

# **Livelihoods of the Urban Poor in Afghanistan - Conceptual Issues and Review of Literature**

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this background paper is to provide the conceptual underpinning of a longitudinal research project on urban livelihoods carried out by AREU in the cities of Kabul, Herat, and Jalalabad, and to give a general overview about the existing literature that deals with urban issues in Afghanistan.

This project aims to carry out in-depth research into the diverse livelihood strategies of the urban poor, their ability to access services, and how their livelihood strategies change over time. Inner workings of different types of urban households and their dynamics are going to be explored using a range of anthropological methods. This is done with the overall objective to inform the design and implementation of policy and programming, as well as to explore the impact of evolving programmes, institutions and policies on household assets and livelihood security.

This exploration into the realities of the urban poor in Afghanistan takes on a livelihoods perspective. As such, in the first part of the paper, a general conceptual discussion of the livelihoods perspective and its application in rural and urban development research outlines the background for the planned project. There exists a variety of analytical frameworks to explore the complex processes of securing livelihoods (e.g. Scoones 1998, DFID 1998, Bebbington 1999, Moser 1998, Rakodi 2002), most of them being developed out of a rural perspective, which makes it necessary to reflect on the specific characteristics of urban situations. In Afghanistan, however, the prevailing situations of chronic conflict and political instability require additional attention, as households have to cope with increased levels of risk and uncertainty (see Pain and Lautze 2002).

In the second part, a review of the literature about urban Afghanistan aims to assess the current situation and the knowledge gaps to be filled. Apparently, there are not many studies explicitly addressing urban livelihoods in Afghanistan (exceptions are Grace 2003, Hunte 2004, ACF 2004, Schütte 2004), but there is literature on contextual issues influencing and determining the complex ground realities of urban livelihoods in Afghanistan.

In the final part of this paper, the conceptual and methodological implications for the proposed research on urban livelihoods are discussed. What are the central research questions that arise from the literature review? How can the conceptual issues addressed be translated into meaningful research?

## **1. The livelihoods perspective**

The standard definition of sustainable livelihoods has been provided by Chambers and Conway in 1992: *'A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base'* (cited in Pain and Lautze 2002, 9).

At the core of all livelihood approaches are the people living in poverty themselves: their actions and efforts, their possessions, their needs, their interests, their priorities, and the contexts in which they live. This emphasis on human agency and capability in line with a high sensitivity to different social, economic, spatial and cultural contexts provides a more comprehensive view on development than the purely economic viewpoints so prevalent in dominant 'traditional' approaches. Instead of portraying people as mere victims of structural constraints, their active role in exploring opportunities and coping with change are central to a livelihoods analysis (see also de Haan and Zoomers 2003).

To capture the complexity of factors influencing livelihood strategies and to make them operational, a number of analytical frameworks have been set up that share basic common elements (see Carney et al. 1999). The most widely used one, however, has been developed by the British government's Department For International Development (DFID 1998, Rakodi 1999), which is also going to serve as the basic conceptual tool for analysing urban livelihoods in Afghanistan (see Figure One).

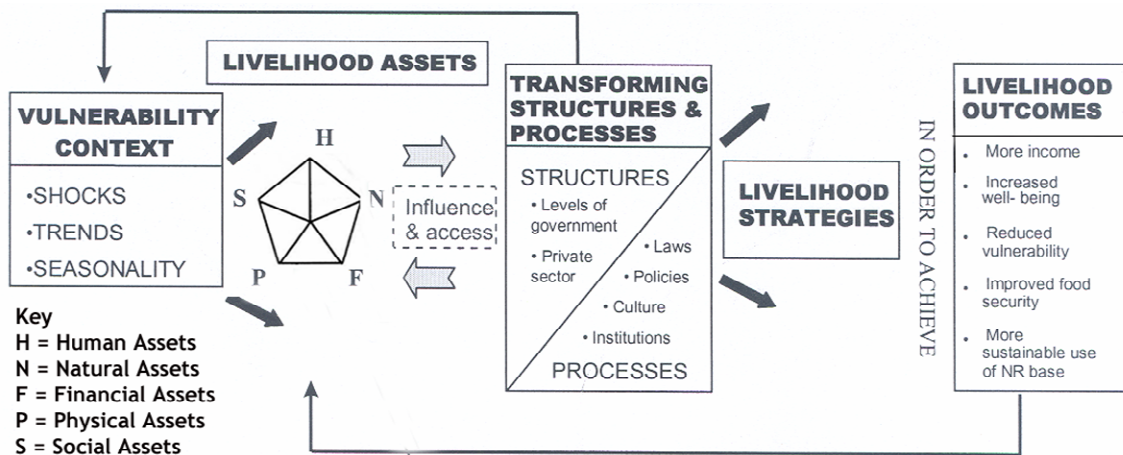


Figure One: The Sustainable Livelihood Framework by DFID (1998)

It is important to recognise that the framework is indeed a comprehensive tool for analysis, like a lens through which to view the world, but it does not pertain to an ultimate truth. Rather, it functions as a heuristic device. There is however a lingering danger to use it as a too rigid grid, as a straitjacket, that does not allow incorporating the complex micropolitics of everyday life (see Beall 2002) – for what else is managing a livelihood other than the practice of daily life, and, in the case of many urban poor, of daily hardship? The world of lived experience, the micro-world of the household and family and its regulations, of network and community, of social relations and interactions, of negotiating access to resources and services – all of these processes are intrinsic to the framework. However, when relational practices are reduced to singular terms like “assets” or “capitals” their complex meanings might be lost. Following Bebbington, Beall (ibid) makes this point very clear in relation to the terms *access* and *resources* – a blurred distinction, as “... *proximity to resources means very little when access to them is denied*” (ibid, 72). Thus, access becomes a critical resource itself, not only on the inter-household level, but also in relation to intra-household dynamics – gender and generational dimensions of livelihood strategies, though largely ignored in most livelihood analyses, play an important role for allowing access to and command over resources (ibid). This has been affirmed for urban Afghanistan (Schütte 2004), and consequently “... *a livelihoods perspective ... needs to embrace both productive and reproductive activities and the social relations accompanying them, notably of gender and generation*” (Beall 2002, 73). This is a general requirement, as is the inclusion of power relations into analysis.

“Assets” are certainly the central element of the framework. They refer to the tangible and intangible resources over which people are able to exercise command and with regard to urban contexts can be briefly described as follows:

**Human Assets:** These refer to knowledge, skills, formal education and good health. In the urban context, human assets are closely linked to the labour resources that a particular household is able to activate, in terms of both number of household members in the workforce, as well as educational background, skills acquired, health status, age and gender of the household members.

**Social Assets:** These refer to the capability of individuals or households to secure resources such as time, information, money and in-kind gifts, by virtue of membership in social networks. In the urban context, networks and reciprocity are usually more fragile and unpredictable due to high fragmentation and heterogeneity of urban populations.

**Physical Assets:** These refer to both productive assets and household assets. Productive assets include basic infrastructure such as shelter, water supply, sanitation, waste disposal, energy supply and transport, but also tools and production equipment required for income-generating activities or enhancement of labour productivity. Household assets in turn refer to household goods such as kitchen utensils, furniture or clothing, but in particular to valuables such as jewellery or other saleable personal belongings. Shelter or housing in urban areas is certainly the most important physical asset that a household can possess.

**Natural Assets:** These refer to endowments with natural resources and institutional arrangements controlling access to common property resources. Natural assets are less influential in the urban context, although the question of land rights and tenure security are essential determinants of livelihood security. However, as land is highly contested and politicised, it rather represents a physical asset in urban contexts.

**Financial Assets:** These refer to the economic resource base in general, i.e., to access to income opportunities, to stocks that are at the household's disposal and to regular inflows of money. In the urban context – characterised by commoditisation of virtually everything – these assets are indispensable for sustaining livelihoods in an urban environment.

With its main emphasis on analysing livelihood resources (what people have), livelihood strategies (what people do) and livelihood outcomes (what goals people pursue), the livelihoods framework is designed to:

- a) **Address human agency and capability** – i.e. build detailed understanding about the process of managing livelihoods in a given context.
- b) **Analyse contexts** – i.e. provide the means for a thorough analysis of the most important factors influencing and determining livelihoods and integrate into analysis the complex interconnections between structures and processes that decisively influence livelihood strategies.
- c) **Analyse institutional arrangements** – i.e. the risks to livelihood security arising out of the relationship between people and their social and natural environment, and the effects of institutions, organisations and legislations on people's livelihoods in a given context.
- d) **Analyse policy environments** – i.e. inform the analysis, design, and implementation of policy and programming, and assess outcomes of policies and programmes with regard to their (positive or negative) effects on livelihood security.

### **Human agency and capability**

The framework highlights the importance of assets as a starting point for analysis by focussing on “...*what the poor have, rather than what they do not have...*” (Moser 1998: 1). Its actor-oriented view takes into account the fact that the poor and vulnerable are not generally helpless victims of constrained environments, but capable social actors, whose actions decisively influence livelihood risks. People have an active role in inducing change, being able to adapt or respond to changing circumstances. Given this, a wide conception of what kind of resources people need to have access to in the process of composing a livelihood has led to considering livelihoods in terms of the *assets* people need to access (see above and Figure One). However, people’s tangible and intangible assets are not merely means through which they make a living – they also give meaning to the world (Bebbington 1999, 2022). Assets are thus not merely “things” or relations, but also the basis of a person’s or household’s power and capability to act, the basis to challenge or change the rules governing control over and use of resources (ibid, de Haan and Zoomers 2003).

### **Contextual Analysis**

While the focus of a livelihoods approach is on human agency and capability, this does not mean to obscure the constraining effects of the social and natural environment and the complex vulnerabilities of the poor, which often do not leave many options available to them in their efforts to compose a livelihood. These contexts are more often than not outside the immediate control of people but fundamentally affect their efforts in

composing a livelihood. However, as has been discussed elsewhere (Schütte 2004), vulnerability in urban Afghanistan takes many different forms and is not exterior to a livelihood system, but rather an integral part of it. Asset management may well affect household vulnerability (ibid, Moser 1998), and an adequate conceptualisation of vulnerability has to acknowledge its complexity and multiple appearances – both as a risky context shaping people’s lives, but also as an internal condition characterised by defencelessness and a lack of means to cope with these risks (see Chambers 1989). Thus, the concepts of livelihood security and vulnerability are intricately intertwined and not separate from each other. Contextual analysis therefore needs to explore the external environment in which people make a living and its attendant vulnerabilities in terms of shocks, trends and seasonality, but these need to be treated as part of a livelihood system. The actual interplay between structural constraints and the capacity to change or remove barriers to human well-being is decisive for achieving positive livelihood outcomes.

### **Institutional Analysis**

Institutions are the formal and informal rules, norms and values shaping daily life and the management of livelihood portfolios. At the same time, they refer to the domains of power and politics, and pose the vital questions as to how people’s own agency is able to influence institutional practices and organisations, and how people themselves are able to mobilise local community support and make claims on government. The latter point has been summarised under a sixth category of assets, namely “political assets” (e.g. Beall 2004, Baumann and Sinha 2001). It refers to political “know-how” and “know-who” and allows people to analyse and address their situation, to influence policy-making and access decision makers (Beall 2004). As such, apart from exploring local norm orientations and value systems, institutional analysis aims to explore the possible ways in which less powerful groups attempt to get by and thereby exercise capacity to influence larger-scale socio-economic and political processes and organisations.

### **Policy Analysis**

All aspects mentioned so far do have a policy dimension. Within a livelihoods framework people in poverty are not viewed as an undifferentiated and passive group at the mercy of broader social processes but as active agents responding to change (see Beall and Kanji 1999). Starting from smaller units like the household and investigating its dynamics and its inner workings and regulations, the linkages of livelihood systems and their attendant social relations to broader social structures need to be explored in order to assess effects of power and socio-economic change. This potential for linking micro-processes to macro-realities, i.e. *“...for establishing connections between local realities and the level at*

*which policies intended to change these realities are formulated”* (Shankland 2000, 6) is perceived to be a key strength of the livelihood framework.

Generally, a livelihoods approach focussing on household strategies, the management of asset portfolios, and the functioning of livelihood systems may add substantial value in various policy-related fields. It does:

- Help ensure that policy is not neglected
- Bring in a people-centred focus into policy making
- Help understand poor people’s capacity for articulating demand
- Provide a common language for policy makers from different sectors
- Link macro to micro levels as part of a livelihoods analysis - i.e. local realities and policies that structure and shape them
- Help identify the most salient policy areas for intervention
- Provide a multi-dimensional understanding of poverty
- Help assess impacts of existing policies on the livelihoods of the poor

(see Rakodi 1999, Pasteur 2001, Shankland 2000)

More specifically, Shankland (ibid) thinks of three crucial areas of investigation:

- The distinctive ways through which policy influences livelihood strategies and livelihood outcomes – it has to be recognised that policy is always mediated through organisations and institutions.
- The opportunities and constraints of poor people themselves to engage in the policy process need to be explored, thus raising issues of power and empowerment.
- Policy analysis needs to complement livelihood analysis itself and has to go beyond the “people-centred” framework to perform a complementary “policy-centred” analysis.

### **Urban Livelihoods - recognising the differences to rural situations**

The livelihoods approach as a rural framework has informed many empirical studies in different parts of the world (e.g. Bebbington 1999, Bohle 2001, Pain and Lautze 2002, van Dillen 2004, Grawert 1998). Urban applications of the model have been less numerous, but recent publications highlight its general usefulness for research on cities as well (e.g. Meikle et al. 2001, Rakodi 2002, Köberlein 2003, Mumtaz 2004), or stress the necessity to focus on urban livelihoods – especially in an age where urban growth rates all over the

world are reaching unprecedented heights and pushing forward what has been called the “urbanisation of poverty” (Sanderson 2002). However, a rural framework needs some revision before it can be applied to urban situations, as contexts and the nature of poverty may differ significantly in cities (Satterthwaite 1997, Satterthwaite and Tacoli 2002). The same holds for situations of chronic conflict and political instability, which are not sufficiently addressed in the original framework (Pain and Lautze 2002).

What are the particular characteristics of an urban environment in contrast to rural contexts? In his study on the livelihoods of urban waste collectors in Delhi, Köberlein (2003) follows Wratten (1995) and distinguishes four general areas specifically affecting urban livelihoods:

- **Commoditisation** – a particular feature of urban livelihoods is their almost complete immersion in the cash economy and the reliance on erratic urban labour markets. Subsistence production is scarce, and housing, food, water, health care and transport require ready amounts of currency, thereby putting constant pressure on poorer households to achieve a sufficient income that meets their needs.
- **Health and social risks** – environmental hazards caused by poor housing, lack of sanitary facilities, defective water supply and drainage or inadequate waste and sewage disposal put the health of the urban poor at risk. Occupational health risks due to lack of safety standards, and social risks caused by communal violence or crime are also more pertinent in the urban context.
- **Social fragmentation** – Building up and maintaining social networks is generally considered more difficult in cities because of the heterogeneity of populations (see Smith 1998, Rakodi 2002). Assets based on social claims therefore tend to be weaker than in rural areas.
- **Confrontations with civic establishments** – Confrontations with authorities, like an oppressive and bureaucratic government or corrupt and exploitative police, are more likely to happen in an urban setting. Further, there is a multiplicity of rules, norms, laws and regulations of land use, enterprises, or products influencing access to employment, land, and basic services. If misapplied, these have a large potential impact on poorer urban groups, resulting in a higher vulnerability to “bad” governance (Satterthwaite 2002). As Sanderson (2002) puts it: “... *most poor city dwellers survive in spite of formal systems.*”

It is difficult to draw sharp lines between urban and rural situations, and it is very clear that the mentioned points also have significance for rural livelihoods. Further, structural



determinants persist which affect the life chances of the poor in both sectors (see Wratten 1995). The mentioned generalised specific characteristics however appear to be more pertinent in an urban setting, but may already differ between cities or even between different locations within cities. However, important contrasts to rural contexts need to be acknowledged, but, as de Haan et al. (2002, 3) make clear, there is a central factor that remains unchanged: people themselves. Their requirements for access to resources, their prospects for living a life in security, their basic necessities are essentially the same human needs. What is different in rural and urban areas is the specific nature of a livelihood system, i.e. *“the mix of individual and household survival strategies, developed over a given period of time, that seeks to mobilize available resources (i.e. tangible and intangible assets) and opportunities (that arise e.g. out of membership in social networks and organisations, or out of institutional mechanisms)”* (Grown and Sebstad 1989, 941). Beall and Kanji (1999) go even further and argue *“that livelihood systems can embrace not only informal institutions and networks but more formal organisations as well, whether this takes the form of neighbourhood soup kitchens or trade unions.”* As such, they involve wider cooperative behaviour beyond the household – which in many cases turns out to be one of the most important resources of the urban poor (ibid).

### **Livelihoods under conditions of chronic conflict and political instability**

A study in urban Afghanistan needs to take account of the specifics of a post-war situation. Studies carried out in Afghanistan and other contexts show that chronic conflict and political instability decisively influence livelihood strategies of the urban poor, and that increasing levels of risk and constant uncertainty most probably lead to a change of livelihood systems (e.g. Pain and Lautze 2002). In contrast to “normal” livelihood strategies carried out in peaceful and stable times, *“...such livelihood strategies become restricted, either because they are no longer possible, because certain sections of the population are excluded from opportunity, or because more lucrative options appear as a result of the war economy”* (Jaspars and Shoham 2002, 9.) Different studies have shown that conflict and war for example lead to widespread asset depletion, displacement, increasing levels of debt, blocked access to and disintegration of markets, a politicisation of ethnicity or the abandonment of traditional livelihood strategies (ibid). The higher frequency of periodic shocks under these conditions leads to a heightened vulnerability, and ethnic or political identity and affiliation may become a crucial factor in determining levels of livelihood security and vulnerability (ibid). Coping strategies adapted to confront adversity often are not very sustainable (e.g. theft, looting, rely on working children, overcoming social taboos, prostitution) and may further increase the asset vulnerability of

affected households and individuals. As such, violence, conflict and a weakened rule of law may drive individuals and households into poverty, and act as a maintainer, thus putting people into situations of chronic poverty (see CPRC 2004).

In terms of coping strategies, studies conducted in Sri Lanka show that social assets are most important to ensure survival under very adverse circumstances (Bohle 2003, Korf 2004). They absorb shocks (and migrants) and secure continuing access to tangible resources under conditions of civil war and ethnic conflicts. Especially the poor share limited resources like housing, food and work and try to jointly confront the external threats (Bohle 2003). Apart from these social resources, political assets play an essential role: Korf (2004) found that alliances with power holders are instrumental in enabling individuals, households or economic actors to stabilise or even expand their livelihood options and opportunities in conflict situations. On the other hand, there is also some evidence that in unstable situations where the rule of force undermines the rule of law, physical asset-building can lead to heightened insecurity. Both mentioned studies utilised a livelihoods approach for analysing the situation and confirmed its general applicability in contexts of war and unrest, and consider it as a particularly useful tool to observe and understand people's behaviour and activities in complex emergencies (see also Korf 2001). Similarly, a livelihoods assessment conducted in rural post-conflict Kosovo (Westley and Michalev 2002) offered specific contributions to better understand people's situations and vulnerability. The most important findings that also have relevance for an urban situation relate to:

- **The vulnerability of extended networks** – people without an extended social network tended to be more vulnerable than those who were part of an extended network. However, these networks are vulnerable to overuse, and the importance of supporting them has been highlighted.
- **The nature of remittances** – it turned out that the association between well-being and remittances is not valid in all situations, with size, regularity and duration of access making the crucial difference.
- **The status of women and girls' access to education** – it was found that women's status in the household was closely related with both their educational levels and their participation in the formal economy. Distance turned out to be a crucial factor for determining school attendance of girls.

The findings and clues of the mentioned studies need to be tested for the Afghan urban context. The same holds for the observation, that there are people who move in and out of

poverty (the transient poor) and those who remain poor (the chronic poor). There apparently exists a continuum of efforts to stay alive at any cost (survival), to achieve longer-term well-being (security), or to move out of poverty altogether (growth) (Grown and Sebstad 1989, Beall and Kanji 1999). However, what exactly the characteristics and determinants are that shape the different situations of the urban poor in Afghanistan remains to be unveiled in order to develop targeted strategies for policy improvement and useful assistance of livelihood strategies.

In sum, the livelihoods approach has proven its potential as a useful device to facilitate a better understanding of poverty, deprivation and survival in many different contexts. Urban situations and those of chronic conflict and political instability require some adaptations to the framework originally developed to analyse rural livelihoods, but these mainly refer to a sensitive and thorough assessment of the contexts in which livelihood strategies are conducted. These naturally differ from rural to urban, and in conflict situations. The principal idea of a framework though remains intact also when studying livelihood strategies in urban areas affected by conflict and instability: that is to provide a holistic structure, which enables to interpret findings on livelihoods and vulnerability in a useful and people-centred way.

## **2. The Afghan urban context**

Afghanistan faces not a temporary crisis, but a long-enduring situation of conflict and instability. During this long period, war, conflict and insecurity have deeply shaped the political economy of the country. In basic terms, there exist and function several “regional economies” within Afghanistan. These are infused with different and intertwined “types” of political-economic systems that have emerged during a generation of conflict and war in the country. Pain and Goodhand (2002) characterise these systems as the dominant war economy, whose functioning in turn shapes a strong black economy and the coping economies of survival. The functionings of these regional economies, with the coping economies harbouring the bulk of the Afghan population, set important contexts for managing and securing livelihoods, in rural as well as in urban contexts. For instance, the creation of “transnational regional markets” is characterised by flourishing black “smuggling economies” and centred around the urban regions of Herat, Jalalabad, Mazar-i Sharif and Kandahar, thus resulting in four main cross-border economic areas with specific characteristics (see Dorronsoro 1999).

The coping economies are generally characterised by a widespread struggle for survival in a high-risk environment. Faced with depleting asset bases, people often rely on the employment of child labour, leading to long-term negative effects on health status and education (Pain and Goodhand 2002, Schütte 2004). More explicitly for the urban context, coping economies tend to be characterised by widespread unemployment, a subsequent loss of income, insecure and expensive housing, food insecurity, and lack of long-term investment and tenure rights.

Research undertaken to gain a better understanding on urban vulnerability in Afghanistan (Schütte 2004) revealed that the urban coping economies tend to set rather uniform conditions in various urban sites – the urban poor and vulnerable face similar risks and problems, be it in Kabul, in Herat, or in Jalalabad. However, each location does somewhat provide different opportunities as well, so that the question as to how spatial parameters determine levels of livelihood security needs some consideration (see also Ravallion and Wodon 1997). A recent study carried out by Action Contre la Faime (ACF 2004) aimed to identify vulnerable neighbourhoods in Kabul by means of mapping spatial access to infrastructure, housing, health services, water, sanitation and job opportunities. This resulted in a characterisation of nine different “livelihood zones” in the city and eleven highly vulnerable neighbourhoods. As such, the survey indicates that spatial categories very well influence levels of social vulnerability or livelihood security, and a general finding of this study is that the actual place of living impacts on the access to job opportunities, services and sanitation conditions (ibid). Thus, spatial factors and the geographical situation do certainly have an impact on livelihoods – unhealthy living environments and the illegal status of informal settlements definitely facilitate deprivation, which usually goes along with poor access to anyway limited services. Yet as indicated earlier: closer proximity e.g. to services does not necessarily regulate access as a crucial resource, especially with regard to services.

Apart from that, vulnerability may not be easily explained using spatial indicators alone. For instance, people living on the remote hilltops in Kabul without close access to clean water and basic services are disadvantaged spatially, but might still have good reasons why they have chosen to settle there. A house illegally built on a steep hillside with poor sanitation, no water and electricity, and exposed to environmental hazards, but owned by the household, may still be perceived as a better option than renting an expensive room in a less remote area of Kabul. There are different choices possible even under very constrained circumstances, and though the ranges of these are certainly not very broad, they still influence levels of vulnerability and livelihood security (Schütte 2004).

However, assessments of social and spatial contexts in urban Afghanistan are mostly confined to the situation in Kabul (e.g. Mumtaz and Noschis 2004, UN Habitat 2003), and literature on other urban sites is indeed very scarce.

The city of Kabul faces the multiple problems of a growing population, a devastated infrastructure and an estimated number of 77,000 destroyed houses (GoA: Securing Afghanistan's Future, Urban Annex, 2004). Accordingly, especially poor and vulnerable populations are affected by poor housing and tenure insecurity, limited access to safe water, a lack of public transportation facilities, no electricity, bad sanitation and waste disposal, very limited basic education and restricted job opportunities (Mohammad 2004), resulting in a high degree of "asset vulnerability" (see Table One below). Apart from this, harsh winters in Kabul pose additional ecological threats to livelihood security, though people who are vulnerable to the threats of winter are also sensitive to stresses and shocks throughout the year (Grace 2003). One of the biggest problems in Kabul and also other cities of Afghanistan is land and tenure insecurity. There exist informal settlements in every bigger city of the country, but inhabitants are hesitant to invest in their habitats because they have not obtained a legal status (see UN-Habitat 2002). To find a sustainable solution to the land question, especially in Kabul – which also acknowledges the situation of the urban poor and the fact that housing as a physical asset is one of the most important assets in urban areas – poses one of the biggest challenges to government, municipality and city planners. Not at least because *"for the very poor and downtrodden, the small piece of land he or she occupies-legally or by invasion, represents the only chance he or she has to gain a foothold in the urban economy. The extent that such ownership is 'illegal', 'non-conforming to a Master Plan', or 'imperfect' creates in the users a deep sense of insecurity - one of the worst consequences of social exclusion"* (UN Habitat 2003, iii).

A more encompassing piece of research carried out in early 2004 (Schütte 2004) investigated the general aspects of asset vulnerability for poor and vulnerable people living in Kabul, Herat and Jalalabad, the negative outcomes these vulnerabilities imply, and possible ways to cope. The findings of this project are summarised in Table One below.

The table attempts to bring together contextual factors and the ways they shape human agency in a situation where people have to strive to merely secure their survival with only very limited scope to achieve longer-term security. A very general conclusion that can be drawn from this table is that the extent to which vulnerability actually manifests itself in the lives of different urban households is mainly a function of respective asset bases, the

composition and quality of these assets, and the actual activities pursued in composing livelihoods. These activities in most observed cases reflect a limited capacity to cope in a risky environment.

Other studies with a focus on human agency under constrained conditions reach similar conclusions. Grace (2003) in her study on winter vulnerability in Kabul showed that many urban poor and vulnerable have difficulties to sustain prolonged periods of hardship without assistance, and Hunte (2004) indicates that safety nets of kinship and social networks deteriorated significantly through the ongoing economic and political crisis. Moreover, widespread capability deprivation and insecurity in Afghanistan also led to psychological effects of depression, frustration, despair and anger (ibid, see also Schütte 2004). With regard to children in poor families, it was found that access to schooling is very limited by the necessity of offspring to participate in productive and reproductive activities to secure household survival (de Berry et al. 2003, Schütte 2004).

Given the overall tenor of the mentioned studies, the situation of the urban poor in Afghanistan appears to be rather depressing. Still, research explicitly focussing on the capacities of the urban poor has not yet been conducted, and the current project on urban livelihoods aims to begin filling this substantial gap.

Table 1: 'Asset-vulnerability' in urban Afghanistan (adapted from Moser 1998); Source: Schütte 2004

<i>Type of 'asset vulnerability'</i>	<i>Outcome</i>	<i>Coping Strategies</i>
<b>Human Assets</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(-) education</li> <li>(-) water supply</li> <li>(-) health care</li> <li>(-) food security</li> <li>(-) job opportunities</li> <li>(-) mental health</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(+/-) Support from social relations</li> <li>(+/-) Negotiating work and education</li> <li>(+/-) Access NGO-programs</li> <li>(+/-) Fetching water from faraway</li> </ul>
<b>Financial Assets</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(-) access to loans</li> <li>(-) repayment capacities of loans</li> <li>(-) sufficient income</li> <li>(-) reasonable rents for housing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(+/-) Sharing shelter</li> <li>(+/-) "Black market" work</li> <li>(+/-) Stealing</li> <li>(+/-) Begging</li> <li>(+/-) Mobilising work from children</li> <li>(+/-) Selling physical assets</li> </ul>
<b>Social Assets</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(-) intra- and inter-household relations</li> <li>(-) social support mechanisms</li> <li>(-) care for children and elderly</li> <li>(-) mobility for women</li> <li>(-) relations to the "powerful"</li> <li>(-) trust in each other &amp; in government</li> <li>(-) domestic peacefulness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(+/-) Building community organisations</li> <li>(+/-) Local potentials for self help</li> <li>(+/-) Find support beyond the extended family</li> </ul>
<b>Physical Assets</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(-) ownership of land and houses</li> <li>(-) housing as a productive asset</li> <li>(-) water-supply</li> <li>(-) transport infrastructure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(+/-) Finding cheaper shelter in places faraway from basic services and infrastructure</li> </ul>
<b>Environmental Assets</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(-) fuel for heating</li> <li>(-) protection against environmental hazards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(+/-) Burning garbage</li> <li>(+/-) Building provisional shelter with plastic from the streets</li> <li>(+/-) Searching the streets and garbage dumps for inflammables and plastic</li> </ul>

### 3. Conceptual and methodological implications for research on urban livelihoods in Afghanistan

What do the so far mentioned conceptual issues and the main findings from other studies imply for a research project aiming to explore urban livelihood systems in Afghanistan?

Generally, it appears that the utilisation of a livelihoods framework offers a feasible way to capture complexity and diversity. It does allow putting people at the centre of investigation and exploring the multiple ways through which they attempt to secure their livelihoods. Though caution is required to not confuse a framework for analysis with the complex realities of urban survival, it does pay attention to the complex interplay of

human agency and social structure and as such sees the urban poor not as sole victims of structural constraints but as capable social actors whose actions decisively influence livelihood risks. Following this line of thinking, the research takes as its starting point the household and attempts to address the question how its members actually attempt to pursue secure livelihoods in their specific living environments. It is planned to work with a certain number of households in each urban location for a period of 16 months and as such to longitudinally assess the complex processes of managing urban livelihoods by using deliberately a qualitative methodology.

To be applicable to urban research there is, however, need for certain adjustments in the livelihoods framework, which mainly refer to a proper conceptualisation of the characteristics of managing a livelihood in an urban context (see above). It is clear that these substantially differ in many respects from rural contexts, though the question of how rural–urban interfaces are shaped in Afghanistan also needs some consideration. However, the contexts in the cities of Kabul, Herat, and Jalalabad already differ significantly, and the constraints and opportunities posed by the different urban contexts to poor urban dwellers need concern.

Specifically, it is planned to involve a broad range of poor and vulnerable urban households in the research, which cuts across the Afghan urban society: different ethnic groups (Hazara, Pashtun, Tadjik, Uzbek, Turkmen) as well as different social groups (female-headed households, households headed by people with disabilities, internally displaced persons (IDPs), returned refugees, longer-term residents, people living in “vulnerable neighbourhoods” and in squatter settlements). As such, the research aims to address a variety of questions which can be arranged according to the four main areas of investigation of a livelihoods approach, as proposed in section one.

### **Human Agency and Capability**

A central aim of the research is to find out about the actual livelihood strategies adopted by the urban poor. The project takes as its starting point the household level, thus attempting to explore the ground realities of urban poverty in Afghanistan. There is need to generate knowledge about the situation of poor households, in relation to both their characteristics and external opportunities and constraints.

A crucial question to answer in this context is what people actually do to secure their livelihood, and where they do it. This implies that daily activities, both productive and reproductive, need to be explored, as well as spatial dynamics, for instance in form of



assessing forms and reasons of daily and seasonal mobility. Activity portfolios, how and why they change over time, will be investigated by using a range of qualitative methods, as well as inter- and intra-household relations and household dynamics. Here, gender and generational issues shaping social relations inside the household need special concern, especially with regard to resource allocation and decision-making.

The means for human agency are the endowments people possess – represented as a household's or individual's asset portfolio. What are the ways people make (or not make) use of it? How vulnerable are the assets under their command? What activities do people pursue to compose their livelihoods and maintain or enhance their asset base? Are there different activity profiles for different social and ethnic groups? How do activity profiles vary in different spatial contexts?

### **Contextual Analysis**

The varying contexts of different “types” of households (i.e. of different social and ethnic groups, see above) need to be assessed. A range of questions suggest themselves in this respect: Does an ethnic affiliation make a difference? In what ways do spatial contexts matter? How do household histories influence current livelihood strategies? What are the specific, internal and external, risks and vulnerabilities faced by different types of households? How do they cope with these? What constraints and opportunities do different social, spatial and ethnic contexts pose? How does seasonality influence urban livelihoods? How do people attempt to change their immediate environment? Are there any urban–rural linkages influencing livelihood strategies?

### **Institutional Analysis**

Institutional analysis aims to assess the micropolitics of daily life and the rules and norms that govern these – both internal and external to the household. They embrace gender- and generational relations as well as kinship and lineage structures and their importance for social organisation. At the same time, broader issues of power and politics need to be addressed.

These relations can be assessed by exploring horizontal and vertical linkages that connect households with other actors, e.g. with other households and community members or inside the neighbourhood (horizontal), or with more powerful groups or organisations (vertical). The latter point refers to the possible ways urban governance might be influenced by people's relationships and activities and, if existent, could best be conceived as representing a political asset. Consequently, a central question to be raised is to what

extent the urban poor in Afghanistan are endowed with such political assets. Are they able to make and enforce claims, for example to the government? How far does people's agency extend to influence social and political processes operating in and on the city? What exactly are these processes? How do they impinge on livelihoods? How does urban governance and urban management affect livelihoods of the poor?

Further, institutional analysis asks how access to resources and services is regulated and controlled, both inside the household and on a broader level. What are the power relations working inside the household? What household members are able access what kind of resources? How do gender relations affect command over resources? What regulates access to basic services? What kind of social networks are maintained or given up (kinship, community, neighbourhood, rural-urban, transnational, vertical relations etc.)? Who is responsible for doing the networking?

### **Policy Analysis**

As indicated earlier, policy analysis should be conducted somewhat apart and complementary to livelihoods analysis. Generally, it aims to identify suitable entry points for policy and programming and salient areas for intervention, which can be translated in the form of precise recommendations. Further, the impact of policy and programming on livelihoods needs to be assessed. However, before this can be accomplished, policy analysis needs to understand what institutions and organisations actually mediate the policy process in urban Afghanistan. It might be helpful at this point to utilise Shankland's (2000) "checklist" to capture the policy process for urban Afghanistan. This list consists of several general questions that are generally applicable in different contexts and tries to combine macro-level investigation of policy with insights from micro-level livelihoods analysis.

#### **A: Livelihood priorities**

1. Who and where are the poor?
2. What are their livelihood priorities?
3. What policy sectors are relevant to these priorities?

#### **B: The policy context**

1. What is policy in those sectors?
2. Who makes policy in those sectors?
3. What is the macro policy context?

#### **C: Policy measures**

1. What measures have been put in place to implement each policy?

2. What are the characteristics of these policy measures?
3. Through what institutions and organisations are these measures channelled?

**D: Policy in the local context**

1. In what shape do these institutions and organisations exist locally?
2. What other institutions and organisations affect local responses to policy?
3. What other local institutions and organisations might policy affect?

**E: People and policy**

1. What resources can poor people draw on to influence policy?
2. What opportunities exist for poor people to influence policy directly?
3. What opportunities exist for poor people to influence policy indirectly?

(Shankland 2000, 22)

This rather exhaustive list might best serve as a means for continuous discussion with government actors and other stakeholders about the relevance of research findings for policy and programming. Apart from that, it will serve as a guideline for formulating recommendations in project-related publications.

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