

PATHWAY TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFGHANISTAN: THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

The Afghanistan is suffered from wars from many decades and have very poor education system. Therefore, this study conducted to investigate the role of education in the sustainable development and also analyze the problem faced by Afghan government to implement such policies. This study used the thematic analysis to achieve the objective and search the certain solutions for Afghan government. After the review of the existing literature and concluded that education is the main pillar of the sustainable development in the economy like Afghanistan. However, the education expenditure trend no in line with GDP per capita growth in Afghanistan. This study recommended that reintegrate all learners into the educational system, guarantee a safe and protective learning environment and mobilize and support educators by ensuring their salaries are disbursed promptly.

Keywords: Education, Economic Development, Afghanistan, Human Capital, Productivity, Poverty Reduction

1. Introduction

The fourth goal of the SDG encourage the education to achieve the higher economic development. Because, education the main pillar of the sustainable development (SD). The Afghanistan is suffered from wars from many decades and have very poor education system (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021). Globally, education has been acknowledged as a critical

component of sustainable development. Operative education initiatives can have a beneficial impact on how the world's progressively exhausted natural resources (NRC) are managed. Students who partake in education get the knowledge, skills, and experiences required to effectively lead their communities and make educated decisions about how to manage their NRC. It is widely accepted that education plays an important role in boosting living standards across the world and has made substantial contributions to societies and global progress. A superior education should provide individuals with the information and skills required to make answerable decisions and aggressively participate in global politics and economy. Education has long been recognized as a critical element of SD in societies across the world. Nature is a unique and irreplaceable resource that meets all human requirements. The current balance between mankind and environment is so sensitive, interconnected, and fragile that it can be impossible to pinpoint the cause of a particular crisis, tragedy, or devastation. Some projections predict that by 2050, our planet's population will grasp eight (8) billion. It is not problematic to recognize that in the current state of non-ecological technologies, this will result in a sharp worsening of environmental quality (EnQ), severe pollution of water and air sinks, exhaustion of NRC, and a slew of complex economic, energy, food, and sociopolitical problems. The idea of sustainable development, which aims to solve present issues and avoid them in the future, was established in order to find resolutions to the situation that has emerged at the threshold of the twenty-first century. The phrase "sustainable development" is derived from the English language and may be interpreted as steady, maintained, developing, and ongoing development. The literature has almost a hundred expressions of this topic. Its most famous expression comes from the 1987 "Our Common Future" talk. He defines "sustainable development" as growth that does not impair the requirements of the current generation while also benefiting future generations (Uralovich et al., 2023).

Education and training can help to build social capital and achieve individual and communal goals, such as enhancing civic behavior and, more generally, making communities safer. Social-capital (SK) can also boost economic recital by increasing trust (Huang *et al.*, 2009). In most circumstances, increased SK improves well-being. However, social capital may depreciate, as when a job loss renders links of former coworkers outdated. Learning decisions can deplete bonding and bridging SK (Putnam, 2000). For example, someone from a low-income family may want to attend university to increase their human-capital (HK). Though, they may face antagonism from people in their community. Cultural-capital (CK) refers to non-financial societal assets, such as educational. CK accumulates over time and may be both actively gained and passively 'inherited' through socialization. It has an impact on personality and thought patterns. It is a kind of statement and self-presentation influenced by the culture in which one lives. Education can produce externalities because growing someone's cultural capital influences their children's educational choices (Weininger, 2005). It comprises psychological variables such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, cognitive-flexibility and morality. These and other character traits help people recognize and navigate social, occupational, and personal challenges. Identity capital is produced by psychosocial abilities, which appear to be primarily cognitive and required for the development of intelligent-strategies and judgments. Education and training may improve life and job happiness, as well as health, by increasing identity capital and allowing individuals to play a more meaningful role in society. Labour market changes (whether or not supported by educational investment) can render identity capital outdated if a new industry or occupation forces people to create a new image of themselves that is better adapted to new conditions (Côté, 2005). Different forms of human capital do not grow independently. The extent of the

advantages created by education and training appears to be related to the interplay of the four categories of human capital. Importantly, different forms of human capital do not develop evenly, concurrently, or consistently favorably. Opportunities for better income from increasing HK may be missed owing to an individual's beliefs and behavior. Despite their ability, someone may decline advancement due to peer pressure (social capital) (Russo *et al.*, 2013).

Afghanistan's educational system has a long and rich history. By 1956, there were 762 educational institutions catering to 121,000 students. Among these, 27 were classified as primary schools, comprising 23 for boys and four designated for girls. By the conclusion of 1977, the oversight and administration of educational establishments were allocated to various authorities. The origins of universities and higher education in Afghanistan trace back to the founding of the Kabul medical faculty in 1932. Subsequently, several additional departments were established and integrated with Kabul University. A small cohort of students received education in the available resources, influenced by foreign lecturers (Sherzad, 2017). This special issue expands on the previous limited literature like (Aarts *et al.*, 2020; McCowan, 2019; Schendel & McCowan, 2015) to investigate the latter, and less generally mentioned, role of education in achieving the SDGs especially in Afghanistan. The pivotal role of education necessitates a unique regard from both society and the state, influencing the dynamics of economic development (GDP). Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate the role of education in the sustainable development in Afghanistan. Also analyze the obstacles in the way to provide education to the children's and tried to suggest the possibilities and potential to achieve the sustainable development.

2. Role of Education in Economic Development

During this time, how education may help with economic growth. Initially, convergence theories highlighted the need of civilizations adapting to the difficulties provided by new technology breakthroughs. Neo-Marxist ideas later focused emphasis on the topic of neocolonialism. Furthermore, neo-institutionalism ideas evolved, focusing on global education culture, which became increasingly important as a framework for legitimizing policy. In the postwar period, resulting in their contribution to the emergence of a major worldwide discourse on education. Politicians sought the advice of international agency specialists to steer educational changes and strategize on borrowing and investing cash in education with the goal of attaining both social and economic growth (Resnik, 2006). Since the 1960s, HK theory has played an important role. Schultz (1961) views argue that education is critical for economic progress and may be a limiting element in this process.

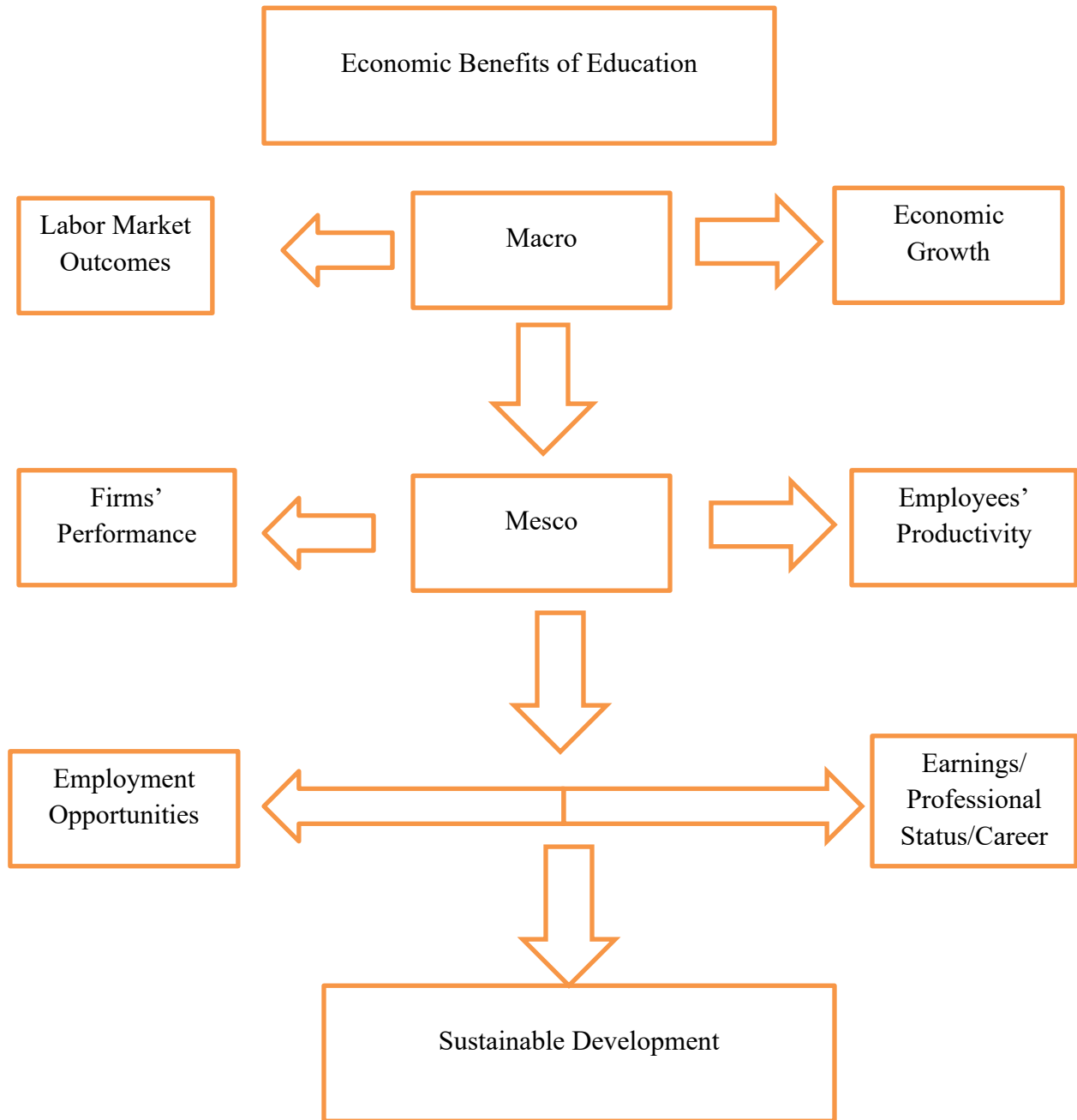
Following World War II, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) was founded to fund physical capital (PK) projects in war-affected and economically disadvantaged countries. Economists at the time felt that a lack of physical capital was the root cause of national poverty. The IBRD provided financial assistance for capital projects in several countries; however, many of these programs were not successful. It was seen that wealthier countries devastated by World War II quickly accepted large amounts of new physical capital, whilst the poorest nations were incapable of properly employing even small amounts. It was claimed that a country's ability to successfully use PK is dependent on its level of HK, arguing that if HK does not rise in tandem with PK, it becomes a limiting factor in economic progress. Furthermore, Schultz (1961) stated that HK is more likely to be the limiting form of capital for growth, as foreign investors have a strong preference for physical capital but are less inclined to invest in human capital (Breton, 2013).

Economic development refers to a country's success in the economic, social, cultural, and environmental sectors. This notion argues that economic progress alone is insufficient for a country. It is similarly important for the nation to improve its performance in a variety of other sectors. Every country strives to improve the quality of life for its residents. To attain this aim, they implement a variety of measures, one of which is investment in the education sector (Storey, 2017). In every country, it appears that educational possibilities are mostly offered to younger, more economically affluent members of the population. As a result, social and equality issues in educational governance are inextricably linked to economic variables. This is clearly linked to how education promotes economic growth and the quality of that education, which may influence investment decisions in education (Argy, 2006).

As the percentage of educated workers upsurges, because these people are better equipped to execute activities that require reading and critical thinking. Nonetheless, obtaining a higher level of education incurs significant expenses. A country does not need to develop a full network of colleges or institutions to gain the benefits of education; it may execute basic literacy measures while still seeing economic growth. Countries with a higher percentage of their population enrolled and graduating from educational institutions involvement faster GDP. As a result, many countries invest in basic education to improve their GDP.

In this perspective, education is considered as an investment in human capital, similar to investing in high-quality equipment. According to UNESCO and UNHDP, developed countries have a higher enrollment ratio than developing countries. This ratio compares the children to school age enrollment (Bhattarai *et al.*, 2025).

Figure 1: Economic Benefits of Education



This suggests that there is a minimal and balanced imbalance between male and female populations in Afghanistan. However, there is a large disparity in the proportion of educated males to educated girls. Afghanistan has one of the world's lowest literacy rates. The literacy rate among guys over 15 is 62%. In comparison, female literacy rates are barely 18%. Only one in every five Afghan women can read or write. This condition is aggravated by widespread and chronic poverty in Afghanistan, with over 36% of the population living below the poverty line, particularly in rural areas. Because of the constraints on economic growth in these rural areas, the illiteracy rate among rural women is three times higher than that of their urban counterparts (Lan, 2022). Human civilization has both monetary and non-monetary components, hence it is important to include both while planning or carrying out any action. Education is an excellent example of an activity that both impacts and is impacted by various variables (Afzal *et al.*, 2010). Figure 1 shows a clear classification of economic benefits at all three levels. The kinds are of SK: (a) bonding - amongst identical groups of individuals; (b) bridging -between different groups; and (c) connecting capital - connections with persons in positions of power (Russo *et al.*, 2013).

Investigations in this critical subject must be developed, implemented, and monitored in a complete and methodical manner (Karatzia-Stavlioti & Lambropoulos, 2009). Investing in education includes investing in human capital, which entails producing a trained workforce that, in turn, promotes innovation creation and productivity (Ziberi *et al.*, 2022). The numbers in Table 1 and Figure 2 show that the Afghan government has committed varied percentages of its overall spending to lowering illiteracy and improving education quality in the country. An analysis of this data reveals a positive correlation between economic growth and educational spending. However, due the security situation in Afghanistan the education expenditure shows ineffective effect on economic growth and play a little role in the SD.

Moreover, it also advocates for active learning and teaching practices that motivate and vest students to change their behavior and take the initiative for sustainable growth. As a result, education for SD promotes abilities, envisioning potential futures, and collaborative decision-making. Environmental sustainability entails managing natural resources wisely to guarantee their future availability. The Earth is a finite ecosystem with limited land, water, and animals; hence it is critical. The only way to ensure that future generations have everything they require to survive is via sustainable resource usage. One of the main ideas of SD is to live within the environmental boundaries. Climate change is one of the moments of not taking action. However, sustainable development is about much more than just the environment. It also entails establishing a strong, healthy, and equitable society (Uralovich *et al.*, 2023).

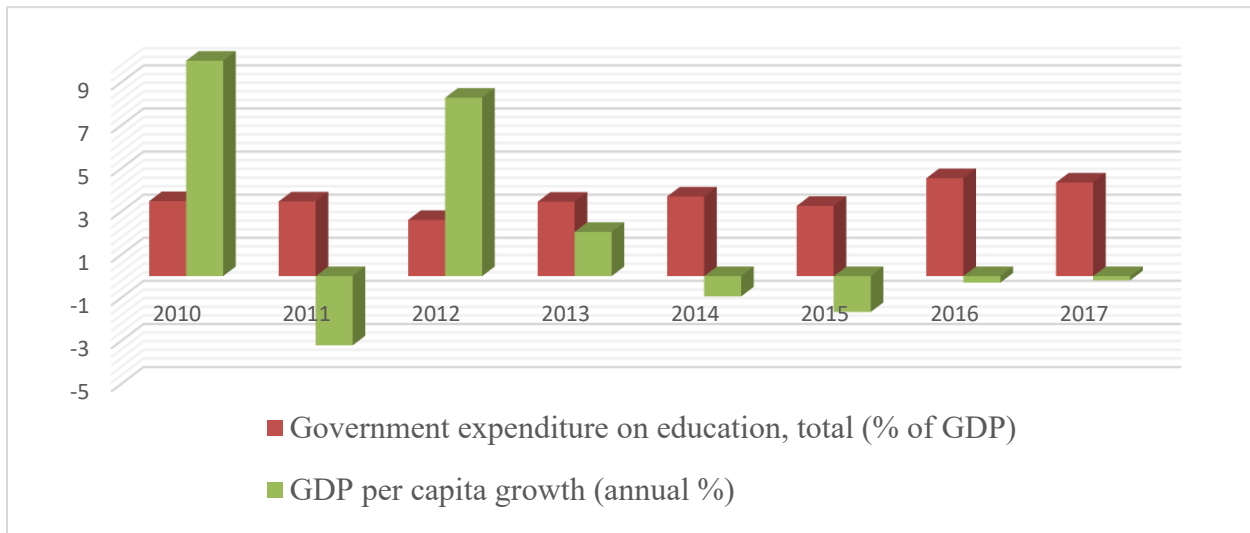
Table 1: Government outlay on education (GEE), total (% of GDP) and GDP per capita growth (annual %)

S.No	Year	Government outlay on education, total (% of GDP)	GDP per capita growth (annual %)
1	2010	3.47945	11.05503
2	2011	3.46201	-3.2133
3	2012	2.6042	8.279369
4	2013	3.45446	2.052068
5	2014	3.69522	-0.93998
6	2015	3.2558	-1.66506

S.No	Year	Government outlay on education, total (% of GDP)	GDP per capita growth (annual %)
7	2016	4.54397	-0.30012
8	2017	4.34319	-0.19557

Data Source: World Development Indicators (2025)

Figure 2: GEE and GDP



Data Source: World Development Indicators (2025)

3. Challenges to Education Sector in Afghanistan

Over the course of more than forty years of conflict, Afghanistan's education system has been significantly impacted. Afghanistan's social and economic sectors have faced several difficulties and challenges during the last four decades as a result of conflict and political instability. However, the primary hurdles in the education sector can be defined as follows: Shortage of infrastructure, lack of trained instructors, shortage of female teachers, cultural views, geographical constraints, and poor government leadership and management. For example, in early 2020, 9.7 million kids attended school, with 38% of them being girls (Moe, 2024). At the same time, 46% of schools lack basic infrastructure and facilities (Borges, 2025). Students sit beneath the sky and continue their study. Teachers inform children that they must leave school when it is raining, windy, or overcast. A large number of pupils confront this challenge, particularly in rural areas and places dominated by the Pashtun ethnic group. These issues are caused by officials, and inadequate government and donor financial allocations. There is a teacher deficit, particularly among professional instructors, in Afghanistan's rural schools. During decades of internal strife and turmoil, the majority of HK went to neighboring Pakistan, Iran, and other nations, resulting in significant shortfalls in the country's human capital development. And the level of competency in the specific sector of education decreased. Children in Afghanistan receive lower-quality education because just 48.0% of their instructors have the necessary academic credentials (UNICEF, 2018).

Another significant and sensitive difficulty is a dearth of female instructors due to the population's traditional culture and other social norms, particularly among rural people. Environmental factors have a direct impact on this issue, which has emerged due to a lack of

infrastructure. In terms of local beliefs, tradition is quite significant in Afghan society, particularly among women. It is vital to adhere to these ancient rules and values. Many girls are denied admission to schools. For many years, some of them have been denied the opportunity to pursue their secondary level education in the rural locations. This strength be one of the reasons behind society's overall low education level. As a result of the nation's five decades of war and political strife, particularly in the medical sector, where there may currently be no female doctors. Another issue is the geographical fences. Afghanistan is a nation with mountains. The majority of the territory is covered by mountains and valleys, and there is no normal transportation infrastructure. Going to school in the mountains requires a long trip over valleys, which is challenging for children, disabled pupils, and girls who live in these places. This type of issue is very prevalent in Nuristan, Kunar, Badakhshan, and many other regions. Meanwhile, pupils in these areas face additional challenges due to school infrastructure deficiencies and the lack of facilities. As a result, during overcast and rainy days, some schools are closed or have fewer courses than usual. Finally, poor government leadership presents another obstacle. For example, one may encounter difficulties obtaining admission, transferring schools, paying additional expenditures, as well as poor curriculum and the usage of various uniforms. All of these behaviors directly affect the country's educational system (Abid, 2025). In addition, several schoolbooks were previously printed and distributed outside of the nation. There have been transportation and political issues with the neighboring countries, as well as several other challenges. To offer a vivid illustration, in 2012, more than four million schoolbooks. It implies that a large proportion of pupils have been attending school without books for over ten months (Borges, 2025).

4. Discussion

According to Gebre (2020), enhance the socioeconomic condition of people and society as a whole, demonstrating that empowering individuals has a favorable influence on GDP. Similarly, investing in education entails investing in HK, such as developing a skilled labor force, which in turn influences innovation and productivity, which is predicted to boost economic growth (Ziberi *et al.*, 2022). For example, Bredt and Sycz (2007) found in an OCED study that in 1995, about 29 nations spent 5.42% of their GDP on all stages of education. These nations boosted their spending to an average of 5.9% of GDP in 2003. They evaluated the link between effective education spending and GDP and claimed that they agreed with Leuven and Oosterbeek (2007), who discovered that "human capital has 'dynamic complementarities', so earlier learning makes subsequent learning easier".

Similarly, UNICEF (2018) in Afghanistan discovered a school scarcity, limited transportation, and 48% of instructors with only a basic academic level, resulting in inferior educational quality. Furthermore, Aurangzeb and Jana (2016) wrote that there are 762 schools in 1956, serving 121,000 pupils. 27 of these institutions were elementary high schools, with 23 being for boys and four for girls. Gebre (2020), however, stated that "access to the education is likely to contribute improvements in the socio-economic status of individuals and community at large, which indicated empowering individuals has a positive impact on economic development". According to Valero (2021), "there is strong evidence supporting the links between education and the determinants of growth in terms of investment in technology and generating innovation itself - the driver of growth in the long run." Highly trained workers are essential for the development of new technology, as well as the establishment and management of successful organizations. According to Ziberi *et al.* (2022), investing in education entails investing in human resources, i.e., producing a trained labor force that will influence the production of

inventions, raise productivity, and other benefits that are projected to boost economic growth. According to Hagan (2023), enrollment in all levels of education in Afghanistan has increased dramatically. According to Bonilla-Jurado *et al.* (2024), Education for Sustainable Development promotes academic achievement, motivation, and engagement, as well as students' ability to handle difficult issues in an environmentally responsible manner. However, considerable impediments, such as a lack of finances and proper teacher training, prevent successful implementation. Therefore, the above discussion indicated that education is main pillar of the development and play a significant role in the sustainable development in Afghanistan.

5. Conclusion

The fourth goal of the SDG encourage the education to achieve the higher economic development. Because, education the main pillar of the sustainable development. The Afghanistan is suffered from wars from many decades and have very poor education system. Therefore, this study conducted to investigate the role of education in the sustainable development and also analyze the problem faced by Afghan government to implement such policies. This study used the thematic analysis to achieve the objective and search the certain solutions for Afghan government. After the review of the existing literature and concluded that education is the main pillar of the sustainable development in the economy like Afghanistan. However, the education expenditure trend no in line with GDP per capita growth in Afghanistan.

4. Recommendations

- Reintegrate all learners into the educational system.
- Guarantee a safe and protective learning environment.
- Mobilize and support educators by ensuring their salaries are disbursed promptly.
- Eliminate obstacles to female participation in education.
- Remove barriers to female involvement in education.
- Ensure sustainable financing for education through the remobilization of existing and new financial resources.
- Improve stakeholder collaboration in education.

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