

Addressing State Fragility through Inclusive Economic Development in Afghanistan

*Bahaudin G. Mujtaba
Belay Seyoum*

Abstract: For nearly five decades, Afghanistan has endured persistent conditions characterized by fear, uncertainty, hopelessness, civil unrest, political instability, and prolonged suffering among diverse ethnic groups. These phenomena are strongly correlated with varying degrees of state fragility, which has remained a defining feature of the nation's governance structure. Empirical evidence and historical analyses indicate that countries classified as fragile states for extended periods often exhibit systemic deficiencies such as ineffective leadership, poor governance mechanisms, endemic corruption, and recurrent external interventions. These factors collectively undermine institutional capacity and erode public trust, thereby creating a self-perpetuating cycle of instability.

When state fragility is not addressed through timely and comprehensive interventions, the probability of a transition toward state failure increases significantly. Such deterioration amplifies societal dependence on localized coping strategies, including the critical role of household-level economic resilience and informal community networks. In the Afghan context, the severe political and economic crises witnessed in recent decades could have been mitigated, or potentially prevented, through proactive strategic planning and collaborative or shared governance. This would have required both public and private sector leaders to recognize early indicators of fragility, adopt evidence-based policy frameworks, and mobilize collective action toward national prosperity under a unified vision.

This research aims to deliver a rigorous and multidimensional assessment of the salient warning signs associated with state fragility in Afghanistan. It emphasizes the necessity for inclusive and sustainable economic development as a cornerstone for long-term stability. Drawing upon comparative data and best practices from nations that have successfully navigated similar challenges, the analysis integrates theoretical models of political stability with empirical insights into entrepreneurial ecosystems. The study delineates actionable strategies for diagnosing, evaluating, and mitigating fragility through the systematic application of core management functions—planning, organizing, leading, and controlling—within the context of economic development initiatives. These recommendations underscore the pivotal role of coordinated or shared leadership and institutional reform in fostering resilience and advancing Afghanistan toward a trajectory of sustainable growth and stability.

INTRODUCTION

State fragility (SF) refers to a condition in which a nation exhibits significant weaknesses or deficiencies in performing essential governmental functions, particularly those related to authority, institutional capacity, and political legitimacy (Seyoum, 2024, p.41; Mujtaba and Seyoum, 2025a). These core functions are fundamental for maintaining social order, delivering public services, and ensuring the rule of law. When these functions deteriorate, the state becomes vulnerable to internal and external shocks, thereby increasing the likelihood of instability and conflict. Each year, millions of individuals across the globe experience the direct or indirect consequences of SF, with many forced into displacement for extended periods, sometimes spanning decades, due to persistent insecurity and governance failures (Seyoum and Camargo, 2021).

One major driver of state fragility is the weakness of public institutions, which often creates fertile ground for systemic corruption and abuse of power by individuals in authority or influential groups (Cavico and Mujtaba, 2011). Such institutional fragility undermines accountability mechanisms and erodes public trust, thereby exacerbating governance challenges. Furthermore, moral and ethical breakdowns have been evident in fragile states such as Afghanistan, where human rights violations have persisted for over five decades. In these contexts, certain police officers and government officials frequently act as though they are above the law, engaging in wrongful punishment of innocent individuals or entire communities as a means of consolidating and retaining political power (Mujtaba, 2007).

If fragile states fail to implement strategic development and governance reforms, they risk transitioning into failed or collapsed states. In such scenarios, extremist factions, warlords, and populist leaders often emerge as dominant actors, further destabilizing the political landscape (Zürcher, 2012; Mujtaba and Seyoum, 2025a). Populism has a profoundly polarizing effect on society. As Seyoum explains, “Populism has a polarizing effect as it pits one group against another thus incentivizing socioeconomic actors to undermine democratic institutions for partisan political gains,” which frequently intensifies ethnic divisions and fuels violent conflicts across the country (2024, p. 31).

The study provides a comprehensive analysis of fragile states that have successfully transitioned from prolonged instability to relative stability by leveraging sustained economic growth and promoting social equity through inclusive development strategies. These strategies emphasize the active engagement of all societal segments, including diverse ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic groups, as well as key stakeholders across public and private sectors. By fostering participatory governance and equitable resource distribution, such inclusionary approaches have demonstrated their capacity to reduce structural inequalities and mitigate conflict drivers within fragile contexts.

In addition to examining these macro-level strategies, the paper places particular emphasis on the catalytic role of entrepreneurship in stimulating economic growth and alleviating poverty. Entrepreneurial activity not only generates employment opportunities but also fosters innovation, enhances productivity, and strengthens local market, factors that are critical for sustainable development in post-conflict and fragile environments. These insights are especially relevant for policymakers, business leaders, and development practitioners in Afghanistan, where entrepreneurial initiatives can serve as a cornerstone for rebuilding institutional capacity and promoting socioeconomic resilience.

Overall, the study seeks to address and critically reflect upon the following research questions, which aim to deepen understanding of the interplay between inclusive governance, entrepreneurial development, and long-term stability in fragile states:

1. What is state fragility, why is it important given its role in home economics, and how to measure it?
2. What are the major indicators of state fragility?
3. Is Afghanistan a fragile state or a failed state? If so, what are the fundamental causes and outcomes of state fragility?
4. How can nations transition out of state fragility?
5. What is the role of sustainable economic development, entrepreneurship and industrialization in state fragility?

LITERATURE REVIEW

State fragility exerts a profound and multidimensional influence on household economics within every nation, shaping patterns of resource allocation, consumption, and overall socioeconomic well-being. Consequently, policymakers must give sustained and systematic attention to this phenomenon to design and implement incremental yet equitable reforms that improve the living standards of all citizens, both men and women, across diverse demographic and geographic contexts (Ahmadzai et al., 2025). Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced understanding of home economics as a critical component of national development, since household-level decision-making directly affects macroeconomic stability and social cohesion.

Studying the variables associated with home economics, such as income distribution, resource management, and financial literacy, enables governments and development practitioners to equip individuals and families with essential skills for optimizing the use of limited resources. This competency is particularly vital in fragile states, where economic volatility and institutional weaknesses often exacerbate poverty and inequality. By strengthening household economic capacity, nations can enhance resilience, improve quality of life, and foster inclusive growth that benefits every family unit, thereby contributing to broader objectives of sustainable development and social equity.

Home Economics

Home economics constitutes a multidisciplinary domain encompassing critical dimensions such as nutrition, food management, household budgeting, and the strategic allocation of limited resources. In low-income countries, where resource scarcity is pervasive and economic volatility is common, the ability to optimize resource utilization becomes not only desirable but essential for survival and long-term well-being. Developing competencies in home economics equips individuals with the analytical and practical skills necessary to make informed decisions regarding food selection, meal planning, and financial management. These skills collectively contribute to improved nutritional outcomes, enhanced health indicators, and overall household resilience.

Furthermore, the study and application of home economics extend beyond individual households, generating positive spillover effects at the community and regional levels. As individuals acquire expertise in household management, they often disseminate this knowledge within their social networks, thereby fostering community development and contributing to poverty alleviation. Importantly, home economics education serves as a powerful tool for women's empowerment, particularly in fragile contexts such as Afghanistan, where women frequently assume primary caregiving and household management responsibilities. By enabling women to exercise greater control over economic decisions and resource allocation, such education enhances gender equity and strengthens social structures.

Investing in home economics education in resource-constrained nations can therefore build a more resilient and adaptive population, better equipped to confront poverty and improve overall quality of life (Mujtaba, 2025a; Seyoum, 2024). While state fragility and home economics may initially appear as distinct concepts, they are intricately interconnected in several critical ways, as discussed in the following sections (Mujtaba and Seyoum, 2025b).

Economic instability. State fragility is often characterized by poverty, inequality, and lack of economic opportunities. This can lead to households struggling to make ends meet, making home economics a challenge. In fragile states, income streams may be irregular or unpredictable, making it difficult for households to budget, save, and plan. Limited access to resources is another major element to economic instability since fragile states often lack basic infrastructure, such as reliable energy, water, and sanitation. This can make everyday household tasks, like cooking and cleaning, more difficult and time-consuming.

Food security, availability and affordability. State fragility can lead to food shortages, making it challenging for households to access nutritious food on a consistent basis. Even when food is available, fragile states often experience high levels of inflation, making food unaffordable for many households.

Health and well-being access can be limited. Fragile states often have underdeveloped healthcare systems, making it difficult for households to access medical care when needed. Additionally, most households may live in overcrowded, unsanitary conditions, increasing the risk of disease transmission.

Education and skills development limitations. State fragility can lead to a lack of access to quality education, making it difficult for households to acquire skills and knowledge necessary for economic empowerment. Similarly, they often lack opportunities for skills development, thereby making it challenging for most households to acquire skills necessary for economic mobility.

Social cohesion and cooperation challenges. State fragility can lead to social unrest, making it challenging for households to maintain social connections and community relationships. Also, the level of trust and cooperation among community members may be limited, which makes it difficult for households to access support networks and collective resources.

State fragility exerts extensive and systemic effects on household economics, influencing families' capacity to allocate resources efficiently, secure essential goods and services, and sustain critical social networks that underpin community resilience. These disruptions often manifest in reduced income stability, heightened vulnerability to market fluctuations, and diminished access to education and healthcare, all of which collectively erode household well-being. Consequently, addressing state fragility necessitates a multidimensional and evidence-based approach that goes beyond short-term interventions. Such an approach should incorporate a rigorous analysis of the underlying structural and institutional drivers of fragility within each national context, while simultaneously promoting inclusive economic development, robust social protection mechanisms, and targeted community empowerment initiatives. By integrating these strategies, policymakers can mitigate the adverse impacts of fragility, strengthen governance systems, and foster conditions conducive to sustainable growth and social equity.

State Fragility

"State fragility" refers to the weakness or deficiencies of governments in performing essential functions such as exercising authority, providing critical services like education, and maintaining legitimacy to enforce commonly accepted rules (Mujtaba, 2025a). State fragility can be understood through multiple paradigms. For instance, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines it as a country's vulnerability to internal and external shocks that undermine state authority, legitimacy, and capacity to deliver basic services. According to the OECD States of Fragility 2022 report, fragility is "the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacities of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks...It occurs in a spectrum of intensity across six dimensions: economic, environmental, human, political, security and societal" (OECD, 2022, para. 1).

Similarly, the World Bank views fragility as situations where governments lack the capacity, legitimacy, or authority to govern effectively or provide essential services. The Fund for Peace (FFP) describes fragility as a dynamic and complex condition involving social, economic, political, and security indicators that heighten vulnerability to instability and conflict. The Brookings Institution emphasizes institutional weakness and illegitimacy, where governments fail to maintain law and order or protect citizens from violence and exploitation. Harvard University's Center for International Development (CID) defines fragility as the inability to provide basic security, justice, and welfare due to weak institutions, poor governance, and limited capacity to deliver public goods (Harvard University, 2020; Ines, 2017; Kedir, 2011; Kennedy, 2013; Lanati & Thiele, 2018; Mair, 2008).

Despite definitional differences, common elements of fragility are evident in Afghanistan. Decades of armed conflict have driven millions into deeper crises (Ahmadzai et al., 2025; Mujtaba, 2007), causing widespread suffering in South Asia. Poverty and unemployment exacerbate these risks, creating a self-reinforcing "fragility trap" that obstructs political stability and economic progress (Seyoum, 2024). Prolonged conflicts in fragile states have destroyed lives, infrastructure, and disrupted global supply chains across South Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Brinkerhoff, 2011; Faust, Grävingholt, & Ziaja, 2015). Research further shows that instability often leads to authoritarianism, resource shortages, and soaring inflation in food and fuel prices worldwide (Zürcher, 2012; Brinkerhoff, 2014; Carment et al., 2015; Chen & Feng, 1996; Choong & Lam, 2010; Collyer, 2006; Dimitrova & Triki, 2018; Faroh & Shen, 2015).

When one asks experts, international business students, or even prompting Google search or any artificial intelligence software (ChatGPT, Meta AI, Open AI, etc.) regarding fragile or collapsed nations, the following countries are likely to have been considered failed states over the past century along with some common rationale for such colossal failures:

1. *Haiti*: Haiti's government collapsed in 1991, in 2004, and recently again in 2024, which has resulted in many periods of instability, civil unrest, and continued violence. In the past, Haiti has struggled with corruption, poverty, and external interference, and has required international intervention to establish a stable government.
2. *Yugoslavia*: Yugoslavia's government collapsed in 1991, which results in a series of brutal civil wars that lasted until 2003. The wars were fueled by ethnic divisions, corruption, and external interference, and the country was eventually dissolved into several independent states.
3. *Cambodia*: Cambodia's government collapsed in 1970, which brought a period of brutal civil war and genocide until 1993. The country required international intervention to establish a stable government, and continues to deal with corruption, poverty, and human rights abuses. However, Cambodia has remained politically stable and has made tremendous economic gains over the past two decades.

4. *Democratic Republic of Congo*: The DRC has continually struggled with instability and violence since 1996. Weak institutions, corruption, and external interference have all contributed to the country's failure to establish a stable and effective government.

5. *Liberia*: Liberia's government collapsed in 1989, leading to a brutal civil war that lasted for over a decade until 2003. The war was fueled by corruption, ethnic divisions, and external interference, and the country required international intervention to establish a stable government.

6. *Rwanda*: Rwanda's government collapsed in 1994, leading to a genocide that resulted in the deaths of over 800,000 people. The genocide was fueled by ethnic divisions, corruption, and external interference, and the country required international intervention to establish a stable government.

7. *Sierra Leone*: Sierra Leone's government collapsed in 1991, leading to a brutal civil war that lasted for over a decade until 2002. The war was fueled by corruption, ethnic divisions, and external interference, requiring international intervention to establish a stable government.

8. *Somalia*: Somalia's government collapsed in 1991, and that was followed by a prolonged period of civil war, clan-based violence, and terrorist activity. The lack of a functioning government, corruption, and external interference have hindered efforts to rebuild the country of Somalia.

9. *South Sudan*: South Sudan's government collapsed in 2013, leading to a civil war that has resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and millions of displaced people today. The war has been fueled by ethnic divisions, corruption, and external interference.

10. *Afghanistan*: Afghanistan's socialist government collapsed in 1992, leading to a prolonged and brutal period of civil war among different factions of freedom fighters (Mujahideen) and then the Taliban rule in 1996. The US-led invasion in 2001 opened many opportunities for unity among different group leaders, but subsequently the international community failed to establish a stable government, and the Taliban's return to power in 2021 led to renewed economic instability and isolation from the international community.

While some of these nations struggle to prevent themselves from being a failed state and eventually transition out of state fragility, such as Afghanistan, the negative brand image hurts their foreign direct investment (Seyoum and Camargo, 2021; Zhang, 2001; Zhao, 2003) opportunities as international firms and leaders are often afraid that their employees' safety might be jeopardized when doing business in such places.

In fragile states, authoritarian constitutions often function as mere "window dressing," offering superficial commitments to the rule of law and fundamental freedoms without any genuine intent to enforce them (Seyoum, 2024). Informal norms frequently govern the behavior of individuals and organizations, shaping interactions within development processes. Conflict in such contexts creates institutional voids, prompting reliance on informal partnerships and fostering real or perceived corruption and inequities as mechanisms to compensate for governance gaps (Mujtaba and Seyoum, 2024). For instance, during the past two decades in Afghanistan, even when the formal government received international

support, many citizens turned to the Taliban for conflict resolution because public institutions lacked the capacity to address local disputes in provinces beyond Kabul. When formal institutions become inefficient and fragmented, informal networks and community groups often collaborate to fill these societal gaps at the local level. Concerning conflict, state fragility and aid effectiveness, Zurcher (2012, p. 461) explains that:

Based on research in Afghanistan...First, in fragile states, the interests of donor-peace-builders and recipient governments are seldom aligned: recipients often lack the political will to implement reform, while donors lack the leverage necessary to promote fundamental change. Second, a lack of basic security is one of main impediments to aid effectiveness. At the same time, projects designed to increase security typically have little impact. Finally, aid is more likely to do harm in fragile states than in countries where a reasonably stable government is in place. This is because resource flows are difficult to track in fragile states, and because international actors frequently lack basic information about the host society. As a result, aid often fuels patronage and corruption.

Beyond ensuring adequate resources for survival, universal access to basic education for both males and females in Afghanistan is critical for transforming a fragile state into one that is strategically stronger, more stable, and prosperous. In 2019, approximately 17% of the global population remained illiterate, a significant improvement from 78% in 1820. Nevertheless, millions of children of primary and secondary school age remain out of school due to extreme poverty, political insecurity, armed conflict, and gender-based barriers. Data indicates that half of the 3.5 million refugee children of primary school age do not attend school (Mujtaba and Seyoum, 2025a). The failure to educate young boys and girls imposes severe costs on their health and well-being and is estimated to result in \$30 trillion in lost global earnings and productivity.

In fragile states, destructive educational practices undermine peace-building initiatives. Policymakers must reverse these trends by promoting constructive education that establishes institutional structures fostering peace and stability, ensuring all children receive quality education. One essential function of education systems should be mobilizing citizens “based on a strong national identity that is inclusive and open to individuals of any ethnic or religious group, i.e., it is an overarching, group-transcending collective identity” (Seyoum, 2024, p. 62). As global citizens and members of one human race, “We must teach our children that if they conceive themselves as part of an ethnic group, they have not yet embraced the overarching national identity” (Seyoum, 2024, p. 62), since rigid affiliations with distinct cultural identities can threaten social harmony within and across nations.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses the approach of reviewing and using literature, observations, and experience to draw practical conclusions involving a systematic and iterative process to state fragility. Such a qualitative approach traditionally begins with a comprehensive review of existing literature on the topic, including academic journals, books, and reputable sources to identify key concepts, theories, and findings relevant to the problem of state fragility. The literature review provides a foundation for understanding the topic, identifying gaps in current knowledge, and informing the development of the research questions, assumptions, and/or propositions.

The second stage involves collecting and analyzing observational data and experiential knowledge, which includes conducting field observations, interviews, surveys, or focus groups to gather primary data. In this study, we relied mainly on observations across the globe, focusing on nations that have experienced state fragility. Additionally, we draw on our own experiences and expertise, as well as that of others, to gain a deeper understanding of the topic. In this study, we used this approach to generate rich, contextualized content that can be used to validate or challenge existing practices and norms. By combining literature, observations, and experience, we can develop a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the topic.

In the third stage, we analyze and synthesize the acquired knowledge to draw practical conclusions, which involve identifying patterns, themes, and relationships between variables, as well as developing conceptual models or frameworks to explain the findings. Our goal is to generate actionable insights that can inform decision-making, policy, or practice that can be used by policy makers in all fragile economies. By integrating literature, observations, and experience, researchers can develop evidence-based recommendations that are grounded in both theory and reality. Such a qualitative methodological approach to state fragility enables researchers to move beyond abstract theory and develop practical solutions that can be applied in real-world contexts. As such, researchers can begin by reflecting on relevant constructs or approaches to measuring state fragility.

Measuring State Fragility

In this modern era of data and analytics, we can use a variety of criteria to assess and measure the stability, decline, or growth of a nation, as compared to others in the region. Measuring state fragility in Afghanistan requires a concrete strategic approach that incorporates various indicators. One widely used framework is the Fragile States Index (FSI), developed by the Fund for Peace (2023). The FSI (2022) framework assesses state fragility across 12 indicators, including:

1. Security Apparatus (militarization, fractionalization)
2. Factionalized Elites (competition, polarization)
3. Group Grievance (discrimination, inequality)

4. Economic Decline (poverty, inequality)
5. Uneven Economic Development (regional disparities)
6. Human Flight and Brain Drain (migration, emigration)
7. State Legitimacy (corruption, accountability)
8. Public Services (health, education, infrastructure)
9. Human Rights (abuses, freedoms)
10. Rule of Law (judicial independence, transparency)
11. Security and Crime (violence, terrorism)
12. External Intervention (foreign influence, occupation)

State fragility has caused enormous migrations of displaced men and women in all continents (Abel and Sander, 2014; Seyoum and Camargo, 2021). According to the FSI (2022, p. 10) data and report, in 2021, “a record number of people (an increase of over 20 million) were internally displaced by violence and natural disasters including in places like Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, and Myanmar.” Similarly, the number of riots and protests and the number of conflict fatalities increased as well when compared to the previous years.

The FSI indicators provide a nuanced understanding of state fragility in Afghanistan, highlighting areas of strength and weakness. By analyzing these indicators, Afghan policymakers and researchers can identify key drivers of fragility and develop targeted interventions to address them through both short-term solutions and longer-term goals. In terms of the “economic decline” (poverty, inequality) indicator, the FSI (2022, p. 45) report explains it as follows:

Economic decline indicator considers factors related to economic decline within a country. For example, the indicator looks at patterns of progressive economic decline of the society as a whole as measured by per capita income, Gross National Product, unemployment rates, inflation, productivity, debt, poverty levels, or business failures. It also takes into account sudden drops in commodity prices, trade revenue, or foreign investment, and any collapse or devaluation of the national currency. The Economic decline indicator further considers the responses to economic conditions and their consequences, such as extreme social hardship imposed by economic austerity programs, or perceived increasing group inequalities.

Like most of the factors from FSI, the economic decline indicator is especially relevant for Afghanistan as it focuses on the formal economy as well as the illicit trade, which includes the drug and human trafficking, and capital flight, along with the levels of corruption and illicit transactions such as money laundering or embezzlement by various powerful groups. Overall, as presented in Figure 1, state fragility can be assessed based on the authority, capacity, legitimacy of the government, as well as certain outcomes such as the nature of crimes, levels of violence, human rights violations, wars, and other significant factors within a specific country and region.

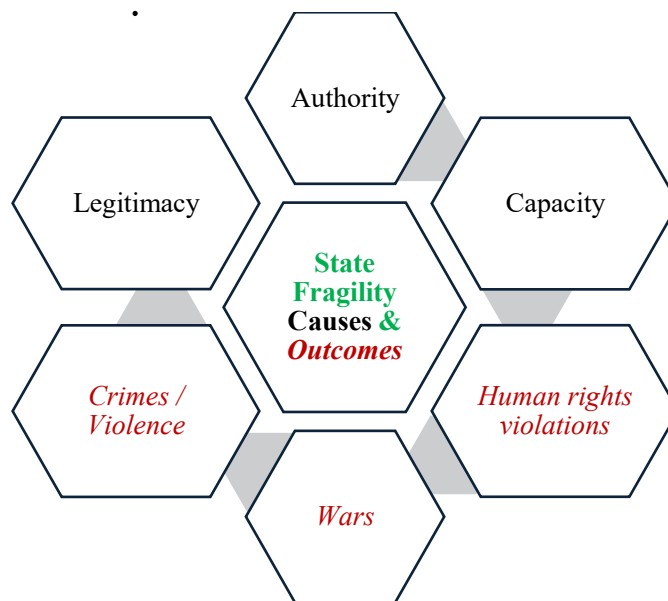


Figure 1 - Causes and Outcomes of State Fragility

It should be acknowledged that there can easily be conflation of causes, outcomes and manifestations of fragile states. We recommend that national leaders focus on the major causes and outcomes of SF in their own countries. The causes and outcomes of SF vary by country since every country is fragile in its own ways. For example, the major causes of SF in Ethiopia mainly relate to factionalized elite and ethnic politics and ethnically based federation while Afghanistan's SF are often more related to security, uneven development and state legitimacy. Of course, there can be commonalities across these causes and outcomes which require a balancing act of "give and take" due to limited resources and urgent priorities. It should be noted that the outcomes can also be different due to dissimilar causes.

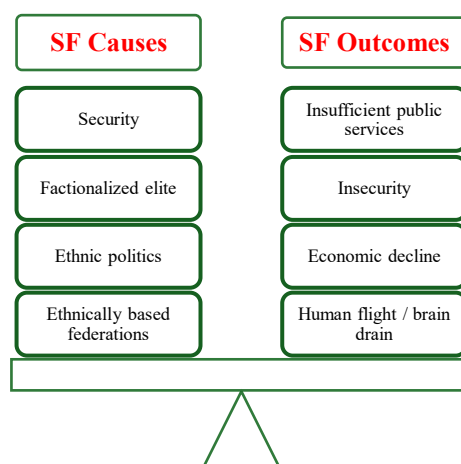


Figure 2 - Balancing Act of State Fragility Causes and Outcomes

The FSI indicators do not differentiate causes, consequences and manifestations, but as shown in Figure 2, SF causes and outcomes can require a balancing act since the weight of each variable can depend on the contexts and factors associated with a specific nation. For example, a country with high educational levels might not suffer from brain drain (Ngoma & Ismail, 2013) to the same extent as another nation with low levels of literacy in its population. It should be emphasized that there is a reinforcing feedback loop, such that lack of security (cause) would lead to more insecurity in terms of anarchy and lawlessness in a country (outcome). Nonetheless, the general causes across countries relate to factors such as lack of security, factionalized elite, group grievance, poverty/inequality, lack of state legitimacy and public services, while outcomes of SF tend to be insecurity, economic decline, human flight/brain drain, insufficient public services, etc. It is important to note that some of the variables can become causes and outcomes at the same time. For example, lack of security in some countries like Afghanistan and Ethiopia can quickly and easily lead to more insecurity, anarchy, and lawlessness. There is a self-reinforcing feedback loop. The same thing can be said about the lack of public services. Systematic differences in access to education between ethnic, religious and regional groups can increase potential risk of conflict and rebellion against the government. Conflict also makes it difficult to provide public services (cause and outcome) which has been witnessed by millions of victims in Afghanistan as well as many other nations over the past recent decades. Manifestations of SF in Afghanistan can be demonstrated in terms of deficiencies in authority (weak governance, lack of effective institutions, increased violence and crime, absence of law and order), lack of state legitimacy (lack of political acceptability and accountability), limited capacity (poor access to education, healthcare etc.), gender inequality, and other such elements impacting various individuals and communities throughout the country.

State Fragility and Displacement

State fragility and people displacement are closely interconnected concepts that impact families physically and psychologically. State fragility is the weakness or instability of a nation's institutions, governance, and economy, making it vulnerable to shocks from internal and external forces. When a state is fragile, it can lead to a range of negative consequences, including:

1. Conflict and violence: Fragile states are more prone to conflict, which can lead to displacement as people flee violence, persecution, or human rights abuses.
2. Economic instability: Fragile states often struggle with economic instability, poverty, and inequality, which can force people to leave their homes in search of better economic opportunities or to escape poverty.
3. Environmental degradation: Fragile states may lack the capacity to manage natural resources, leading to environmental degradation, climate change, and natural disasters, which can displace people.

4. Poor governance: Fragile states often have weak institutions, corruption, and poor governance, which can lead to human rights abuses, persecution, and displacement.

As a result, people's displacement can be both a cause and consequence of state fragility. Displacement can exacerbate state fragility. Large-scale displacement can put additional pressure on already weak state institutions, economies, and infrastructure, further eroding state capacity. Displacement can create new challenges for people, processes, and government institutions. Policy makers should be aware that any displacement can lead to new challenges, such as managing refugee camps, providing humanitarian assistance, and addressing social and economic tensions between host communities and displaced populations. Additionally, people's displacement can undermine stability and create new security risks, since displaced populations may become vulnerable to radicalization, exploitation, or recruitment by armed groups.

It is important to reduce or eliminate SF because it causes unintended consequences or suffering, especially to the innocent victims who seek shelter in safer zones and neighboring countries to keep women, children, and the elderly alive. Regarding the displacement of millions of citizens from fragile states, we believe the entire earth should be a unified and inclusive sanctuary, where every human being can thrive without the shackles of artificial borders and divisive ethnic labels. It is time to transcend the outdated notion of segregation and embrace our shared humanity, recognizing that our diversity is a strength, not a weakness. By dismantling the barriers that separate us, we can create a world where everyone has the freedom to live, move, and flourish without fear of persecution, marginalization, or exclusion. As a universal rule, since the hereditary material in humans (known as DNA or deoxyribonucleic acid) of any two individuals from anywhere on earth is likely to be 99.9% identical, policy makers should promote peace so the world can be a safe space for every human without man-made borders dividing people based on ethnic or nationality labels.

Addressing state fragility and people displacement requires a comprehensive approach that includes such functions as strengthening state institutions and governance, promoting economic development and stability, addressing environmental degradation and climate change, protecting human rights and promoting social cohesion, and providing humanitarian assistance and supporting displaced populations. By addressing these underlying factors, it is possible to reduce state fragility and people displacement, promoting stability, security, and prosperity for all.

RESULTS

According to recent data from the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR, 2025, para. 3), as of June 2024, approximately 122.6 million individuals worldwide were forcibly displaced due to conflict, persecution, and other crises,

with children accounting for nearly 40% of this population (Mujtaba and Seyoum, 2025a). This staggering figure underscores the growing humanitarian challenge and the disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups, particularly minors who face heightened risks of malnutrition, interrupted education, and psychological trauma.

Compounding these challenges, Afghanistan ranks among the top 20 climate-vulnerable nations globally, where recurrent climate-related disasters—such as floods, droughts, and extreme weather events—have devastated rural communities and agricultural systems. These environmental shocks exacerbate existing socioeconomic fragility, eroding livelihoods, displacing families, and further destabilizing governance structures. The intersection of forced displacement and climate vulnerability illustrates the complex, multidimensional nature of fragility, where environmental stressors amplify conflict dynamics and perpetuate cycles of poverty and insecurity. As a matter of fact, according to Displaced International (2025, para. 3),

- 23.7 million Afghans are in acute need, with 11.6 million experiencing “catastrophic” food insecurity.
- 3.2 million Afghans are internally displaced, and 8.2 million have sought refuge abroad, many in neighboring countries such as Iran, Pakistan, and Tajikistan.

Displaced International strongly urges all nations hosting or managing displaced refugees to fully honor their obligations under the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees and related international legal frameworks. Central to these commitments is adherence to the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits the forced return of refugees to territories where they would face widespread insecurity, deprivation, or other severe threats to life and liberty. Such actions constitute a violation of fundamental universal human rights and undermine the legal and moral responsibilities of states as signatories to global conventions (Displaced International, 2025, para. 5).

The principle of non-refoulement, as articulated by the United Nations Human Rights Office, guarantees that no displaced person should be returned to a country where they risk cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, punishment, or other forms of irreparable harm (UN Human Rights, 2025). This principle is not merely a legal obligation but a cornerstone of international humanitarian law, reflecting the global consensus on protecting vulnerable populations from persecution and violence.

Given the unprecedented scale of displacement worldwide and the extreme hardships refugees already endure, including loss of livelihood, exposure to exploitation, and psychological trauma, the international community and national policymakers must act decisively to uphold these protections. Failure to do so not only jeopardize individual lives but also erodes the credibility of international norms designed to safeguard human dignity and security. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms, enhancing monitoring systems, and

fostering multilateral cooperation are therefore essential steps to ensure that displaced refugees receive the protection guaranteed under international law.

Is Afghanistan a Failed State?

The Fragile States Index has consistently ranked Afghanistan among the most fragile states globally, reflecting persistent governance and security challenges. In 2022, Afghanistan was positioned 3rd out of 179 countries in terms of overall fragility, a ranking that underscores the severity of its structural weaknesses. The country's scores are particularly low in critical dimensions such as the security apparatus, factionalized elites, and state legitimacy—indicators that collectively reveal systemic vulnerabilities in governance and institutional capacity (Fragile States Index, 2022).

However, while the FSI provides a useful comparative framework, it is essential to critically evaluate all elements of state fragility beyond numerical rankings. Such assessments should consider historical, political, and socio-economic contexts, as failed states not only destabilize their own societies but also contribute to global insecurity and regional instability (Patrick, 2007; Scowcroft & Berger, 2005).

Regarding the question of whether Afghanistan qualifies as a failed state, the short answer remains “no” (Mujtaba & Seyoum, 2025). Nonetheless, this classification remains highly contested among scholars and policy experts, largely due to Afghanistan's complex history of political volatility, regime changes, and governance disruptions. These fluctuations have profoundly affected diverse ethnic and social groups across the country, creating a dynamic environment where fragility persists despite intermittent periods of progress. In terms of a definition for a failed state, a failed state is typically characterized by various factors present in the nation, such as (Mujtaba and Seyoum, 2025a):

1. Collapse or weakness of governance
2. Loss of control over territory
3. Inability to provide public services
4. Erosion of legitimacy
5. High levels of violence and insecurity.

While some of the factors associated with a failed state do apply to the situation in Afghanistan, some are not relevant, and others have improved or are stabilizing. It is a fact that Afghanistan has faced significant challenges over the past five decades, and especially since the US-led invasion in 2001 and the subsequent Taliban insurgency. Over the past several decades, Afghanistan has chronically struggled with:

1. Persistent instability and violence
2. Weak governance and corruption
3. Limited control over territory (particularly in some of the rural areas)

4. Inadequate public services (e.g., healthcare and education, especially for young girls and women)
5. Economic struggles, including opium trade and aid dependency on the international community and non-governmental organization (NGOs).

An examination of recent data on Afghanistan, as presented in Table 1, reveals that the Fragile States Index 2024 Global Data continues to indicate a high degree of state fragility across multiple dimensions. These include security, uneven development, human flight and brain drain, state legitimacy, diminished public services, persistent human rights concerns, and inconsistencies in the rule of law. Although modest improvements in security have been observed since 2021, these deficiencies collectively underscore the structural vulnerabilities that characterize Afghanistan's governance and socio-economic systems.

Afghanistan's security score now surpasses that of Somalia; however, both nations share a long history of political turmoil and conflict spanning several decades. In terms of uneven development, Afghanistan ranks higher than Yemen and Syria, reflecting deep regional disparities and limited access to essential services. The country's overall ranking as the 7th most fragile state in 2024 (FSI, 2024) is particularly alarming, as such positioning often prompts discussions about whether Afghanistan approaches "failed state" status. For comparative context, Ethiopia occupies the 12th position, slightly ahead of Myanmar, Chad, Haiti, and the Central African Republic.

Afghanistan is further categorized as a nation on high alert status, with an overall fragility score of 103.9. Other countries in this category include Yemen, Syria, Sudan, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, each scoring between 101 and 109. Somalia, by contrast, falls within the very high alert status group, with a score of 111.3. These figures highlight Afghanistan's precarious position within the global fragility spectrum and its susceptibility to governance breakdowns and humanitarian crises (Mujtaba and Seyoum, 2025b).

While some researchers and practitioners may classify Afghanistan as a failed state—a designation that could deter foreign investment and multinational corporations, the situation is not immutable. Fragility and even failure are dynamic conditions rather than permanent states. Countries can transition out of fragility through targeted reforms, strategic governance initiatives, and sustained international cooperation. The trajectory of Afghanistan will therefore depend on the effectiveness of political leadership and the implementation of comprehensive strategies aimed at restoring stability and institutional resilience.

Table 1 - Fragile States Index Global Data from 2007-2021

Most Fragile States		Least Fragile States	
Country	Rank	Country	Rank
Somalia	1st	Portugal	164th
Sudan	2nd	Singapore	165th
South Sudan	3rd	Germany	166th
Syria	4th	Austria	167th
Congo Democratic Republic	5th	Sweden	168th
Yemen	6th	Australia	169th
Afghanistan	7th	Netherlands	170th
Central African Republic	7th	Luxembourg	171st
Haiti	9th	Canada	172nd
Chad	10th	Ireland	172nd
Myanmar	11th	Switzerland	174th
Ethiopia	12th	Denmark	175th
Palestine	13th	New Zealand	175th
Mali	14th	Iceland	177th
Nigeria	15th	Finland	178th
Libya	16th	Norway	179th
Source: FSI 2024 Global Data. Retrieved on December 4, 2024, from: https://fragilestatesindex.org/global-data/			

Arguments supporting the classification of Afghanistan as a failed state generally emphasize persistent insurgency and terrorism (Piazza, 2008), chronic governance inefficiencies, widespread corruption, and recurring humanitarian crises such as large-scale refugee displacement and severe food insecurity. These factors are compounded by prolonged economic stagnation and the country's continued dependence on foreign aid, which collectively undermines institutional resilience and national sovereignty.

Conversely, arguments against labeling Afghanistan as a failed state often highlight the presence of a functioning, albeit fragile, government structure, even during periods of international military and financial support. Additional considerations include Afghanistan's ongoing diplomatic recognition, active participation in international relations, and efforts to rebuild infrastructure and public institutions. Moreover, the resilience and adaptability demonstrated by Afghan communities in navigating extreme socio-political and economic challenges serve as indicators of latent capacity for recovery and development.

The status of Afghanistan is further complicated by the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, an event that introduced governance dynamics typically associated with failed states. For example, the education system for young girls and women has deteriorated dramatically, with schooling beyond the sixth grade

becoming virtually non-existent. This regression has triggered heightened human rights concerns among global advocacy groups and international organizations. Additionally, Afghanistan faces mounting risks of economic collapse, escalating food insecurity, and worsening humanitarian crises, particularly as displaced refugees from neighboring countries are compelled to return under precarious conditions. These developments, coupled with prolonged international isolation, underscore the complexity of Afghanistan's fragility and the urgent need for comprehensive policy interventions.

Security conditions in Afghanistan have shown significant improvement over the past four years, despite the severe economic downturn that followed the withdrawal of international forces and the reduction of foreign assistance. This improvement in security, however, does not negate the broader structural vulnerabilities that persist within the country. While Afghanistan exhibits several characteristics commonly associated with failed states, such as weak governance, limited institutional capacity, and socio-economic instability, it is more accurate to classify Afghanistan as a "fragile state" or, in some contexts, a "weak state."

The current situation remains highly complex, shaped by the interplay of state and non-state actors competing for control over resources, territory, and political influence. These actors include formal governmental institutions, insurgent groups, and local power brokers, all of whom exert varying degrees of authority across different regions. Such competition not only fragments governance but also complicates efforts to establish a unified national strategy for development and stability.

Table 2 - Afghanistan's Demography, Economy, and Security Post-2021 Era

<i>Demographics</i>	Population: 38.9 million Ethnicities: Pashtun (42%), Tajik (27%), Hazara (9%), Uzbek (9%), others (13%) Languages: Pashto (official), Dari (official), Uzbek, Turkmen, etc. Religion: Islam (99.7%)
<i>Economy</i>	GDP (nominal): \$6.6 billion GDP per capita: \$180 Main industries: agriculture, natural gas, coal, copper, textiles Main exports: fruits, nuts, carpets, textiles, gemstones Main imports: machinery, fuel, food, textiles, construction materials
<i>Security and Conflict</i>	Ongoing conflict: Insurgency. Civilian casualties: over 100,000 since 2009 Internally displaced persons (IDPs): over 4 million Refugees: over 5.7 million in foreign countries
<i>Human Development</i>	Life expectancy: 64.1 years Literacy rate: 38.2% Access to electricity: 34.6% Access to improved water sources: 55.4% Infant mortality rate: 52.4 deaths/1,000 live births

Table 2 provides estimated data and key indicators that illustrate Afghanistan's fragility, including metrics related to security, governance, economic performance, and social development. These figures serve as an empirical foundation for understanding the country's position within the global fragility spectrum and underscore the urgent need for comprehensive policy interventions aimed at strengthening institutional resilience, promoting inclusive governance, and fostering sustainable economic recovery.

Learning from Ethiopia, Vietnam and Singapore

Like the situation in Afghanistan, the nation of Ethiopia is generally considered a fragile state due to continued political instability rather than being seen as a failed state. While Ethiopia has faced numerous challenges, including ethnic tensions, poverty, and human rights abuses, it has maintained a functional government with many strong institutions. The federal government, led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, has implemented various reforms aimed at promoting democracy, human rights, and economic development. Ethiopia's state of fragility is evident in several areas (Seyoum and Camargo, 2021), since the country has struggled with ethnic violence, particularly in the Oromia and Tigray regions, which has led to displacements of thousands and humanitarian crises. Additionally, the government has continually faced criticism for its human rights record, including restrictions on freedom of expression and association. The country's economy is also heavily dependent on agriculture, which makes it vulnerable to climate-related shocks and global market fluctuations. Despite these challenges, Ethiopia has made significant progress in recent years, including the signing of a peace agreement with Eritrea in 2018 and the introduction of economic reforms aimed at promoting private sector growth and foreign investment. The government has also taken steps to address human rights concerns, including the establishment of a national human rights commission. Overall, while Ethiopia faces significant challenges, it is not considered a failed state, but rather a fragile state that requires continued support and engagement from the international community to consolidate its gains and address its remaining challenges. Afghan and Ethiopian leaders can learn from each other's best practices in successfully transitioning out of state fragility.

Afghan leaders can learn from the case of places such as Vietnam (ranked 119th in 2024 based on the FSI Global Data report) which more quickly recovered from their devastating war by focusing on the education and ethics of its growing population (Nguyen et al., 2013). So, Afghans can learn from the best practices of fragile states as well as developed economies that are politically stable, economically thriving, and those with progressively stronger institutions. Afghans can learn from smaller countries, such as the case of Singapore which has an educated population of about six million people that made the country politically stable, economically thriving, and a financial powerhouse over the past five decades. Singapore's remarkable transformation from a post-colonial state to a modern, prosperous nation is a testament to its effective governance and economic strategies. Since gaining independence in 1965, Singapore's founding

father, Lee Kuan Yew, and subsequent leaders have implemented a unique blend of authoritarian and democratic principles, emphasizing social stability, reward for hard work and qualification (meritocracy), and long-term planning. This approach has enabled Singapore to maintain a corruption-free and business-friendly environment, which has continually attracted foreign investments while fostering a highly competitive economy. Today, Singapore is a thriving financial hub, a global trade leader, and one of the world's most prosperous nations, with a GDP per capita exceeding \$64,000. Singapore's transformation over the past five decades offers valuable lessons for Afghan leaders. The following are some of the key takeaways from Singapore that might help leaders in Afghanistan:

1. *Strong and effective governance:* Singapore's success can be attributed to its strong and effective governance. Afghan leaders can learn from Singapore's emphasis on meritocracy, transparency, and accountability in governance.

2. *Long-term planning and vision:* Singapore's leaders have consistently demonstrated a long-term perspective, planning and investing in the country's future. Afghan leaders can benefit from adopting a similar approach, setting clear goals and priorities for the country's development.

3. *Investment in human capital:* Singapore has invested heavily in education and human capital development which has resulted in the creation of a highly skilled and productive workforce. Afghan leaders can prioritize education and vocational training for all boys and girls to build a similar foundation for economic growth. Afghans should provide culturally appropriate coaching, mentoring, and affirmative action opportunities for women to thrive in entrepreneurship.

4. *Diversification and economic development:* Singapore has diversified its economy, developing a thriving finance sector, a strong manufacturing base, and a vibrant services industry. Afghan leaders can explore similar strategies to reduce dependence on a single sector (e.g., agriculture) and promote economic diversification.

5. *Anti-corruption measures:* Singapore has a strong reputation for being corruption-free, with strict laws and enforcement mechanisms in place. Afghan leaders can learn from Singapore's anti-corruption strategies to promote transparency and accountability in government and business while fully respecting international human rights for all residents of Afghanistan.

6. *Infrastructure development:* Singapore has invested heavily in modern infrastructure, including transportation networks, public housing, and telecommunications. Afghan leaders can prioritize infrastructure development to facilitate economic growth, improve living standards, and enhance connectivity physically and virtually through technological integrations.

7. *Social cohesion and national unity:* Singapore's success is also attributed to its emphasis on social cohesion and national unity. Afghan leaders can learn from Singapore's approach to promoting national identity, social harmony, and community engagement.

8. *Strategic partnerships and international engagement:* Singapore has cultivated strong strategic partnerships with other countries, international organizations, and multinational corporations. Afghan leaders can explore similar

partnerships to attract investment, promote trade, and enhance regional cooperation.

9. *Institutional capacity building*: Singapore has developed strong institutions, including an independent judiciary, a professional civil service, and effective regulatory bodies. Afghan leaders can prioritize institutional capacity building to ensure effective governance, rule of law, and public service delivery.

10. *Adaptability and resilience*: Singapore has demonstrated adaptability and resilience in the face of changing global circumstances. Afghan leaders can learn from Singapore's ability to navigate uncertainty and respond to emerging challenges.

By studying Singapore's journey to becoming a developed economy or Vietnam's recovery from their devastating war, and applying the relevant lessons, Afghan leaders can develop culturally appropriate strategies to overcome the country's existing fragility challenges and build a more stable, prosperous, and resilient economy.

DISCUSSION / RECOMMENDATIONS

Transitioning Out of State Fragility

Afghanistan must transition from its current status as a fragile state on high alert and near the threshold of being considered a failed state toward building a stronger and more resilient economy. Leveraging its human capital and implementing strategic planning, this transition requires a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach that addresses root causes of instability across localities, cities, and regions. A foundational step is establishing a legitimate, inclusive, and accountable government capable of delivering essential services effectively. This involves strengthening public institutions, promoting good governance, and ensuring broad societal participation, including women, minorities, and civil society organizations (Mujtaba and Seyoum, 2025b).

Economic development is another critical pillar for reducing poverty, generating employment, and expanding opportunities for all citizens (Senathip et al., 2017). Afghanistan must diversify its economy, invest in infrastructure, and foster private sector growth by utilizing its human resources. The country's abundant natural resources such as minerals and agricultural potential can serve as drivers of economic progress. Additionally, enhancing regional connectivity and trade will enable Afghanistan to access emerging markets in Central and South Asia.

Ultimately, Afghanistan's path out of fragility demands sustained commitment to peace, stability, and continuous human capital development through modern education and environmental stewardship for all citizens (Zeeshan et al., 2024). This process requires ongoing international support and strong domestic leadership to implement reforms, combat corruption, advance gender equality, and promote national unity (Nguyen et al., 2013; Koester et al.,

2016). By addressing these challenges and leveraging opportunities, including ethical applications of artificial intelligence technologies (Mujtaba, 2024), Afghanistan can build a more resilient and prosperous future. As an initial step, Afghan leaders should prioritize the following actions to accelerate the nation's transition out of fragility (Mujtaba and Seyoum, 2025a):

1. *Establish a national dialogue forum:* Create a platform for inclusive discussions among politicians, civil society, and community leaders to address contentious issues and build consensus using all its human resources assets, especially from women at all levels.
2. *Promote transparency and accountability:* Establish an independent anti-corruption agency, implement asset declaration laws, and introduce transparent budgeting and procurement processes.
3. *Create gender equality:* Make educational and work opportunities available for all young girls and women in Afghanistan to make the existing and future workforce more competitive. Provide mentoring and culturally appropriate affirmative action opportunities for qualified females to become representatives of various generations in all ranks of public sector institutions.
4. *Strengthen local governance:* Decentralize power and resources to provincial and district governments and establish community-based development councils to ensure local participation in decision-making.
5. *Foster economic diversification:* Invest in infrastructure development, promote private sector growth, and support the development of key sectors such as agriculture, mining, and tourism.
6. *Improve access to justice:* Strengthen the judiciary, establish a national justice sector strategy, and increase access to justice for vulnerable populations, especially women, people with disabilities, and children.
7. *Enhance security sector governance:* Reform the security sector by introducing transparent recruitment and promotion processes, strengthening parliamentary oversight, and promoting civilian-military relations.
8. *Support reconciliation and reintegration:* Establish a comprehensive reintegration program for former combatants and promote national reconciliation through inclusive dialogue and confidence-building measures.
9. *Invest in human capital:* Increase investment in education, healthcare, and vocational training, with a focus on underserved and rural populations, to build a skilled and productive workforce.
10. *Foster regional cooperation:* Strengthen regional relationships through economic cooperation, trade agreements, and joint infrastructure development projects to promote stability and prosperity.

When combined with full, transparent engagement from local, national, and international stakeholders, these actions can enable Afghan leaders to systematically address the structural and institutional drivers of state fragility. Such collaborative efforts are essential for promoting political stability, fostering inclusive governance, and laying the foundation for sustainable economic development. By integrating participatory decision-making processes and ensuring accountability at all levels, Afghanistan can transition from its current high-alert fragility status toward a more resilient and diversified economy.

Moreover, this transformation requires not only policy reforms but also the mobilization of social capital and the strengthening of institutional frameworks that guarantee equitable access to resources and opportunities. Active involvement of civil society, private sector actors, and international development partners will be critical in creating an enabling environment for long-term growth. Through these coordinated strategies, Afghanistan can move beyond short-term crisis management and establish a trajectory toward stability, prosperity, and a sustainable economic outlook that benefits all segments of its population.

Sustainable Economic Development

The priority for Afghans has always been their security and independence. Once a nation’s people can enjoy security, autonomy, and sovereignty, the next major issue is the sustained economic growth of the country and all people groups residing within the nation through shared leadership (Mujtaba, 2025b), modernization (Seyoum, 2024), and technological innovations (Mujtaba, 2025c).

Sustainable economic development refers to a process of economic growth and development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Cavico and Mujtaba, 2016; Aimkij et al., 2013). It aims to balance economic, social, and environmental objectives to create a stable and prosperous economy that benefits all members of society. As presented in Table 3, the key principles of sustainable economic development include economic growth, social equity, environmental sustainability, institutional stability, and human development.

Table 3 - Principles of Sustainable Economic Development

<i>Economic growth</i>	Increasing economic output and income to improve living standards.
<i>Social equity</i>	Ensuring that economic benefits are shared fairly among all members of society, reducing poverty and inequality.
<i>Environmental sustainability</i>	Protecting the natural environment and conserving natural resources for future generations.
<i>Institutional stability</i>	Establishing a stable and effective institutional framework to support economic development.
<i>Human development</i>	Investing in education, healthcare, and other essential services to improve human well-being and productivity.

Sustainable economic development is crucial for Afghanistan's future, as the country seeks to transition from a divided and conflict-driven economy to a peaceful and prosperous one. This requires effective leadership and a holistic approach that addresses Afghanistan’s structural challenges, such as inadequate infrastructure, limited human capital, and a dominant informal economy (Mujtaba, 2019). By investing in effective leadership training and sustainable

economic development programs, Afghanistan can enhance its security while reducing its reliance on foreign aid, creating more jobs, and improving the living standards of its inhabitants.

A key sector for sustainable economic development in Afghanistan is agriculture, which employs around 60% of the workforce (Momand et al., 2024). Afghanistan has significant potential for agricultural growth, with fertile land, favorable climate conditions, and a strategic location for trade with neighboring countries. However, the sector faces numerous challenges, including limited access to finance, technology, and markets. Initiatives such as irrigation system development, agricultural training programs, and market access support can help unlock the sector's potential throughout Afghanistan.

Another critical area for sustainable economic development in Afghanistan is the extractives sector, particularly mining. Afghanistan is richly endowed with natural resources, including copper, gold, and rare earth minerals. Responsible development of these resources can generate significant revenue, create jobs, and stimulate economic growth. However, this requires strong governance, environmental safeguards, and transparent revenue management to ensure that the benefits are shared equitably among the entire population.

To achieve sustainable economic development, Afghanistan needs to prioritize investment in human capital, particularly the education and vocational training of both males and females. This will help build a skilled and adaptable workforce, capable of driving economic growth and digital innovation (Nafei et al., 2025a). Additionally, Afghanistan should focus on developing its infrastructure, including roads, energy systems, and digital connectivity with modern generative artificial intelligence capabilities (Mujtaba, 2025c). By addressing these fundamental challenges, Afghanistan can create a solid foundation for sustainable economic development and improve the lives of its citizens.

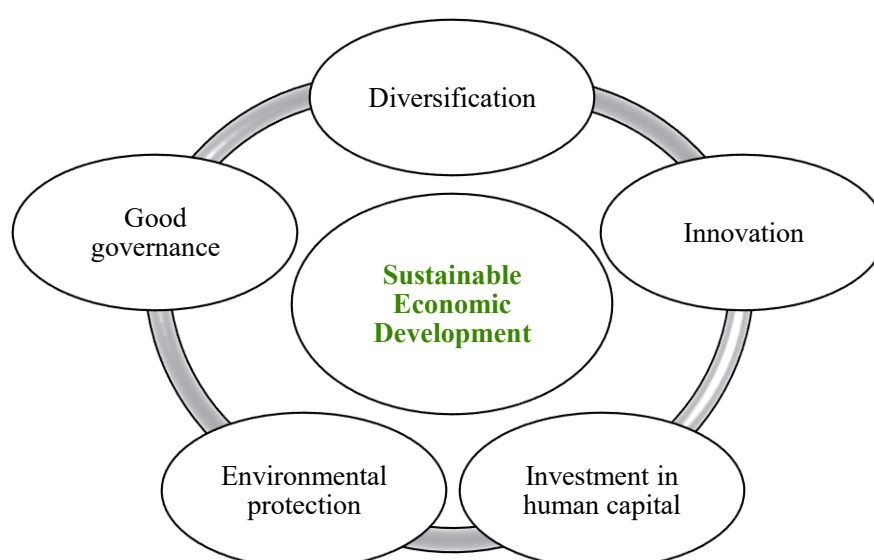


Figure 3 - Sustainable Economic Development Strategies

More specifically, and as a starting point shown in Figure 3, Afghan leaders and public officials should note that sustainable economic development can involve the following strategies:

1. *Diversification*: Reducing dependence on a single industry or resource. Afghanistan should aim towards industrialization to generate jobs and increase exports.
2. *Innovation*: Encouraging entrepreneurship, research, and development to drive economic growth. Afghanistan can be a great place for tourism, all year long.
3. *Investment in human capital*: Developing skills and knowledge to improve productivity and competitiveness of the country's entire human resources assets.
4. *Environmental protection*: Implementing policies and practices to minimize environmental degradation and promote sustainable resource use.
5. *Good governance*: Ensuring transparency, accountability, and effective institutions to support economic development.

By adopting sustainable economic development strategies in various cities throughout all provinces and innovative thinking supplemented with affirmative action programs for disadvantaged groups (Mujtaba, 2023), Afghanistan can efficiently create a more stable, prosperous, and equitable future for more citizens.

Entrepreneurship Development

In any fragile state, there can be high transaction costs for doing business (due to bureaucracy and corruption), limited financing opportunities, and anxiety regarding the adoption of new technologies due to fears of theft, expropriation, etc. In the case of Afghanistan, researchers and leaders must underscore the implications of persistent gender discrimination on female entrepreneurship. In many developing countries such as Ghana and Nigeria, more women are engaged in entrepreneurship than men. Entrepreneurship for females and males of all ethnic backgrounds must be encouraged and made available through inclusionary mentoring and relevant affirmative action programs since private businesses positively contribute to creating employment opportunities while raising national income.

Facts show that, "Some two billion people and a half of the world's poor live in countries where development outcomes are impacted by fragility and conflict" (Seyoum, 2024, p. 48). As such, public and private sector leaders in fragile states like Afghanistan need to create a strategic plan to transition their nations out of crisis. Strategic planning would require all leaders to create transparency, accountability, and formality. Formal institutions include laws, regulations, and rules that establish the basis for production, exchange, distribution, and education for everyone in the country. Formal institutions should lead to the creation of a stronger government that can exercise its authority, capacity, and legitimacy in a timely manner in foundational functions such as providing universal education for all children and women (Mujtaba, 2015).

State fragility causes severe development challenges due to weak institutional capacity, poor governance, conflict among various ethnic groups, and continued political instability. When states fail, bad actors often become stronger which leads to the population being displaced, human capital depleted, unemployment rising, and the nation's production and incomes declining.

State fragility is typically a byproduct of several factors: Factionalized elite and ethnic politics, ethnic federation, poor leadership, and weak institutions as well as moral and ethical failures (Seyoum, 2024, p.54) which can result in political instability, communal violence, and continued insecurity in a country. Based on institutional theory, weak institutions within a nation can easily become a source of state fragility which undermines social cohesion and broader economic progress.

One fact is that the probability of being poor in today's world largely depends on whether you are born in a fragile state or not. As emphasized by Seyoum (2024), the good news is that by the year 2030, about 78% of non-fragile states come close to achieving the goal of ending extreme poverty, and only 19% of fragile states are expected to achieve that goal, thereby meeting one goal out of 17 proposed by the United Nations in their Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Afghan leaders must focus on and highlight the role of entrepreneurship and industrial policy to both create and sustain economic and political stability. Strategic trade policy can be a means for increasing incomes and easing tensions. Finally, technology policy can also be explored as a means of engaging domestic people and global investors in entrepreneurship and innovation to create more local jobs and agile organizations (Aaman et al., 2024). The inability of states to create relevant policies that benefit the local populations is a huge concern since it leads to "brain drain" as the most educated, skilled, and entrepreneurial citizens migrate to other nations. Facts show that fragile states that have been in social and economic crisis, in 2023, caused more than 100 million people to run from conflict and crisis. One possible explanation for state fragility is the leaders' and country's incompetence in economic management where they do not create comprehensive administrative capacity to translate their goals into resource allocation in a strategic manner. This is where education and reliance on experts become important for fragile states.

Assuming societal stability is present along with the foundational pillar of an entrepreneurial culture, the following are a few specific recommendations for effective economic development to make Afghanistan more prosperous:

1. *Establish a national entrepreneurship development program:* Create a comprehensive program to support entrepreneurship development, including training, mentorship, affirmative action programs for women, and access to finance. This program can be implemented in partnership with the private sector, universities, and international organizations.

2. *Develop special economic zones (SEZs) and industrial parks:* Establish SEZs and industrial parks in strategic locations, such as near borders, airports,

and seaports. These zones can offer tax incentives, streamlined regulations, and modern infrastructure to attract domestic and foreign investment, promote exports, and create jobs.

3. *Promote agriculture and agribusiness development:* Support the development of Afghanistan's agricultural sector by providing training, credit, and market access to farmers. Invest in irrigation systems, rural roads, and storage facilities to improve agricultural productivity and reduce post-harvest losses.

4. *Foster digital economy and e-commerce development:* Develop Afghanistan's digital economy by investing in digital infrastructure, such as fiber optic cables, data centers, mobile networks, and artificial intelligence. Support the growth of e-commerce by providing training and resources to entrepreneurs and establishing a regulatory framework that promotes online trade.

5. *Establish a national investment promotion agency:* Create a national investment promotion agency to promote Afghanistan as a destination for foreign and domestic investment. This agency can provide information on investment opportunities, facilitate business registration and licensing, and offer after-care services to all local and foreign investors.

The usage of modern technologies, digital transformation, and artificial intelligence can be a powerful equalizer for the people of any nation (Khanfar et al. 2024; Mujtaba, 2024; Subramaniam et al., 2023), and Afghan leaders can develop their current and future workforce to gain and utilize such skills and competencies using relevant leadership styles (Zareen et al., 2015). Effective and timely implementation of these recommendations can help Afghanistan to promote entrepreneurship, create more jobs for those with and without high levels of education, diversify the Afghan economy, reduce the country's dependence on a single sector such as agriculture, increase exports, enhance tourism, improve trade balances, enhance living standards, reduce poverty, and boost economic stability.

Empowering Afghan Women

Afghanistan's "hidden gem" for economic growth can be their females since their contributions and progress has been consistently and/or intentionally hindered through cultural norms, lack of resources, discrimination, and prolonged physical insecurities. Through their societal role and being conditioned in home economics, Afghan women can play a major role in the entrepreneurial orientation of Afghanistan and the South Asian region by breaking the cycle of oppression or glass ceiling (Uro et al., 2024). For thousands of years, Afghan women have traditionally played a vital role in managing household economies both in the city and rural areas, leveraging their skills in home economics to ensure the well-being of their families (Ahmadzai et al., 2025; Mujtaba, 2015). Like most patriarchal cultures, women in Afghanistan have traditionally learned most of the home economic skills passed down to them from previous generations. Despite facing significant social and cultural barriers such as violence, harassment, and being bullied (Power et al, 2013; Mujtaba, 2007),

Afghan women have demonstrated remarkable tenacity, resilience and resourcefulness in managing household finances, preparing meals, making sure children go to school, and maintaining domestic hygiene. These skills, often overlooked and undervalued, form the foundation of robust and sustainable small business startups and an overall economy (Zaidi et al., 2023).

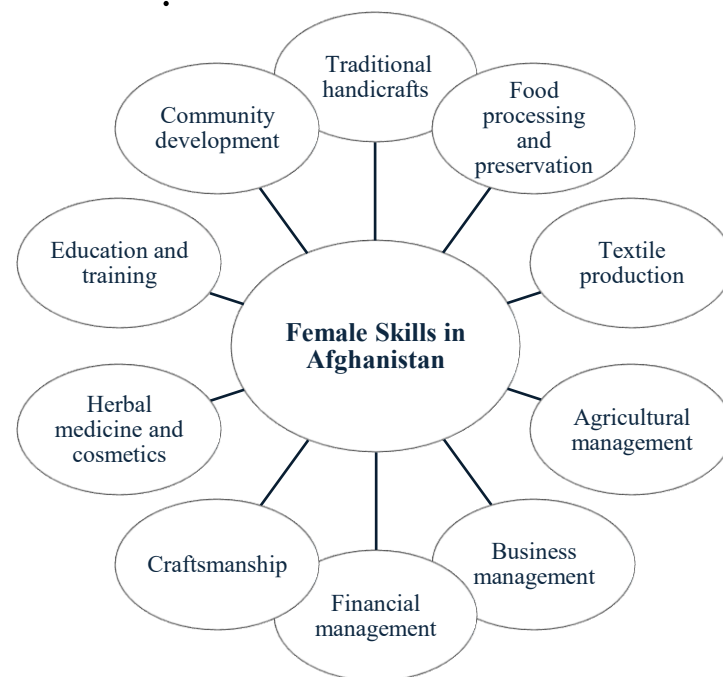


Figure 4 - Female-Dominated Skills in Afghanistan (Sample)

As Afghanistan seeks to rebuild and revitalize its economy, the diversity and integration of Afghan women can play a pivotal role in driving entrepreneurial growth and development and therefore should get strategic and tangible social support from all stakeholders nationally and internationally (Assefa and Mujtaba, 2025; Seyoum et al., 2021). By leveraging their leadership skills in home economics (Nafei et al., 2025b), Afghan women can establish and manage small businesses, such as food processing, handicrafts, and textiles if given support and affirmative action opportunities by the government. Moreover, their experience in managing household finances can be scaled up to manage small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), providing a critical source of employment and income for their families and communities. While women excel at any profession at the same level or even better than their male counterparts, some of the main skills that Afghan females that did not even attend formal education might possess and excel at that can make Afghanistan economically prosperous are presented in Figure 4, including the following:

1. *Traditional handicrafts:* Afghan women are skilled in creating intricate handicrafts, such as embroidery, weaving, and pottery, which can be sold locally and internationally.
2. *Food processing and preservation:* Afghan women have expertise in preparing and preserving traditional foods, such as jams, pickles, and dried fruits, which can be marketed as artisanal products.
3. *Textile production:* Afghan women are skilled in spinning, weaving, and sewing, which can be leveraged to produce high-quality textiles, such as carpets, clothing, and accessories.
4. *Agricultural management:* Afghan women have experience in managing small-scale agricultural projects, including planting, harvesting, and marketing crops, which can contribute to Afghanistan's agricultural sector.
5. *Business management:* Many Afghan women have experience managing small businesses, such as tailoring shops, bakeries, and restaurants, which can be scaled up to contribute to Afghanistan's economic growth.
6. *Financial management:* Afghan women have expertise in managing household finances, which can be applied to managing small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and contributing to Afghanistan's financial sector.
7. *Craftsmanship:* Afghan women are skilled in creating intricate crafts, such as jewelry-making, woodcarving, and metalwork, which can be sold as unique, handmade products.
8. *Herbal medicine and cosmetics:* Afghan women have knowledge of traditional herbal remedies and cosmetics, which can be developed into natural, organic products for local and international markets.
9. *Education and training:* Many Afghan women have experience in teaching and training, which can be leveraged to develop Afghanistan's human capital and contribute to the country's economic growth.
10. *Community development:* Afghan women have expertise in community development, including project management, community outreach, and social mobilization, which can be applied to develop and implement community-based projects that contribute to Afghanistan's economic development.

Empowering Afghan women to take on entrepreneurial roles can have a transformative impact on Afghanistan's economy and society which can match the growth of countries such as Vietnam and Ethiopia, while aiming to eventually become more industrialized and prosperous like Singapore, Japan, South Korea, and others. By providing training, mentorship, culturally relevant affirmative action opportunities, and access to finance, Afghan women can unlock their full potential and contribute to the country's economic growth and development. Moreover, their participation in the economy can help to promote social cohesion, challenge patriarchal norms, and foster a more inclusive and equitable society for its entire human resources assets.

CONCLUSION

Afghanistan's state fragility stems from a complex interplay of historical, political, economic, and social factors. It has long been characterized by weak governance, a dominant informal economy, and persistent insurgency. These conditions have produced far-reaching consequences, including widespread poverty, inequality, and human rights violations. To move beyond fragility and high-alert status, Afghan leaders must adopt a comprehensive, inclusive strategy that addresses root causes of instability while promoting sustainable economic development, good governance, and human security.

Achieving economic resilience requires targeted actions such as establishing national dialogue platforms, advancing gender equality, ensuring transparency and accountability, and strengthening local governance structures. Additional priorities include investing in human capital, fostering economic diversification, and enhancing regional cooperation to build a more robust and sustainable economy. By tackling underlying drivers of fragility and prioritizing inclusive development, Afghanistan can progress toward a more peaceful and stable future. This transition demands sustained reform efforts, inclusive dialogue, and the creation of strong, effective institutions.

The persistence of weak governance capacity, particularly in ensuring security for citizens and businesses, has led to unacceptable levels of human suffering. This paper offers a multidisciplinary analysis of state fragility with actionable recommendations for Afghan leaders. Ultimately, political actors, private and public sector leaders, and academic researchers focused on entrepreneurship, economic policy, international trade, and emerging markets must collaborate to implement these strategies, enabling Afghanistan to overcome fragility and achieve sustainable peace and economic growth.

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BIOGRAPHY

Bahaudin G. Mujtaba is Professor of management, human resources, and international management. Dr. Mujtaba has served as a professor, director, and department chair at the Huizenga College of Business and Entrepreneurship at Nova Southeastern University since 2002. Bahaudin was given the prestigious annual “Faculty of the Year Award” twice at NSU. Bahaudin is a certified trainer on topics such as “Situational Leadership” by the Paul Hersey organization, and a “Cultural Competency” trainer through the National Multi-Cultural Institute (NMCI). He has been involved in leadership, management development, and cultural competency education since the late 1990s. Bahaudin worked with Publix Super Markets, Inc. in retail management and as a senior management development specialist in their human resources department for sixteen years. Bahaudin’s research and writing interests are in the areas of human resources, cross-cultural leadership, sustainability, international management, and higher education.



Belay Seyoum is professor of international business at Nova Southeastern University. He specializes in the areas of international trade and foreign direct investment. His research studies have been published in various academic journals such as the Journal of Economic Studies, the Thunderbird International Business Review and the International Business Review. Over the last few years, Dr. Seyoum has developed a keen interest and concern over the growing number of developing countries with weak capacity to carry out basic governance functions leading to unacceptable levels of human suffering. His recent book on State fragility, business, and economic performance deals with this problem and attempts to provide suggestions and policy recommendations.

