The Missing Architecture

Why Afghanistan Needs Systems, Not Short-Term Solutions...

Author	Ravi Mohan KHARKA
Published	2025
Source	LinkedIn Pulse Article
Article Type	International Article / Policy Reflection

FULL ARTICLE TEXT

Afghanistan today sits at a difficult crossroads: modest macroeconomic growth on paper, but deep fragility in jobs, education, markets, and institutions. The economy is estimated to have grown by about 2.5% in 2024, driven largely by agriculture, construction and trade, even as manufacturing, services and public investment remain constrained and aid levels decline. **(Source: World Bank https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview)**

Beneath these headline numbers, however, the real question is not just how much Afghanistan grows, but how it governs that growth and who participates in it—especially its youth. Youth unemployment is close to 17%, slightly above the global average, and has hovered around its historical peak in recent years. **TheGlobalEconomy.com** At the same time, nearly 80% of

Afghans still depend on agriculture and related agribusinesses for their livelihoods, in an economy where agriculture contributes roughly one-third of GDP.

In this context, the “real need” is not one more isolated project or short-lived programme. It is the *strengthening of Afghanistan’s governance systems*—through technical support to the current authorities and aligned institutions—to organize data, skills, and markets in a way that gives young people a credible pathway into the domestic and international labour market.

From Humanitarian Response to Systemic Governance Support

Over the last years, humanitarian funding has kept millions of Afghans alive, but it has not been designed to build enduring systems. Donor support is now declining: a recent joint UN–World Bank–EU–ADB recovery assessment for earthquake-hit eastern provinces notes “significant shortfalls” in funding, with broader humanitarian appeals for Afghanistan only about half funded.

This shrinking fiscal space makes system-building even more urgent. Without stronger governance architecture—clear processes, interoperable databases, and predictable rules—three critical risks intensify:

1. **Youth exclusion**: A growing cohort of semi-educated and trained youth finds no structured entry to the labour market.
2. **Market fragmentation**: Domestic markets for Afghan products and produce remain informal, under-capitalized, and poorly coordinated.
3. **Policy blindness**: Decision-makers, including the current de facto authorities, have limited access to reliable, integrated data for evidence-based decisions.

Technical engagement with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) and relevant sector institutions does not need to be political. It can be framed as neutral support to improve systems that benefit ordinary Afghans—especially children, adolescents and youth—regardless of the political environment.

Data Systems: The Backbone of Informed Decisions

The World Bank’s recent development updates emphasize that, in the absence of traditional budget support, job creation will depend on a combination of private sector dynamism, skills development and targeted inclusion programmes. None of this can be managed well without robust data systems.

Afghanistan urgently needs:

- **Integrated registries** for learners, skills trainees, apprentices and jobseekers, linked to labour market outcomes.
- **Market information systems** that track prices, volumes and routes for key agricultural and manufactured goods.
- **Spatially disaggregated data** on services, infrastructure, and enterprises at provincial and district levels.

At present, much of the country’s data landscape is fragmented: different ministries, international agencies and NGOs maintain their own spreadsheets and platforms, often incompatible with each other. This fragmentation means that, for example, a TVET centre cannot systematically see which skills are in demand in local markets, nor can a provincial authority see how many trained electricians or solar technicians are actually working or unemployed. UNESCO’s vocational skills needs assessment highlights precisely this mismatch: many training courses still teach skills that

are no longer requested by employers, leaving graduates unable to generate income. (Source: UNESCO https://articles.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2024/10/12.Vocational_Skills_Needs_Assessment_Sept2024.pdf)
Technical support to the IEA and sector institutions should therefore prioritise **digital public infrastructure for data**—including standards, interoperability protocols and capacity-building—over standalone, donor-branded databases.

Skills, TVET and Youth: Turning Training into Employment

Evidence from UNDP and other partners is clear: technical and vocational education and training (TVET) is one of the most effective levers for turning vulnerability into livelihoods, particularly for youth and women. Yet the latest UNICEF–UNESCO *Afghanistan Education Situation Report 2025* paints a stark picture:

- Formal TVET enrolment has stagnated at roughly **66,000 learners**, with female participation collapsing since 2021.
- Non-formal TVET has grown sixfold since 2019, signalling massive demand for short, practical skills training—but often with weak certification and limited labour-market linkage.

At the same time, the broader education crisis is severe: more than **2.13 million primary-age children remain out of school**, while over **90% of 10-year-olds cannot read a simple text**, one of the deepest "learning poverty" crises in the world. This is why system-level support matters. Afghanistan does not simply need more training courses; it needs:

- A **national TVET data platform** that links training providers, learners, employers and migration pathways—tracking who is trained in what, and with what employment outcomes.
- **Labour-market-aligned curricula**, updated regularly with employer input, informed by skills needs assessments such as those recently conducted across multiple regions.
- **Quality assurance and certification frameworks** that give Afghan youth credentials recognised domestically and, where possible, in regional labour markets.

SSEOA's long-standing work on TVT (Technical & Vocational Training) and the earlier development of a **national TVT Online System** under EU-funded initiatives already point in this direction: a digital bridge connecting vocational training centres, skilled workers, private sector employers, and regular migration channels. Building on that experience with updated architecture, AI-enabled matching, and mobile access could give the current TVET landscape the systemic backbone it lacks—if it is anchored in national governance systems rather than parallel NGO platforms.

Domestic Markets and Product/Produce Management Systems

Afghanistan remains a predominantly agrarian country. Around **34–35% of GDP** comes from agriculture, and roughly **three-quarters of the population** depend on agriculture and related activities for livelihoods. However, most farmers operate as subsistence or near-subsistence producers, with weak links to structured markets. The country's recurrent reliance on imported wheat, flour, sugar and vegetable oil—despite growing domestic output—shows how thin domestic value chains still are.
What is missing is not only infrastructure, but *systems*:

- **Produce and product registries**: digital records of producers, volumes, grades and locations.
- **Aggregation and logistics platforms**: mapping where produce is available, what storage and cold chain exists, and what transport capacity can be deployed.
- **Digital market information services**: real-time prices and demand signals accessible via basic mobile phones, allowing farmers and small enterprises to make informed decisions.

Technical support to the IEA's economic and agricultural institutions can credibly focus on these "neutral" systems—data standards, interoperable registries, and basic digitization of procurement and inventory for domestic products. This, in turn, creates demand for **TVET-trained youth** in logistics, quality control, food processing, cold-chain management, maintenance, and digital services.

Education Foundations: ECD and Community-Based Schools as System Anchors

No governance or labour-market system can function without a basic foundation of human capital. Afghanistan's early childhood and foundational learning indicators remain among the weakest globally:

- Only about **5% of pre-primary-age children** access early education centres, one of the lowest coverage rates in the world.
- Many children enter Grade 1 without any structured early learning, which significantly depresses later learning outcomes.

At the same time, **community-based education (CBE/CBS)** has become a lifeline. UNICEF reports that as of late 2025, over **320,000 children**—around 65% of them girls—are accessing education through some 10,600 community-based classes. (**UNICEF** - **https://www.unicef.org/media/175686/file/Afghanistan-Humanitarian-Situation-Report-No.-9%2C-30-September-2025.pdf**) These community structures are not just temporary stopgaps; they are potential *anchors* for future education governance: local data collection, school management committees, social accountability, and early warning for dropout and protection issues.
SSEOA's own strategic vision—linking **ECD**, **Community-Based Schools** and **TVT/skills pathways**—directly responds to this reality. By designing programmes where:

- Children receive **quality ECD** in their early years;
- They transition into **CBS/primary learning spaces** that have minimum standards and data reporting; and
- Older adolescents can access **community-linked TVET and apprenticeships**,

SSEOA and its partners are effectively proposing a **continuum of human capital**, anchored in community systems but connected to national data and governance frameworks.
Technical support to the education authorities—formal and de facto—should therefore prioritise:

- Standardised **ECD and CBS data modules** integrated into wider education information systems;
- Simple but robust **school and class registries** with geo-coordinates and enrolment/attendance tracking;
- Capacity-building of local actors (school shuras, CBS facilitators, ECD educators) to report and use data.

What "Technical Support to Governance" Should Look Like

Given the political sensitivities around Afghanistan, external partners are understandably cautious. But if the objective is to prevent a lost generation and enable Afghans to rebuild their own economy, then **technical support to governance systems** is not optional—it is essential. Such support can be structured with clear guardrails:

1. **System-not-symbolism**: Focus on standards, registries, and data architecture rather than branding or visibility.
2. **Interoperability and openness**: Ensure systems can be used by multiple stakeholders (ministries, NGOs, private sector) without locking in a single vendor or platform.
3. **Youth-centred design**: Design TVET, market, and data systems with Afghan youth—men and women—in mind, based on real labour market analysis, including opportunities for safe and regular migration.

4. **Evidence and accountability**: Use data systems to monitor both outcomes and equity: who is being reached, who is excluded, and where corrective action is needed.

SSEOA's proposed work on an upgraded **TVT Online System**, its ECD and CBS initiatives, and its focus on linking skills to domestic and regional labour markets is an example of how Afghan civil society can partner with authorities, UN agencies and donors to deliver this kind of technical governance support in practice.

Conclusion: Building the Invisible Infrastructure of Nation-Building

Afghanistan's real need is not merely more short-term projects or scattered trainings. It is the construction of the *invisible infrastructure* of nation-building: data systems, skills pathways, and market linkages that turn individual effort into collective progress.

Technical engagement with the IEA and relevant institutions—on education data, TVET and labour-market systems, domestic produce and product management—is one of the few levers still available that can simultaneously:

- Create meaningful opportunities for Afghan youth,
- Strengthen domestic markets and food systems, and
- Enable more rational, evidence-based governance in a very constrained environment.

If partners are willing to invest in these systems—and if Afghan institutions, civil society organisations like SSEOA, and the private sector can co-create and steward them—then every child in an ECD class, every learner in a CBS classroom, and every trainee in a TVET workshop will "plug into" something bigger than a single project: a national architecture of opportunity.

--KHARKA Ravi, PhD Research Scholar.