



# Migration and development dynamics in Shahrake Mahdia, Afghanistan

Shahrake Mahdia is an unplanned neighbourhood of Kabul. Amid protracted stagnation, security pressures and the imminent Taliban takeover, young adults felt despair for the future – both for themselves and the area.

---

This snapshot from August 2021 finds many have layered, challenging experiences of migration. Over half (56%) know of someone who has been deported – or have themselves been deported – from abroad.

---

Built after the arrival of internally displaced people and funded by the diaspora, migration has been integral to the development of Shahrake Mahdia.

---

Overall migration abroad is not viewed in a positive light, but rather a last resort ahead of the fall of Kabul.



Nassim Majidi  
Najia Alizada  
Zabihullah Barakzai  
Hannah Murray



Photo: Nassim Majidi for MIGNEX.

Shahrake Mahdia is a township (*Shahrak*) in Dashte Barchi, Kabul province, west of Kabul’s city centre.

The township was built 16 years ago, with the arrival of the first group of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the central provinces of Afghanistan. The strength of social networks and the displacement of entire communities led to investments – including from diaspora members - for the development of the town.

Shahrake Mahdia is an informal, expanding urban neighbourhood of Kabul. During

MIGNEX fieldwork in July 2021, the township was experiencing major livelihood collapse and protracted stagnation – a result of the third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic and the fall of Kabul. The impacts of climate change were also pervasive, many residents are facing water shortages.

Almost half of surveyed young adults (47%) are either unemployed (17%) or doing unpaid housework or looking after children (30%). Most (88%) consider it difficult to earn a living and feed a family. By the end of the fieldwork, the security situation had deteriorated significantly, with the sudden presence of the Taliban approaching Darulaman, close to Shahrake Mahdia.

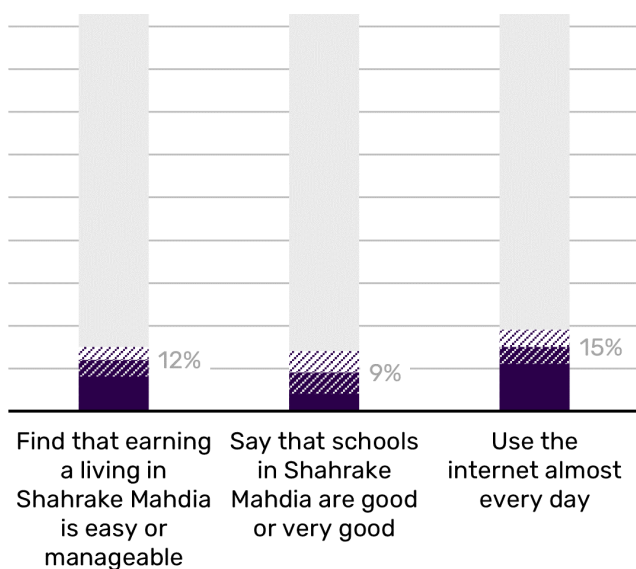
This brief offers an overview of migration and development dynamics in the days before the fall of the GoIRA.

This case study brief is based on fieldwork and survey data. The MIGNEX team also conducted research in Shahrake Jabrael and Behsud and carried out a review of migration-relevant policies in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup>

**Migration from Shahrake Mahdia**

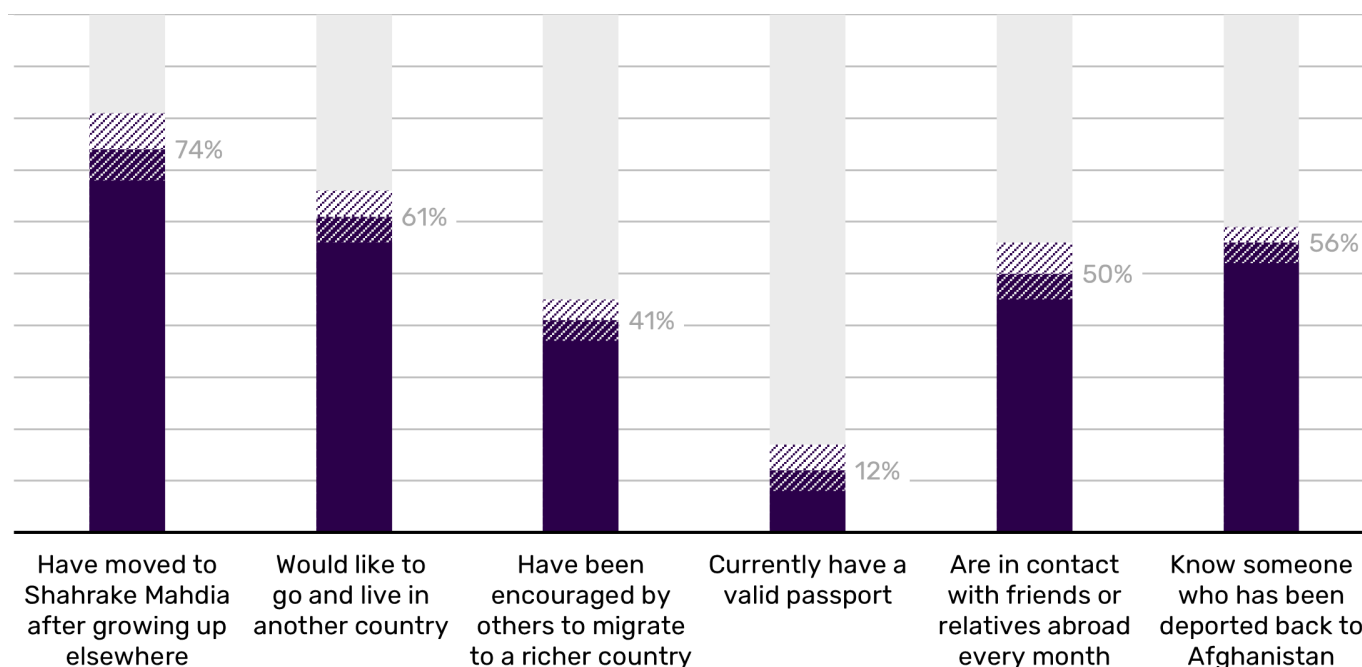
Many young adults (84%) have family or friends living abroad, predominantly in Iran (70%), Germany (29%), Sweden (21%), Australia (20%) and Turkey (20%).

In addition, many young adults living in Shahrake Mahdia have direct experiences of



**Figure 1. Indicators of development**

Source: MIGNEX Survey. Hatched area: confidence interval.



**Figure 2. Indicators of migration dynamics**

Source: MIGNEX survey. Hatched area: confidence interval.

irregular migration, having been displaced internally first, and then migrating to Iran or Pakistan (and sometimes both). Most do not possess a passport. Feasibility of getting a visa to travel abroad via regular routes is low.

One in ten (10%) of surveyed young adults have experienced a failed migration attempt, and nearly one-third (32%) know of someone stuck in a different country than intended. In addition, over half of young adults (56%) know of someone who has been deported – or have themselves been deported – from abroad.

Although many young adults are aware of the dangers of migration, international out-migration is viewed as necessary. Over half of young adults surveyed (61%) would prefer to leave Afghanistan in the next five years.

Despite this, many did not expect to leave. More than two-thirds of surveyed young adults (72%) expected to stay in Shahrake Mahdia in the next five years.

Of those young adults who preferred to stay, one-quarter (24%) would rather leave Shahrake Mahdia and migrate internally – often for higher education, employment or improved access to services and facilities.

Over one-third (39%) of young adults know of someone from Shahrake Mahdia who has migrated internally in the past five years.

Almost one-quarter (20%) of young adults have seriously considered migrating internally within Afghanistan in the past year.

### Migration aspirations

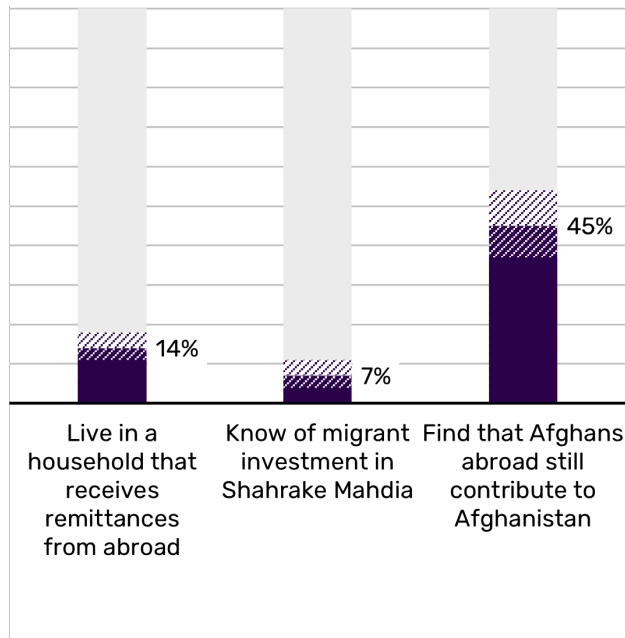
Overall, international migration isn't viewed as a positive prospect by young adults, but rather a 'last resort' ahead of the fall of Kabul. Just under one-third of surveyed young adults have (27%) seriously considered international migration in the past year.

Many young adults feel a lack of hope for a future - both for themselves and the area. Although they hope to continue with their education in the township, young people often found themselves jobless, in low paid jobs, or migrating and risking their lives.

Two-thirds (66%) of young adults are internal migrants – many of whom were IDPs from the central highlands and provinces. Finding themselves in protracted displacement

*No one's mental health is in good condition these days. Even children are not in good condition due to insecurity.*

Focus group participant



**Figure 3. Migration–development interactions**

Source: MIGNEX Survey. Hatched area: confidence interval.

and unable to return home, many residents feel stuck in a situation beyond their control.

### Gender and migration

Perceptions of migration vary somewhat in between men and women. Many women spoke of the relocation to Kabul as traumatic. Since regular migration is considered almost impossible, many prefer to remain, in the hope of a calm life in the township.

Women also noted the increasing access to local services, which might not be available to them in other parts of the country. Young men did not speak about the trauma of past migration – many knew migration would happen again, even for those who had already returned, or had been returned.

For the most part, women seem to be ‘left behind’, with their husbands having migrated abroad on their own. Over three times as many

young men (37%) than women (14%) have lived abroad for at least one year.<sup>2</sup>

### Links between migration and development

Migration is intertwined with Shahrake Mahdia’s development. Most surveyed young adults (84%) have a family member, relative or friend living abroad – around one-quarter (17%) of whom reported that their household received remittances.

However, since August 2021, the Afghan financial system has been in crisis and the banking sector has neared collapse. US sanctions have posed significant limits to state and private banks’ liquidity, and the ability of Shahrake Mahdia’s support network to send remittances. Many who remain do so without support, remittances, and livelihoods.

### Notes

1. Fieldwork consisting of key informant interviews, focus group discussions and observations was carried out by Nassim Majidi, Zabihullah Barakzai, Najia Alizada in June–July 2021. A face-to-face survey of 500 randomly selected residents (aged 18–39 years) was conducted by Samuel Hall in July 2021.
2. Since the fall of Kabul, many of the women encountered during data collection remained in the area. Many felt that leaving the country was not possible due to their gender. *Afghan women, migration and their future*, Migration Policy Practice. See: <https://publications.iom.int/books/migration-policy-practice-vol-xi-number-4-december-2021-april-2022>
3. This data was collected before the fall of Kabul in August 2021. It is a baseline of the situation before the fall and remains a key contextual and historical element of understanding of two decades of humanitarian assistance and Afghans’ own investments in the development of their communities.

### mignex.org

MIGNEX – Aligning Migration Management and the Migration–Development Nexus – is a five-year research project (2018–2023) with the core ambition of creating new knowledge on migration, development and policy. It is carried out by a consortium of nine partners: The Peace Research Institute Oslo (coordinator), Danube University Krems, the University of Ghana, Koç University, Lahore University of Management Sciences, Maastricht University, ODI, the University of Oxford and Samuel Hall.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons CC BY NC 4.0 License.

Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2022  
ISBN (print) 978-82-343-0297-8  
ISBN (online) 978-82-343-0298-5

Suggested citation: Majidi, N., Alizada, N., Barakzai, Z., Murray, H. (2022) *Migration and development dynamics in Shahrake Mahdia, Afghanistan*. MIGNEX Case Study Brief. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo.



MIGNEX has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 770453. The views presented are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the institutions with which they are affiliated. The European Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information herein.