



Strategic Environmental Planning and Management  
for the Peri-urban Interface  
Research Project

**UNDERSTANDING THE OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS  
FOR LOW-INCOME GROUPS IN THE PERI-URBAN INTERFACE:  
THE CONTRIBUTION OF LIVELIHOOD FRAMEWORKS**

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## 1. AIMS AND STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

There is increased recognition that the ways in which individuals and households achieve their basic needs are based on the management of a complex combination of capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities. Related to this is a more dynamic analysis of poverty which has been developed in recent years and which shows that people tend to move in and out of poverty, depending on how vulnerable they are to external shocks and stresses, and on how rapidly they can recover from such crises. The different types of strategies they adopt can be categorised as: income-earning strategies; expenditure-reducing strategies while striving to secure a given level of basic services; collective support strategies to address needs through kin, social and local networks; and external representation strategies in collaboration with, or through other institutions to bring resources and facilities to the settlement. These strategies depend on the availability of a number of different assets (or 'capitals'). People who are not able to improve their livelihoods often fail to access, defend and capitalise on their existing assets and their vulnerability increases. A better understanding of the constraints and opportunities faced by different groups in gaining access to and in managing their assets is therefore an essential element of poverty reduction interventions. With this in mind, a number of frameworks have been developed, generally focusing on either rural or urban livelihoods. Section 2 briefly summarises their main features.

The term peri-urban has also recently become widely used. This stems from the recognition that the management of natural resources in the region surrounding an urban centre is often of great importance to the livelihoods of many groups (for example farmers and fishing communities) and is equally crucial for the sustainable provision of these resources (for example freshwater and foodstuff) to the whole region, including its urban residents. The dynamic processes of socio-economic and environmental change which are usually a major element of the peri-urban interface are likely to have an impact on the opportunities and constraints faced by different groups in their access to assets and the construction of livelihood strategies. Based on the frameworks summarised in section 2, section 3 draws on the (admittedly limited) existing empirical literature and examines the relevance of the models to the construction of livelihoods in the peri-urban interface (PUI). Finally section 4 suggests ways in which elements of the different models can be usefully combined to improve their use as tools for research and policy-making in the context of the PUI.

## 2. UNDERSTANDING LIVELIHOODS IN RURAL AND URBAN CONTEXTS

### 2.1. The Sustainable (Rural) Livelihoods Framework<sup>1</sup>

The main components of this are:

- livelihood assets (the five different types of capital: social, human, natural, financial, physical)
- transforming structures and processes (i.e. what determines access, or lack of it, to the capitals)
- livelihood strategies and outcomes

The importance of asset diversity and interdependence in the framework builds on the recognition of the complexity and variety of the processes which underlie poverty and vulnerability.

Transforming structures (defined in the framework as public sector, private sector, civil society) and processes (legislation, policies, culture and institutions) are crucial because interventions at this level are likely to affect strategies and outcomes. They operate at all levels, from households to global, and determine access to assets, terms of exchange between different assets, and the returns (economic and non-economic) to livelihood strategies. Understanding transforming structures is especially important in the PUI, where institutional fragmentation and rapid change in the roles, responsibilities, rights and relations between different groups and organisations can result in growing social polarisation.

Livelihood strategies and outcomes: this is where rural-urban linkages can be more visible, for

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<sup>1</sup> This draws essentially from Diana Carney (ed.), 1998.

example in the form of different forms and types of migration, multi-spatial household organisation, etc. It is also where the opportunities and constraints characteristic of PUIs can be more easily identified, for example in the types of income diversification strategies available to different groups.

The Sustainable Livelihoods framework originates from a rural perspective, and although (building on Integrated Rural Development) it does take into account the impact of urban centres (for example in terms of migration and access to markets), its focus is very much on rural populations and activities. The question then is whether it needs to incorporate more 'urban' concerns.

## 2.2. The 'Capitals and Capabilities' Framework<sup>2</sup>

This is also essentially a rural framework. However it emphasises the shift in rural areas from agrarian (or natural resource-based) livelihoods to more diversified strategies based on a range of assets, income sources and product and labour markets. The five capital assets in this framework are: produced, human, natural, social and cultural. 'Produced' capital somehow overlaps with 'physical' capital and 'financial' capital in the SRL framework.

This addition of the 'cultural' capital is an important difference because the framework aims to build a notion of access to resources which brings together the material side ('making a living') as well as the ways in which perceptions of poverty determine livelihood strategies, and the cultural meaning attached to assets (this may be relevant in the PUI, for example with respect to land ownership). Moreover, assets are not only resources that people use, they are also what gives people the capability to be and act. For example, human capital gives people the tools to change their worldview and the capacity to improve their circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

In this framework, processes and structures do not appear as a separate category. However, 'access' is recognised as the central feature (or 'resource') capable of transforming (or not) livelihood strategies. Access is incorporated into 'social capital', whereas in the SRL framework access is understood more as an institution and negotiated through the transforming structures and processes.

## 2.3. The Asset Vulnerability Framework

This framework specifically addresses urban poverty.<sup>4</sup> This is differentiated from rural poverty by three main features:

- commoditisation (or monetarisation) of labour and food, services etc. Urban residents must rely more on goods and services purchased rather than produced at the household level. Labour is also usually for wages or for the production of goods/services to be sold rather than for subsistence activities;
- environmental hazards in the urban context are often more serious;
- social fragmentation can erode social capital.

The assets identified in this framework are:

- labour (the most important asset for poor people)
- human capital
- productive assets (often including housing as the most important)
- household relations (pooling income and sharing consumption)
- social capital

Livelihood strategies are divided into 'income-raising strategies' and 'consumption-modifying strategies'. What is important about these strategies is that they may negatively affect the

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<sup>2</sup> Bebbington, 1999

<sup>3</sup> Sen, 1997

<sup>4</sup> Moser, 1998

household's asset base, and in this case increase its vulnerability in the long run (for example sending children to work rather than to school). Strategies which increase the asset base, on the contrary, reduce vulnerability on the long term while possibly reducing income in the short term (for example sending children to school rather than to work or keeping them at home).

The model focuses on the household and neighbourhood levels, and wider spatial (and the related social) dimensions were not considered in much depth in the original case studies which form the basis of the framework.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. LIVELIHOODS, ASSETS AND ACCESS IN THE PUI

This section reviews the different types of assets described in the three frameworks above with specific reference to the PUI. By way of introduction, it is useful to summarise how different levels of social and economic processes and of policy-making affect urban growth patterns and, consequently, the nature of the peri-urban interface and the wider context within which livelihood strategies are organised.

The major differences in the patterns of urbanisation between different regions (intended here as supra-national geographical entities) and the spatial adaptation to structural transformations are reflected in the characteristics of their peri-urban interface. The metropolitan regions of South East Asia (Desakota) have no equivalent in sub-Saharan Africa (especially in terms of size). However, Desakota regions also show important variations, depending on the speed and nature of industrialisation. Important factors here are demographic pressure encouraging in-migration, the extent of investment in specialised agriculture and most crucially the extent of employment creation in the formal sector (likely to result in more secure and higher incomes than the informal sector). A country's - and a city's - place in world economy is therefore a major factor in shaping peri-urban processes.

The historic and geographic specificity of towns is also an important factor. Small and intermediate towns often (but by no means always) depend on rural consumers and producers for their urban economies. Larger cities usually attract more industry, and have a greater share of the national infrastructural investment (although recently there has been a trend towards the provision or improvement of infrastructure in secondary cities in order to attract private investment - especially in Latin American countries). Industrial activities in larger centres are often located or re-located in peripheral areas, where they attract labour, either directly or through subcontracting (often stimulating the growth of spatially concentrated clusters of producers operating on a 'flexible specialisation' model).

Other differences in the nature of the peri-urban interface may arise from the urban centre's geographical position. Many African administrative towns were established in areas of low density population, and the rural-urban divide is quite sharp there. In the case of urban centres surrounded by higher density population regions, urban horizontal growth tends to incorporate pre-existing villages.

People and activities on the urban fringe of the same urban centre may also vary widely. Residents can include: high and middle-income households moving to residential areas in 'greener' areas well-connected to the centre; low-income residents moving from central areas, looking for more space as well as more affordable housing and cheap land on which they can build their own house; new migrants from rural and inner urban areas or other urban centres (in many cases tenants); people living in villages incorporated into the city. Planning regulations have an important role, especially with respect to zoning which often requires the relocation of industrial activities outside the city centre and may thus encourage the increase in low-cost rented accommodation in the surrounding villages.

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<sup>5</sup> Moser *et al*, 1997.G

### 3.1. Human Capital/Labour

**Labour** is the most important asset for poor people, and is closely linked to human capital (the skills, knowledge and ability - also physical - to work). Recent evidence shows that income diversification is an increasingly important strategy for both urban and rural populations.<sup>6</sup> This means involvement in different sectors of activity (agriculture, trade and services, manufacturing) and also in many cases in different forms of employment (casual wage labour, skilled and semi-skilled subcontracting, and subsistence production, especially agricultural). In the PUI, income diversification is likely to be intensified as the proximity of urban and rural labour markets can provide increased employment opportunities.

Employment within the peri-urban area is determined by the nature of the area itself (see above). For example, the development of high and middle-income residential areas attracts domestic service and other services, including trade and waste collection. Leisure infrastructure also provides employment for service workers, although often in low-skill and low-paid jobs. By contrast, the relocation of industry on the urban fringe can create demand for semi-skilled and skilled workers both from large enterprises and more often from sub-contracting small and micro-enterprises as well as demand for services for workers (for example food and accommodation). In some cities, the urban fringe has developed into mixed industrial and residential areas dominated by highly productive small, specialised firms working in clusters and linked to each other by strong business and social networks. In areas where the PUI includes commercial farms, seasonal employment as agricultural wage labour can provide an important income source for the urban poor, sometimes involving commuting or temporary migration. Here again, the availability of such employment depends on the type of agricultural production systems in the region, since the capability to (and need for) hiring agricultural hands is usually limited to medium or large commercial farms.

The main determinant factors of employment opportunities in the PUI can be summarised as follows:

- the nature and scale of economic activities in the PUI. This may vary widely around different cities, but also in different areas of the PUI;
- the spatial distribution of these economic activities and transport availability and costs. It is usually recognised that one of the key elements in the development of the Metropolitan Regions of South East Asia is the availability of cheap transport allowing workers to commute between residential areas and workplace. Mobility needs to be included as an important factor allowing access to labour markets.

In the two rural-oriented frameworks, **human capital** consists essentially of education and health services. By contrast, the urban-focused framework (and indeed most of the urban literature) draws attention on the health implications of environmental hazards for urban residents. Lack of access to basic services such as water and sanitation is a crucial issue. In many peri-urban areas, the problem relates to their location - they are a long way away from existing water mains, trunk sewers and storm and surface water drains. Some peri-urban areas are also on particularly difficult terrain (e.g. informal settlements of even middle and upper class areas on hills, informal settlements in flood plains) which make the provision of water, sanitation and drainage infrastructure more difficult and expensive. Many peri-urban areas also fall under the jurisdiction of local government which is weak or has low capacity for investment in those forms of infrastructure which are local government responsibility, or where local government has an important role in negotiating investment from regional, national and private utilities. Other peri-urban areas are in larger 'rural' local government areas lacking the capacity for urban management and investment.

### 3.2. Environmental Hazards

Most health risks faced by low-income groups arise from environmental hazards (biological, chemical, physical) in the home, neighbourhood, workplace or wider city. In the 'asset vulnerability' framework, environmental hazards affect human capital and therefore people's ability to work. A

<sup>6</sup> See Bryceson and Jamal, 1997; and Ellis, 1998.

recent review<sup>7</sup> shows that the combination of agricultural and industrial activities and residential use in peri-urban areas can create specific health hazards. Some peri-urban areas are degraded or damaged by being a sink for different urban liquid, solid and sometimes air borne wastes. Peri-urban areas also often share problems with low-income urban settlements - so it is likely that bad management (and the marginalisation of local communities) is also a crucial issue. This can be exacerbated by the 'institutional fragmentation' which frequently affects the PUI, as administrative boundaries may not include jurisdiction over the actual sources of the problem.

### Natural capital

The management of natural resources, on the other hand, can be an income generating activity for low-income groups, for example in the form of small (and often semi-formal or informal) enterprises for the collection of household waste. However, these enterprises cannot replace larger entities such as municipal authorities in managing the disposal of waste, especially when it is concentrated in large quantities (as is often the case in the PUI). Here again, institutional fragmentation can be a major problem. Indeed, successful initiatives dealing with environmental issues affecting the city as well as its surrounding region have been able to do so through the co-operation of different levels of administration and the private sector.<sup>8</sup>

Another characteristic of the PUI is the competition for resources between different groups. This includes the quality and quantity of freshwater availability, land management (critical for keeping down prices of residential land in the city and for reducing the loss of agricultural space and watershed damage). Land is a natural asset which is also a productive one - this aspect is discussed in more detail in the next section.

## 3.3. Financial, Productive, Physical Capital

Physical capital in the sustainable livelihoods framework includes infrastructure and tools/equipment. Financial capital includes savings as well as transfers. The urban-based model takes a wider approach to the definition of productive assets. In the urban context, housing is equated to land for rural people, as the asset on which income-generating activities can be based. For example, home-based enterprises are especially important for home-bound household members, often women - although the success of such enterprises depends on the availability of infrastructure such as water and electricity. Renting accommodation to migrant workers can also be a source of income for the 'indigenous' population.

In densely populated regions, the expansion of urban centres means that existing villages are absorbed by the city. The changes which occur in these 'fringe' villages are intimately linked to the changes in the surrounding area, as they can provide cheaper infrastructure (including land for industrial sites and housing) and in many cases cheaper labour. In Delhi, for example, they act as centres for informal economic activities which in turn are vital for the whole regional economy to which they are linked by subcontracting arrangements. These areas are often outside the municipal boundaries, or are not considered in municipal master plans which tend to privilege the creation of industrial parks. The consequence is that they are considered as informal settlements, with the resulting lack of infrastructural investment and risk of eviction.<sup>9</sup>

Land is one of the most important issues in the peri-urban interface, and the one which is more often at the origins of tensions and potential conflict. The general trend is that better-off urban residents acquire land in the urban fringe for a variety of purposes. These include renting it to small farmers (in some cases the same ones who sold it in the first place), while waiting for urban infrastructure to reach the area and then build a house either for residence or for renting. Another

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<sup>7</sup> Birley and Lock, 1998

<sup>8</sup> Balvín Díaz *et al*, 1996

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin and Bengani, 1998

option is to leave land idle, in a more overtly speculative operation.<sup>10</sup> Around smaller towns, larger farmers purchase land to increase the size of their farms (it is not clear whether there is a speculative objective, or whether acquisition is motivated primarily by the opportunities provided by the increased proximity to urban markets).

Land as a productive asset is clearly not sufficient on its own. In Paraguay, many smallholders in the surrounding region of Asuncion have not been able to benefit from the proximity of urban markets. This is because they do not own enough land to use as collateral for credit to invest in the profitable production of vegetables and fruit for urban consumers. In many cases they are forced to sell to larger farmers. The optimal use of productive and physical capitals is therefore intrinsically linked to access to financial assets.

### 3.4. Social Capital, Household Relations and Cultural Capital

Social capital is an increasingly used term, but also one which is difficult to define, especially in a commonly agreed manner, and even more difficult to identify and assess. In the sustainable livelihoods framework, social capital is intended in the widest sense as 'social resources' (such as networks, membership of formal groups, trust and reciprocity, etc.). The urban-focused framework uses number and duration of CBOs as an indicator of social capital. In the capitals and capabilities framework, social capital has the crucial role of providing (or denying) access to other assets.

Issues of access have been investigated with regards to market mechanisms<sup>11</sup>, an issue which is relevant to livelihood strategies in the PUI where the proximity of urban demand and markets is usually assumed to represent an opportunity for small producers in the surrounding region. However, markets are better understood as social institutions, where in most cases some (groups of) actors are able to enforce mechanisms of control which favour access for specific groups and exclude others. In South Asia, for example, grain markets tend to be dominated by large local merchants who control access to the means of distribution (transport, sites, capital, credit and information). Even in the petty retail subsector, gender and caste act as major entry barriers.<sup>12</sup>

Aside from access to markets, another important aspect of social capital is that of representation, that is, access to the 'state' (intended here in the widest sense and including different levels of government, from local to national). While this is a crucial issue for low-income groups regardless of spatial location, it is likely that in the PUI this requires access to different institutions (given its institutional fragmentation). The capacity of these groups to benefit rather than lose from this is determined by their access first to information and second to representation of their own interests. Social capital is thus an important element of people's capability to control and defend all other assets.

Household relations are considered as a separate asset in the urban-based framework, where the structure, composition and cohesion of the household determine its ability to mobilise labour and for sharing both expenditure-reducing and income-generating strategies. Although households relations are usually defined as those between members sharing residence, it may be possible to extend this to 'multi-spatial' households, whose members share stronger relations that kin especially with respect to moral and financial commitments and obligations. Cohesive households with a relatively high proportion of active adults may be able to diversify their income sources more widely than small households or households with a large proportion of dependants. In Tanzania, the accumulation strategies of better-off households in the fringes of small towns are constructed on the simultaneous exploitation of rural and urban resources, where profits from agriculture are invested in urban infrastructure (e.g. stores) and profits from urban areas (for example renting out the stores) can be invested in rural resources (e.g. farmland).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Kelly, 1998

<sup>11</sup> For example by Ribot, 1998; Zoomers and Kleinpenning, 1996; Harriss-White, 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Harriss-White, 1995

<sup>13</sup> Baker, 1995



Cultural capital is possibly more difficult to define and assess than social capital. It refers essentially to people's perceptions of the meaning of poverty and wealth or, more widely, to subjective assessments of 'quality of life'. In turn, these may have a crucial role in determining the relative importance of all other assets, and therefore in shaping livelihood strategies. For example, land ownership can be very important for some groups because of the cultural and social identity it provides rather than its economic value. In Tanzania, owning land in the home area or, indeed, in peri-urban areas is very important for urban residents, even those of middle-class status whose income is mainly urban-based. Migration decisions are also influenced by the cultural value attached to mobility: in many West African countries, the economic aspects of movement to the cities or to other countries are often secondary compared to its 'experiential' value. In the capitals and capabilities framework, cultural capital is the asset which brings the framework beyond the impact of livelihood strategies on poverty and income indicators and, together with social capital, is critical in enhancing people's capacity to be their own agent of change. Given the rapid socio-economic change in the PUI, cultural values are likely to also undergo change. This can be especially the case with regards to gender and generational roles as different opportunities emerge for women and youth, for example employment in non-agricultural sectors.

#### **4. OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS IN THE PUI: SOME TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS**

The conclusions below are tentative for two main reasons: first, because of the relative lack of specific data and information on poverty in the PUI<sup>14</sup>; second, because the frameworks discussed here are relatively recent and, although they all build on previous work, their empirical value needs to be explored in practice. For many groups, the PUI is likely to be associated with shifting livelihood strategies (in the sense of changes in the ways in which these strategies are constructed and the relative importance of different assets). The structures and processes as defined in the sustainable livelihoods framework are of particular relevance in determining access to assets and thus in shaping strategies, in view of the institutional complexity of the PUI and of the nature and roles of often competing actors (for example private and public sectors, different administrative levels, urban and rural residents). In addition to the SL framework, the capital and capabilities and the asset vulnerability models offer valuable insights especially with regards to the interrelations between different assets.

The most important element of livelihood strategies in the PUI (but also in rural and in urban areas) is income diversification. Access to a number of assets determines the extent to which the socio-economic and spatial characteristics of the PUI translate into opportunities rather than constraints for poor households. Productive capital includes land, but also housing (as in the urban framework). Physical assets (especially transport and mobility infrastructure) and management of natural resources can also provide employment, for example cheap transport activities and waste collection. As the significance of subsistence activities decreases, labour becomes increasingly important (as in the urban framework) and so does human capital. However, as environmental hazards also increase, it seems important that they are given more attention than in the rural-based frameworks.

The critical role of social capital (as described in the capital and capabilities model) is relevant to livelihood strategies in the PUI. Its underlying resource ('access') is what can transform spatial proximity to urban centres into opportunities. This applies to markets as well as state and public institutions (for example for the provision of services and more generally representation). In this sense, it completes the 'structures and processes' element of the sustainable livelihoods model.

Household relations (as described in the urban framework) can be usefully integrated into the model. Evidence suggests that income diversification within the household can be a successful

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<sup>14</sup> Rakodi, 1999

accumulation strategy, which allows different members to engage in different activities (sometimes entailing spatial mobility such as temporary migration or commuting). Income is then pooled and if possible invested in assets.

Finally, the concept of cultural capital can be useful in counterbalancing the tendency to consider households as homogenous and consensus-based units. Its formulation in the capitals and capabilities framework emphasises collective identity in rural areas. In the context of the PUI, in addition to prevailing perceptions of quality of life, it may allow a better understanding of changes in the normative roles of different groups, including gender and generation, in relation to socio-economic change and therefore of changing intra-household relations. This in turn can highlight some of the non-economic reasons behind the ways in which the strategies of different households and individuals combine assets.

What are then the implications for policy-making and planning? The main concept arising from the discussion above is that livelihoods are complex and that there can be wide differences in the way individuals and households construct them. These differences are not only between groups (based on income levels, gender, generation, ethnicity and so on) but also within the same groups. Indeed, the strategies of a single individual or household vary over time, depending on both internal factors (age, increasing or decreasing responsibilities, for example children) and external factors (general trends in the socio-economic and cultural context). This diversity of activities calls for an enabling policy environment, or one which encourages access to opportunities and attempts to reduce constraints, rather than the enforcement of sets of normative policies, which could not reflect such variety of livelihood strategies.

For example, since income diversification is an important strategy for both low and middle income groups, changes in land use in the PUI should carefully consider their consequences for employment and income-generating activities. Access, both physical (transport) and social (information) should be encouraged, as it is pivotal in the development of positive livelihood strategies. Finally, the strengthening of representative institutions (both in terms of decision-making power and revenue) and their negotiating powers with other actors within the wider urban and peri-urban areas and the surrounding region are crucial for the positive management of the environment.

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