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Urbanisation in fragile societies: thinking about Kabul

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Urbanisation in fragile societies: Thinking about Kabul

As part of the Blavatnik School of Government's "Challenges of Government" Conference, the International Growth Centre's Cities that Work team put together a panel on identity and legitimacy in Kabul. The discussion highlighted the importance of building legitimacy in fragile contexts, particularly given the emergence of fragmented identities and new networks of solidarity, resistance and governance in urban contexts affected by conflict.

A city on the rise

Kabul is one of the oldest and fastest-growing cities in the world. With a recorded history of over 3,500 years, it has been a critical hub to many empires in the region. Kabul has been the political capital of Afghanistan since 1776, and we cannot emphasise enough how important the city is to the country. It is ethnically diverse, but also relatively fragmented along these very lines; it is young but lacks the adequate jobs that provide opportunities for the young, and – like the rest of the country – it is experiencing extraordinary growth. In 2001, it had a little over 500,000 residents. Today, Kabul has over five million inhabitants, including a further one million daily commuters. A nearly ten-fold increase in population size in less than two decades is not typical.

People may be moving to Kabul because conflict is driving them to the relative protection of the city. The internally-displaced people who reside in Kabul represent this most clearly. International population shifts compound this national population change. The return of millions of refugees from Pakistan and Iran have also increased Kabul's residential growth. A further explanation might lie in the emergence of a service-intensive sector in Kabul, which has arrived on the back of the foreign aid and security sectors. This sector has both directly and indirectly created considerable job opportunities.

The need for a common identity

A shared sense of identity and belonging is an integral part of building a city that works. Its absence decreases overall compliance with public policies and makes it harder to establish

a connection to the city.

Kabul highlights fragmented identity in two distinct ways. First is the somewhat simplistic distinction made between various groups divided principally on when they or their ancestors moved to the city. Before the Soviet tanks rolled into Kabul in December 1979, Kabul was a small city ruled by an increasingly westernised elite. After that, the elite mostly left the city and the country. Some of them returned after the US-led intervention toppled the Taliban in 2001. With them, the nostalgia for the pre-1979 "Golden Era" returned too.

But Kabul had changed. In the interim decades, thousands moved from rural areas or returned from neighbouring countries in search of better opportunities. In addition, many had moved to Kabul to escape violence. Therefore, the Kabul of the 21st century was more diverse and chaotic. However, the nostalgia for the Kabul of the past has limited some of the elite's willingness to accept the majority of today's residents as real Kabulis.

Second, urbanisation in Kabul is highly fragmented along ethnic lines. Notable exceptions are the older central parts of the city, university campuses and the expanding café scene providing melting points – particularly for the young. However, for the most part residents of the city live in areas of the city where their ethnic group dominates. As Shabana Basij-Rasikh, an Afghan educator who runs a school in Kabul, told us during our panel, the first time one of her students from the Hazara ethnic group interacted with someone from the Pashtun ethnic group was during a school field trip. This lack of interaction exists despite them living together in the same city. However, since the development of more cultural nodes, there is an increased opportunity to mix.

How do we build legitimacy?

The legitimacy of governance is an important feature that is often lacking in fragile societies. However, narrowing the legitimacy deficit in a city like Kabul, where people often do not identify themselves with the city, is not easy. The strength of non-state actors further complicates this situation. This is particularly the case with the foreign-funded development sector in Kabul. Although this sector often provides vital public services, it can further weaken legitimacy and accountability.

Focusing on local engagement can increase people's trust in government. Here, Kabul could hold the key for the rest of the country. As the largest urban area with a diverse population, Kabul can act as a starting point for targeted policies and investments. Municipal services, such as sanitation and traffic lights, are a highly visible way to indicate to the people that the state can deliver.

This increasing trust has already been set in motion. In 2017, Kabul saw increased local engagement in an attempt to revive the social contract. Despite the overall perceived pessimism, citizens still wanted the government to succeed and provide services. By reaching out to their citizens, the city government felt their commitment and buy-in to a co-designed vision of the city. The residents also felt listened to and incorporated in its future development.

People who identify as members of their local community are less likely to cheat on tax requirements. In 2017, Kabul witnessed a record-breaking annual revenue of over USD 40 million. 2018 surpassed this with a sum of USD 50 million. To many, this increase is an indicator of the level of trust people have in the government. Citizens were willing to pay as soon as the city showed a level of credibility and legitimacy, which in turn made them confident that they would get a 'return on their investment.'

Relentless incremental experimentation

Crucially for a city developing within a fragile environment, the necessity for quick wins is crucial to building legitimacy. We live in radically uncertain times, and nowhere is this more pertinent than in Kabul. In order to combat this, persistent and incremental gains are necessary. Repeated small wins in governance might be the most efficient way to build legitimacy and transcend rigid identities.

Managing expectations is the key here. Rather than promising large, difficult to implement, and ultimately failed promises, governments should seek smaller, and thus achievable, projects. Exemplifying this is the comparison of the ever-delayed metro-bus project in Kabul, the personification of local government failure for many Kabulis and the low hanging fruit of installing new dustbins. The latter, although small, was a service that was lacking. In its delivery, it built trust in the city government – a critical and necessary step that needs to be repeated in fragile societies.

Editor's note: This blog was originally published on Urbanet.