnerability. Households with limited and unstable incomes may have fewer options to secure adequate housing or pay for essential services. Consequently, housing insecurity, limited employment, and inadequate services can reinforce one another. From an urban-planning perspective, this indicates that settlement upgrading alone may not be sufficient unless it is accompanied by measures that improve access to livelihoods and social opportunities [11], [18].

2.5 Environmental and Spatial Implications

The spatial expansion of informal settlements can also have environmental implications. Research on Kabul has identified concerns related to land degradation, pressure on natural resources, air pollution, water contamination, and exposure to environmental and climate-related risks [12]–[14]. Informal settlement growth may increase exposure to such risks where households occupy locations with inadequate drainage, limited infrastructure, or insufficient environmental management.

Climate-related vulnerability is particularly relevant for low-income and displacement-affected communities because households with limited resources may have fewer opportunities to adapt to environmental hazards. Previous research has examined climate risks and adaptive strategies in Kabul's informal settlements and has emphasized the relationship between settlement conditions, environmental exposure, and adaptive capacity [13].

However, environmental pressures in Kabul should not be attributed exclusively to displaced populations. Population growth, informal urbanization, inadequate infrastructure, economic conditions, governance limitations, and wider environmental pressures also contribute to these challenges [6], [13], [14]. Displacement is therefore better understood as one factor interacting with broader processes of urban and environmental change.

2.6 Inclusive Urban Planning and Urban Resilience

The literature increasingly emphasizes the need to move beyond short-term humanitarian responses toward approaches that integrate displacement into urban planning and development. Urban planning in displacement-affected contexts needs to consider housing, infrastructure, livelihoods, land management, social inclusion, and environmental resilience as interconnected issues [7], [17].

Inclusive planning approaches can help reduce the separation between displaced populations and wider urban development processes. Instead of treating displaced households solely as temporary humanitarian beneficiaries, planning frameworks can recognize them as participants in the changing urban population. This perspective supports approaches such as settlement upgrading, improved service provision, affordable housing, secure tenure, livelihood support, and stronger institutional coordination [17], [20].

Urban resilience is particularly relevant in this context. Resilience involves not only the ability of urban systems to respond to immediate pressures but also their capacity to adapt to longer-term demographic, economic, social, and environmental changes. For Kabul, this requires coordination between urban planning institutions, municipal authorities, humanitarian organizations, development actors, and affected communities [8], [17].

2.7 Conceptual Synthesis

The literature reviewed in this study suggests that the relationship between internal displacement and urban settlements should be understood as an interaction between population movement and pre-existing urban conditions. Displacement can increase demand for housing and services, while weak infrastructure, informal urbanization, limited livelihoods, and institutional constraints can increase the vulnerability of displaced households.

Accordingly, this study adopts an integrated conceptual perspective in which displacement interacts with several interconnected dimensions of urban development: housing and settlement conditions, basic urban services, social inclusion, economic livelihoods, infrastructure, and environmental conditions. These dimensions are not treated as independent outcomes. Rather, they may reinforce one another within displacement-affected settlements.

For example, concentration of displaced households may increase pressure on housing and services, while limited income can restrict access to adequate housing and infrastructure. Weak planning and tenure arrangements may further constrain service provision, while environmental exposure can increase vulnerability among households living in underserved locations. These relationships are treated as analytical pathways rather than as evidence of simple or exclusive causation.

The conceptual approach therefore provides a basis for examining how displacement interacts with Kabul's existing urban challenges and for identifying planning responses that address both immediate service deficiencies and longer-term urban development needs. The empirical analysis that follows combines documentary evidence with direct field observations and informal oral accounts from selected displacement-affected areas of Kabul to examine these dimensions within the boundaries of a qualitative case study.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Evidence Strategy

This study uses a qualitative urban case-study design supported by secondary quantitative and published geospatial evidence. The design was selected because the research question concerns both lived settlement conditions and the wider spatial transformation of Kabul. The study does not claim to be an original mixed-methods field survey because no statistically representative household survey or systematic institutional interview

program was conducted. Instead, different evidence types are integrated transparently: documentary and institutional evidence; direct qualitative field observations; informal oral conversations used only as contextual material; and secondary quantitative and GIS/remote-sensing findings reported in published studies. This distinction prevents secondary evidence from being presented as original measurements.

This study employs a qualitative case-study approach to examine the relationship between internal displacement and urban settlement conditions in Kabul City. The research combines three complementary sources of evidence: documentary materials, direct field observation, and informal oral conversations. This approach is intended to provide a contextual understanding of displacement-related urban challenges rather than statistically representative estimates.

The qualitative case-study design is appropriate because the study focuses on the interaction between displacement and multiple dimensions of urban development, including housing, basic services, economic conditions, infrastructure, social relations, and environmental pressures. The evidence is therefore interpreted within the specific urban context of Kabul rather than generalized statistically to all displaced populations or all urban settlements in Afghanistan.

The quantitative and spatial component is therefore treated as a secondary evidence layer. Published post-2001 remote-sensing studies are used to document measurable changes in built-up land and vegetation, while the present study does not claim to have independently classified satellite imagery or conducted a statistically representative household survey.

3.2 Documentary and Secondary Quantitative Evidence

The documentary corpus consists of academic studies, institutional reports, humanitarian assessments, policy documents, and published research relevant to internal displacement, informal settlements, housing, infrastructure, livelihoods, social inclusion, environmental conditions, and urban planning in Afghanistan. Secondary quantitative evidence is used only where a published source reports a measurable population, land-use, built-up-area, or other spatial indicator. Such values are attributed to the original study and are not presented as measurements generated by the author. Differences in geographic extent, classification method, reference year, and data source are retained rather than combined into a single synthetic estimate.

The documentary component of the study draws on academic studies, institutional reports, humanitarian assessments, policy documents, and other published materials relevant to displacement and urban development in Afghanistan. Sources include materials addressing internal displacement, informal settlements, housing, infrastructure, livelihoods, social inclusion, environmental conditions, and urban planning.

These documentary sources were used to establish the broader context of displacement in Kabul and to compare existing findings with conditions observed during the field component. The literature also provides evidence concerning issues that were not directly measured during field observation, including broader patterns of urbanization, environmental vulnerability, governance, and socioeconomic integration.

3.3 Field Observation

Direct field observations were conducted in displacement-affected areas and settlements in eastern Kabul and around Qanbar Crossroads. The observations focused on visible and locally experienced conditions associated with urban settlement and displacement.

Particular attention was given to population concentration, housing and settlement conditions, availability of basic urban services, economic conditions, access to clean water, electricity, and the condition and availability of supporting infrastructure. These observations were used to provide contextual evidence concerning the everyday urban conditions experienced by people living in displacement-affected areas.

The field observations were qualitative in nature. They were not designed as a statistically representative survey, and no statistical estimates of the prevalence of the observed conditions are presented in this study.

3.4 Informal Oral Conversations

During the field visits, informal oral conversations were also conducted with some residents and individuals encountered in the observed areas. These conversations provided additional contextual information concerning everyday living conditions and difficulties experienced by people in displacement-affected settlements.

Because these conversations were informal and were not systematically recorded or documented in written form, they are treated as supplementary qualitative evidence rather than as a formal interview dataset. The study therefore does not report a formal interview sample, statistical analysis, or generalized conclusions based solely on these conversations.

3.5 Data Analysis and Integration

The evidence was organized around the principal dimensions of the research questions: housing and settlement conditions, basic services, social relations and inclusion, livelihoods, infrastructure and spatial change, and environmental vulnerability. Qualitative evidence was analyzed thematically by identifying recurring issues across documents and field observations. Secondary quantitative and geospatial findings were extracted descriptively, with attention to their study area, observation period, data source, and analytical method. The evidence types were then compared during interpretation. Where multiple sources point in the same direction, the finding is treated as stronger contextual evidence; where methods or geographic boundaries differ, the results are reported separately rather than pooled. No statistical meta-analysis was conducted.

The collected evidence was organized and interpreted thematically according to the principal dimensions of the research questions: housing and settlement conditions, access to basic services, social relations and inclusion, economic conditions, infrastructure, and environmental and spatial implications.

The analysis involved comparing themes emerging from documentary sources with observations and contextual information obtained during field visits. This process helped identify areas of consistency between the existing literature and field-based evidence, as well as issues requiring more cautious interpretation.

No statistical analysis was undertaken. The purpose of the analysis was to identify recurring qualitative patterns and to interpret them within the broader urban context of Kabul.

3.6 Triangulation and Validation

Triangulation was undertaken across documentary evidence, direct field observations, informal oral accounts, and published quantitative/geospatial studies. The purpose was not to claim statistical validation but to assess whether different forms of evidence identify comparable urban processes. Localized observations of underserved settlement conditions were compared with published research on informal settlements and urban land-use change. Because the field observations are geographically limited and the oral conversations were informal and undocumented, they are treated as contextual evidence. Published GIS and remote-sensing results are likewise treated as secondary evidence and are not represented as the author's own GIS analysis.

The study uses qualitative triangulation by comparing information obtained from documentary sources, direct field observations, and informal oral conversations. Documentary evidence provides the broader research and policy context, while field observations provide direct contextual evidence from selected displacement-affected locations. Informal oral accounts provide additional insight into everyday experiences encountered during the field visits.

Triangulation is used to strengthen the contextual interpretation of the findings. However, because the field component was geographically limited and the oral conversations were informal and undocumented, the findings should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all displaced populations or all urban settlements in Kabul.

3.7 Case Study Boundaries

The geographic case is Kabul City within the urban and municipal planning context rather than Kabul Province as a whole. Direct observations were concentrated in selected displacement-affected areas of eastern Kabul and around Qanbar Crossroads. The population focus is internally displaced and displacement-affected urban households, while recognizing the influence of host communities, returnees, economic migrants, and the wider resident population. Temporally, the documentary review emphasizes recent evidence while published spatial studies provide longer historical baselines, including studies covering 1973–2020, 1993–2021, and 1998–2022. These periods are not merged into one continuous original dataset; they are used to establish the longer-term urban context.

The geographic focus of the study is Kabul City, with direct field observations concentrated in selected displacement-affected areas of eastern Kabul and around Qambar Crossroads. The study primarily considers conditions affecting internally displaced populations and their interaction with the wider urban environment.

At the same time, the study recognizes that Kabul's urban growth cannot be explained by internal displacement alone. Returnees, refugees, economic migrants, natural population growth, informal urbanization, economic conditions, and institutional constraints also

influence the city's spatial and socioeconomic development. Accordingly, the study treats displacement as one contributing factor interacting with broader urban processes rather than as the sole cause of Kabul's housing, infrastructure, service, or environmental challenges.

3.8 Ethical and Interpretive Considerations

Given the informal nature of the oral conversations, this study does not present personally identifiable information or attribute individual statements to specific participants. The oral accounts are used only to provide contextual insight into conditions encountered during field observation.

The methodological approach also requires careful interpretation of causality. Where the evidence indicates a relationship between displacement and urban pressures, the study uses terms such as contributes to, is associated with, increases pressure on, and interacts with, rather than presenting displacement as the exclusive cause of complex urban conditions. This distinction is particularly important in interpreting infrastructure deficits, informal settlement growth, environmental pressures, and service shortages, which are influenced by multiple factors.

4. Results and Findings

This section presents the findings generated from the qualitative case study. The analysis combines direct field observations from selected displacement-affected areas of eastern Kabul and around Qanbar Crossroads with informal oral accounts and documentary evidence. The field evidence is used as contextual qualitative evidence and is not treated as a statistically representative survey. The original study identifies housing, services, social cohesion, livelihoods, infrastructure, and environmental conditions as its principal areas of investigation.

4.1 Summary of Qualitative Field Observations

The direct field observations focused on population concentration, housing and settlement conditions, access to basic services, economic conditions, clean water, electricity, and infrastructure. The following table summarizes the principal observations and their planning implications.

Table 1. Summary of Qualitative Field Observations in Displacement-Affected Areas of Kabul

Number	**Observation Dimension**	**Main Qualitative Observation**	**Planning Implication**
1	Population concentration	High concentration of residents was observed in some displacement-affected settlements in eastern Kabul and around Qambar Crossroads.	Increased pressure on housing, infrastructure, and basic urban services.

2	Housing and settlement conditions	Some observed settlements had difficult housing conditions and limited supporting urban infrastructure.	Need for settlement upgrading and improved housing conditions.
3	Basic urban services	Access to essential urban services appeared limited in some observed locations.	Priority should be given to improving service provision in underserved settlements.
4	Clean water	Limited access to reliable and clean water was observed in some displacement-affected areas.	Improvement and expansion of water-supply infrastructure should be prioritized.
5	Electricity	Electricity access appeared limited or unreliable in some observed locations.	Improvement and expansion of basic electricity infrastructure are required.
6	Economic conditions	Difficult economic conditions and limited livelihood opportunities were evident among some residents encountered during the field visits.	Urban planning should be linked with livelihood and economic-support measures.
7	Infrastructure	Existing infrastructure appeared insufficient to fully accommodate the concentration of population in some observed areas.	Infrastructure investment should be coordinated with settlement growth and population needs.
8	Spatial conditions	Some displacement-affected settlements were located in underserved or informally developed urban areas.	Area-based planning and integrated settlement upgrading should be considered.

source: Author's qualitative field observations in selected displacement-affected areas of eastern Kabul and around Qambar Crossroads.

Note: The table summarizes qualitative observations and is not based on a statistically representative survey. The observations should therefore not be interpreted as quantitative estimates for all displacement-affected settlements in Kabul.

4.2 Housing and Settlement Conditions

The findings indicate that housing is one of the most important dimensions of vulnerability among displacement-affected households in Kabul. The original literature reviewed in this study identifies rapid informal urban expansion, overcrowding, inadequate shelter, and insecure tenure as major housing challenges for displaced populations [3], [4], [5].

The field observations in eastern Kabul and around Qambar Crossroads showed concentrated settlement patterns and difficult housing conditions in some displacement-

affected areas. These observations are consistent with the broader literature concerning underserved and informal settlements in Kabul.

Housing vulnerability is closely connected to household economic conditions. Households with limited financial resources may have fewer opportunities to obtain adequate housing within the formal market and may therefore settle in areas where housing is relatively accessible but infrastructure and services are limited.

The findings therefore suggest that displacement interacts with existing housing and land-management challenges in Kabul. Displacement should not, however, be regarded as the sole cause of informal settlement growth because Kabul's urban expansion has also been influenced by population growth, return migration, economic migration, land-management problems, and institutional constraints.

4.3 Access to Basic Urban Services

Limited access to basic urban services was one of the principal conditions identified during the field observations. In some observed areas, access to clean water and electricity appeared limited or unreliable. The observations also indicated broader deficiencies in supporting urban infrastructure.

These findings are consistent with the existing literature, which identifies inadequate infrastructure and uneven service provision as important challenges in Kabul's informal and underserved settlements [4], [6], [8].

The lack of reliable water and electricity has implications beyond individual household comfort. It affects the overall functioning and resilience of settlements and may increase the vulnerability of households that already have limited economic resources.

The findings therefore support the need for area-based improvement of basic services in displacement-affected settlements. At the same time, service deficiencies cannot be attributed exclusively to displaced populations because Kabul's infrastructure limitations are also associated with wider population growth, informal development, institutional capacity, and existing urban deficits.

4.4 Social Relations and Community Integration

The literature reviewed in this study indicates that displacement can influence relations between displaced and host communities. Economic inequality, competition for limited resources, employment difficulties, and unequal access to services may create barriers to socioeconomic integration [9], [11], [18].

The informal oral conversations conducted during the field visits provided contextual insight into everyday difficulties experienced by people living in displacement-affected areas. These accounts support the broader interpretation that housing conditions, economic insecurity, and limited access to services can influence the experience of displaced households within the urban environment.

However, the oral conversations were informal and were not systematically recorded or documented. They therefore cannot be used to calculate the prevalence of particular social experiences or to make statistically representative claims concerning social cohesion throughout Kabul.

The findings consequently suggest that social integration should be considered alongside physical settlement planning. Improving housing and infrastructure without addressing livelihood opportunities, community participation, and access to services may not be sufficient to achieve meaningful urban inclusion.

4.5 Economic Vulnerability and Livelihood Conditions

Economic vulnerability was another important dimension identified through the field observations and documentary evidence. Previous studies have identified limited livelihood opportunities, informal employment, and barriers to socioeconomic integration among displaced populations in Afghan cities [11], [18].

The field observations indicated difficult economic conditions among some residents encountered in the observed areas. These conditions are important because household income directly influences the ability to obtain adequate housing, access services, and improve living conditions.

Economic vulnerability and spatial vulnerability may therefore reinforce one another. Households with limited and unstable income may remain concentrated in underserved settlements, while poor settlement conditions can make access to employment, transportation, and other opportunities more difficult.

The findings suggest that livelihood considerations should consequently be incorporated into urban planning interventions. Settlement upgrading and infrastructure improvements should be complemented by measures that support access to sustainable economic opportunities.

4.6 Infrastructure and Spatial Pressure

The findings indicate that displacement contributes to existing pressure on urban infrastructure in Kabul. Concentration of population in underserved areas can increase demand for water, electricity, sanitation, transportation, waste management, drainage, and other infrastructure systems.

The original study identifies infrastructure pressure as one of the major dimensions through which displacement interacts with Kabul's urban development.

However, infrastructure pressure cannot be explained by displacement alone. Kabul's infrastructure has also been affected by population growth, informal urbanization, return migration, economic migration, limited investment, and institutional constraints.

The findings therefore support a contribution-based interpretation: displacement can increase pressure on existing systems, but it operates within a wider set of urban processes. This distinction is important for planning because infrastructure interventions should address the needs of entire settlements rather than treating displaced households as an isolated urban category.

4.7 Environmental and Spatial Implications

The documentary evidence reviewed in the study identifies environmental challenges associated with Kabul's rapid and informal urban development, including land degradation, pollution, pressure on natural resources, and exposure to climate-related risks [12]–[14].

The direct field component of this study primarily focused on population concentration, housing, services, economic conditions, water, electricity, and infrastructure. It did not involve formal environmental measurements. Therefore, environmental findings in this study are based primarily on documentary evidence and the observed relationship between settlement conditions and environmental vulnerability.

Underserved settlements may be particularly vulnerable when drainage, waste management, water systems, and other infrastructure are inadequate. Climate-related risks may further increase vulnerability among households with limited economic resources.

Environmental pressures should nevertheless not be attributed exclusively to displaced populations. They result from the interaction of displacement with wider population growth, informal urbanization, infrastructure deficiencies, resource pressures, and environmental management challenges.

4.8 Findings in Relation to the Research Questions

4.9 Secondary Quantitative and Spatial Evidence

Published geospatial research provides quantitative context for interpreting the qualitative observations in this study. These studies are secondary evidence and are not presented as original GIS analyses by the author.

A peer-reviewed study analyzed land-use change in Kabul from 2001 to 2019 using Landsat imagery processed with ERDAS IMAGINE and ArcGIS. The study classified built-up area, green area, empty space, and mountain areas and reported an increase in built-up land alongside a decline in green area [22].

Another study assessed urban sprawl and land-use/land-cover variation in Kabul City for 1993, 2008, and 2021 using Landsat imagery and GIS-based analysis [23]. For the post-2001 period, its 2008 and 2021 classifications provide directly relevant spatial evidence of continued built-up expansion and declining vegetation cover.

Source: Redrawn for presentation from the published Landsat/GIS classification of Ahmadi, Sahak, and Sahak (2023) [23]. The figure is secondary evidence and is not an original GIS classification produced by the present study.

Table 2. Published quantitative evidence on post-2001 land-use/land-cover change in Kabul City.

Study / period	Built-up area	Vegetation / green area	Reported change	Evidence type
Hussaini et al. (2001–2019) [22]	237.28 → 306.45 km²	273.12 → 159.70 km²	Built-up +69.17 km²; green −113.42 km²	Landsat; ERDAS IMAGINE; ArcGIS
Ahmadi et al. (2008–2021) [23]	212.0 → 364.8 km²	173.7 → 126.6 km²	Built-up +152.8 km²; vegetation −47.1 km²	Landsat; SVM; GIS

Note: The two studies use different classification procedures and study boundaries/definitions; their numerical values should therefore not be merged into a single time series. They are presented as complementary secondary evidence.

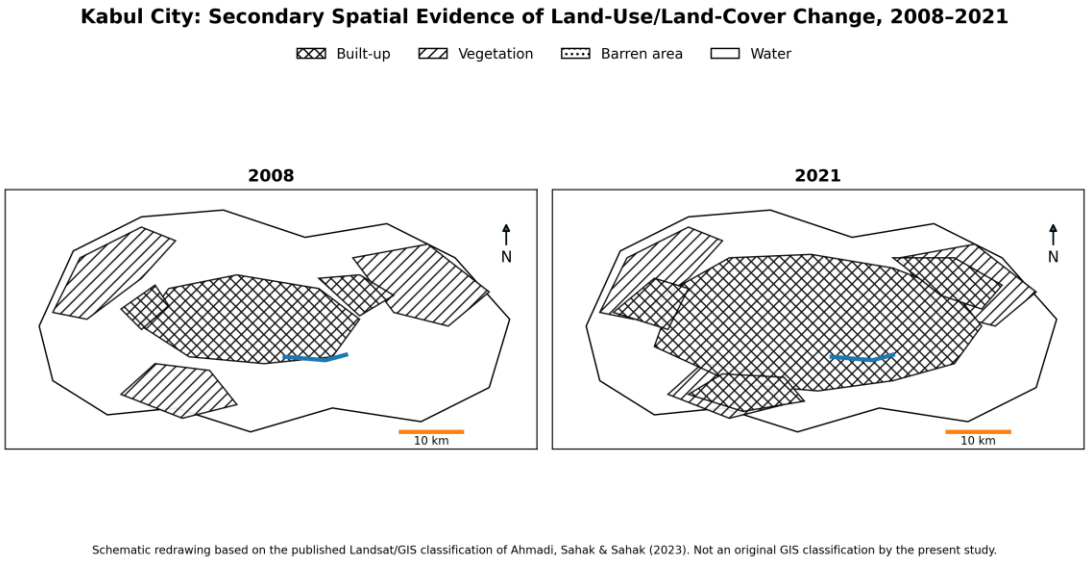


Fig. 1. Secondary spatial evidence of land-use/land-cover change in Kabul City, 2008–2021.

A 2024 study examined land-use/land-cover change in Kabul using satellite imagery and machine-learning classification and likewise reported expansion of built-up areas accompanied by reductions in vegetation and bare land [24]. Because that study covers Kabul Province rather than only the municipal city area, its results are used only as broader spatial context.

Table 3. Post-2001 population estimates reported in published Kabul studies.

Year	Reported population	Source	Interpretive note
2001	≈1.5 million	Ahmadi et al. (2023) [23]	Historical estimate reported by the study
2017	≈5 million	Ahmadi et al. (2023) [23]	Estimate reported in the cited study
2020	≈4.114 million	Hussaini et al. (2022) [22]	Estimate reported in the cited study; not directly harmonized with the 2017 estimate

Note: These figures are reported estimates from different published studies and are not treated as a harmonized official population series. They are included only to demonstrate the scale of post-2001 demographic growth discussed in the literature.

Research focused specifically on informal settlements in Kabul District 13 has also demonstrated the value of GIS and field observation for identifying infrastructure and service challenges in informal areas [25].

Taken together, the secondary spatial literature confirms substantial urban and land-use transformation in Kabul. These studies do not, however, establish that internal displacement alone caused the observed expansion. Urban growth reflects interacting demographic, economic, migration, land-market, governance, and infrastructure processes.

The findings provide the following answers to the research questions.

Research Question 1: What are the primary housing and service-related challenges faced by IDPs in Kabul?
The findings indicate that the main challenges include difficult housing conditions, concentrated settlement, inadequate supporting infrastructure, and limited access to basic services, particularly clean water and electricity in some observed locations.

Research Question 2: How does displacement influence social relations between IDPs and host communities?
The evidence indicates that displacement can create both opportunities and challenges for social integration. Economic insecurity, unequal access to services, and competition for limited urban resources may create barriers to integration. However, because the oral evidence was informal and undocumented, these findings should be interpreted as contextual rather than statistically representative.

Research Question 3: What are the economic and infrastructural implications of displacement for urban systems?
The findings indicate that displacement can contribute to pressure on infrastructure and is associated with economic vulnerability among some displaced households. These impacts interact with wider processes such as population growth, informal urbanization, migration, and institutional constraints.

Research Question 4: How can inclusive planning and policy frameworks enhance the resilience of both displaced and host populations?
The evidence indicates that inclusive planning should combine improvements in housing and basic services with infrastructure development, livelihood support, settlement upgrading, environmental resilience, and stronger coordination among relevant institutions.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of the Main Findings

The findings demonstrate that internal displacement interacts with existing urban vulnerabilities in Kabul rather than operating as an isolated cause of urban change. Housing difficulties, inadequate services, economic vulnerability, and infrastructure pressure are interconnected conditions that affect displacement-affected settlements.

The field observations in eastern Kabul and around Qambar Crossroads provide localized evidence that is broadly consistent with the existing literature on informal and underserved settlements in Kabul. However, the evidence also demonstrates the importance of considering the wider urban context. Population growth, return migration, economic migration, informal urbanization, economic conditions, and institutional limitations all contribute to Kabul's urban conditions.

This interpretation avoids presenting displaced populations as the sole source of urban problems. Instead, displacement is understood as one factor interacting with pre-existing weaknesses in housing provision, infrastructure, land management, and service delivery.

5.2 Housing and Service Vulnerability

The findings concerning housing and basic services support previous research emphasizing the vulnerability of households living in informal and underserved settlements. Limited access to clean water and electricity observed during the field visits provides localized qualitative evidence concerning the service challenges identified in the literature.

Housing policy should therefore not focus exclusively on physical shelter. Adequate housing also depends on location, infrastructure, tenure security, affordability, and access to essential services.

5.3 Economic Vulnerability and Social Inclusion

The findings demonstrate a close relationship between economic conditions and social inclusion. Limited employment opportunities and unstable livelihoods can restrict households' ability to obtain adequate housing and services.

This suggests that settlement upgrading alone may not resolve the broader vulnerabilities experienced by displaced households. Livelihood opportunities, social participation, and access to urban resources should be incorporated into displacement-sensitive planning.

5.4 Infrastructure and Urban Governance

Displacement can increase pressure on infrastructure where displaced households settle in areas that already have limited service capacity. Nevertheless, infrastructure deficits are produced by multiple interacting processes.

The planning implication is that infrastructure investment should be based on settlement needs rather than on displacement status alone. Area-based approaches can benefit both displaced and host communities and may reduce inequalities between underserved areas and better-served parts of the city.

5.5 Environmental Vulnerability and Resilience

The literature indicates that informal and rapidly expanding settlements in Kabul face environmental and climate-related vulnerabilities. The field component of this study did not conduct formal environmental measurements; therefore, the environmental interpretation remains primarily documentary.

Nevertheless, inadequate water systems, drainage, waste management, and other infrastructure can increase vulnerability to environmental pressures. Urban resilience

therefore requires environmental considerations to be integrated into settlement upgrading and infrastructure planning.

5.6 Implications for Urban Planning

The findings support a transition from short-term, displacement-specific responses toward longer-term urban planning approaches. Displaced populations should be considered within broader urban development frameworks rather than treated exclusively as temporary humanitarian beneficiaries.

For Kabul, this requires coordinated attention to housing, basic services, infrastructure, livelihoods, land management, social inclusion, and environmental resilience. Such an approach can address immediate needs while also strengthening the long-term capacity of the urban system.

5.7 Contribution of the Study

The contribution of this study is primarily contextual and integrative. Existing research has examined different dimensions of displacement in Kabul, including housing, informal settlements, livelihoods, infrastructure, social integration, and environmental vulnerability. This study brings these dimensions together within an urban-planning perspective.

A further contribution is the combination of documentary evidence with direct qualitative observations from displacement-affected areas in eastern Kabul and around Qambar Crossroads. Because the field evidence is localized and the oral conversations were informal and undocumented, the study does not claim statistical representation.

Its contribution is therefore to provide a grounded qualitative interpretation of how displacement interacts with existing urban settlement challenges in Kabul.

6. Policy Recommendations

The recommendations are organized according to implementation priority and time horizon. They are derived from the findings concerning housing, basic services, economic vulnerability, infrastructure, social inclusion, and environmental conditions.

6.1 Short-Term Priorities

- **Improve Access to Basic Services**

Immediate attention should be given to clean water, electricity, sanitation, waste management, and other essential services in underserved displacement-affected settlements. Service improvements should prioritize areas where population concentration and infrastructure deficiencies are particularly evident.

- **2. Identify and Map Underserved Settlements**

Relevant urban authorities and development partners should strengthen settlement mapping and spatial information systems to identify areas with high population concentration, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to basic services.

- **3. Strengthen Community-Level Participation**

Residents of displacement-affected settlements should be involved in identifying priority service and infrastructure needs. Community participation can help ensure that interventions reflect actual settlement conditions.

6.2 Medium-Term Priorities

- **4. Settlement Upgrading**

Rather than relying exclusively on relocation, appropriate underserved settlements should be considered for gradual upgrading where technically, environmentally, and legally feasible. Upgrading may include improvements to roads, drainage, water supply, electricity, sanitation, and waste management.

- **5. Improve Housing and Tenure Security**

Planning authorities should develop practical approaches to improving housing security and addressing tenure-related vulnerabilities. Where possible, transparent land and housing mechanisms should be strengthened to reduce the risk of eviction and support longer-term settlement stability.

- **6. Integrate Livelihood Support with Urban Planning**

Economic support should be linked with settlement interventions. Improved access to employment, vocational opportunities, local markets, and livelihood programs can strengthen household resilience and reduce economic vulnerability.

- **7. Strengthen Social Inclusion**

Planning programs should consider both displaced and host populations. Community-based activities, participatory planning, and equitable service provision can support cooperation and reduce tensions associated with competition over limited urban resources.

6.3 Long-Term Priorities

- **8. Integrate Displacement into City-Wide Urban Planning**

Internal displacement should be incorporated into Kabul's broader urban development frameworks. Planning should recognize that some displaced households may remain in the city for extended periods and therefore require sustainable access to housing, infrastructure, services, and economic opportunities.

- **9. Develop Inclusive and Affordable Housing Strategies**

Long-term urban planning should expand access to affordable and adequately serviced housing. Housing strategies should consider land availability, infrastructure capacity, affordability, tenure security, and environmental suitability.

- **10. Strengthen Climate-Resilient Urban Development**

Environmental risk assessment, drainage improvement, sustainable land-use planning, waste management, and climate-resilient infrastructure should be integrated into settlement planning, particularly in vulnerable areas.

- **11. Improve Institutional Coordination**

Sustainable responses require coordination among municipal authorities, relevant urban and housing institutions, humanitarian organizations, development partners, and community structures. Stronger coordination can reduce duplication and connect short-term assistance with longer-term development planning.

7. Study Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the direct field observations were concentrated in selected displacement-affected areas of eastern Kabul and around Qambar Crossroads. The observations therefore cannot be considered representative of all urban settlements or all displaced populations in Kabul.

Second, the oral conversations conducted during the field visits were informal and were not systematically recorded or documented in written form. Consequently, they are used only as supplementary contextual evidence rather than as a formal interview dataset.

Third, the study did not employ a statistically representative household survey. It therefore does not provide statistical estimates concerning the prevalence or magnitude of particular housing, service, economic, or social conditions across Kabul.

Fourth, the study relies substantially on documentary and institutional evidence. Differences in the methods, geographical coverage, and purposes of the original sources may affect the comparability of the information presented.

Finally, Kabul's urban conditions are shaped by multiple interacting factors, including internal displacement, return migration, economic migration, population growth, informal urbanization, governance capacity, economic conditions, and environmental pressures. The findings should therefore not be interpreted as demonstrating that displacement is the sole cause of the city's housing, infrastructure, service, or environmental challenges.

8. Conclusion

Internal displacement has become an important component of Kabul's changing urban landscape. This study demonstrates that displacement interacts with existing challenges related to housing, basic services, livelihoods, infrastructure, social inclusion, and environmental vulnerability.

The findings indicate that displacement-affected households in the observed areas of eastern Kabul and around Qambar Crossroads experience significant settlement and service-related difficulties. Population concentration, inadequate housing and infrastructure, limited access to clean water and electricity, and difficult economic conditions were among the principal conditions identified through the qualitative field observations.

The study also demonstrates that these challenges cannot be attributed to displacement alone. Kabul's urban conditions are shaped by multiple processes, including population growth, return migration, economic migration, informal urbanization, institutional constraints, and broader economic and environmental pressures. Displacement should therefore be understood as a contributing factor that interacts with existing urban vulnerabilities.

In response to the first research question, the study finds that housing insecurity, underserved settlements, and limited access to basic services are major challenges affecting displacement-affected households. In response to the second question, the evidence indicates that economic and service inequalities can influence social integration, although the informal nature of the oral evidence limits the extent of generalization. In response to the third question, displacement contributes to pressure on infrastructure and is associated with economic vulnerability, while these pressures are simultaneously shaped by wider urban processes. In response to the fourth question, the study finds that inclusive planning requires integrated interventions addressing housing, services, infrastructure, livelihoods, social inclusion, and environmental resilience.

The principal contribution of the study is its integrated qualitative perspective on displacement and urban settlement conditions in Kabul. By combining documentary evidence with direct field observations and informal oral accounts, the study connects broader evidence on displacement with localized observations from displacement-affected urban areas.

The findings ultimately suggest that displacement should be incorporated into long-term urban planning rather than addressed solely through short-term humanitarian responses. Inclusive settlement upgrading, equitable access to basic services, improved housing and tenure conditions, livelihood support, resilient infrastructure, environmental planning,

and stronger institutional coordination can contribute to more inclusive and resilient urban development in Kabul.

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