

Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

Synthesis Paper Series

# Urban Livelihoods in Afghanistan



Jo Beall and Stefan Schütte

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Funding for this research  
was provided by the  
European Commission (EC)

August 2006



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## About the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU)

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research organisation that conducts and facilitates action-oriented research and learning intended to inform and influence policy and practice. AREU also actively promotes a culture of research and learning by strengthening analytical capacity in Afghanistan and by creating opportunities for analysis and debate. Fundamental to AREU's vision is that its work should improve Afghan lives. AREU was established by the assistance community working in Afghanistan and has a board of directors with representation from donors, the United Nations, multilateral organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Current funding for AREU is provided by the European Commission (EC), the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Stichting Vluchteling and the governments of the United Kingdom, Canada, Denmark (DANIDA), Switzerland, Norway and Sweden. Funding for this study was provided by the European Commission.

## Acknowledgements

This report summarises 12 months of intensive fieldwork in 120 poor urban households in Kabul, Herat and Jalalabad. We would like to thank all the families who participated and whose experiences form the very basis of this research synthesis. We are grateful to them for their remarkable cooperation and patience throughout the study period. They welcomed us warmly during our regular visits, which intruded upon their precious time and privacy.

A study of this type and scale would not have been possible without our team of researchers, who established trust and rapport with the members of our study households: Parvin and Hayatullah in Herat; Dr Sharaf and Basira in Jalalabad; and Leena and Anil in Kabul. They did a magnificent job. Special thanks to Mamiko Saito, who contributed significantly to the success of the project.

The entire project benefited tremendously from the guidance and management support provided by Dr Paula Kantor, whose substantive input to the content and direction of the study is invaluable.

We would also like to acknowledge Aftab Opel for helping us design the methodology in the initial stages of the project and for his overall input. The authors wish to thank Daniel Esser for his substantive input throughout the process of producing this report.

Finally, we want to thank Jolyon Leslie, Paul Fishstein and Pushpa Pathak for their very useful comments on the drafts of this report and, last but not least, Fe Kagahastian for her editorial contribution.

Jo Beall and Stefan Schütte, Kabul, August 2006

# Table of Contents

Glossary .....	i
Acronyms .....	ii
Executive Summary .....	1
1. Introduction .....	7
2. The Political Economy of Afghan Urban Livelihoods .....	9
2.1 Background .....	9
2.2 Sustainable urban livelihoods: Framing the analysis .....	11
3. Methodology .....	17
4. Land, Services and Social Infrastructure .....	21
4.1 Land, housing and security of tenure .....	22
4.2 Basic services: Water supply, sanitation and electricity .....	26
4.3 Health and education .....	28
5. Urban Labour Markets and Household Consumption.....	35
5.1 Urban labour markets and income-earning opportunities .....	35
5.2 Household structure and the division of labour .....	42
5.3 Coping with risk: Consumption, credit and debt.....	46
6. Asset Building through Collective Action and Representation .....	51
6.1 Neighbourhood and family networks.....	51
6.2 Social assets and collective action .....	52
6.3 Social assets and representation .....	54
7. Urban Livelihoods and Implications for Policy.....	59
7.1 Key findings .....	59
7.2 Implications for national policy.....	60
7.3 Implications for urban policy and city planning.....	62
7.4 Conclusion.....	63
References.....	65

## Glossary

<i>Afghani (or Afs)</i>	official Afghan currency
<i>ashar</i>	communal, reciprocal work (typically around life cycle events)
<i>gharibkar</i>	work activities carried out by the poor
<i>ograyi</i>	form of credit in which goods are loaned to seller and paid for after final sale
<i>mozarebat</i>	partnership agreement in which one person provides money or assets and other time and labour, from which profits are shared
<i>wakil-e gozar</i>	neighbourhood representative
<i>wasita</i>	relations to powerful people
<i>Zor Abad</i>	informal settlement; literally, “place taken by force”

## Acronyms

AKDN	Aga Khan Development Network
AREU	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
EC	European Commission
GoA	Government of Afghanistan
I-ANDS	Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
MoUD	Ministry of Urban Development
NDF	National Development Framework
NSP	National Solidarity Programme
SLF	Sustainable Livelihoods Framework
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme





## Executive Summary

The cities of Afghanistan are growing fast. The pace of this growth exceeds the planning and management capabilities of the already overwhelmed central government and of under-resourced municipalities, making them unable and, at times, unwilling to effectively work on reducing levels of urban poverty and vulnerability. As a result, poor urban households are excluded from the most basic services and are forced to live day-to-day on meagre, unreliable income flows in often health-threatening environments.

Against this background of unprecedented and largely unplanned urbanisation in the country, the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) carried out research in five Afghan cities to explore the ground realities of urban poverty and vulnerability. By understanding the diverse livelihood strategies poor and vulnerable households pursue, and how and why such strategies change over time, this AREU study hopes to inform policy formulation that builds on the capabilities, needs and priorities of marginalised urban populations.

The report draws on empirical data from individual studies conducted across five urban locations. Three case studies – in Kabul, Herat and Jalalabad – involved longitudinal research among 40 households over a 12-month period. In addition, short-term city case studies were conducted in Mazar-i-Sharif and Pul-i-Khumri over a two to three-week period in each location. In the first case, the life paths of poor urban households were observed and tracked over an entire year. Economic changes and shifts in the livelihood trajectories of households were documented and the movements of households tracked along a continuum of livelihood security and vulnerability. In the Mazar-i-Sharif and Pul-i-Khumri cases, research focused on specific livelihood situations in poor urban settlements in northern Afghanistan, capturing the dynamics in intermediate-sized cities. This

synthesis report presents key findings and a comparative analysis of the results from across these study sites.

### Key findings

Access to land, services and social infrastructure

- Afghanistan's poor urban population have little or no access to basic services and social infrastructure. This is a result of limited resources, combined with the authorities' unwillingness and lack of capacity to serve effectively. Exclusion from basic services adversely affects the capacity of the urban poor to earn adequate income and acquire the necessary human assets to have quality of life. While lack of services has long been recognized as a major problem in urban Afghanistan, investments in safe water supply, sanitation, and shelter programmes have been largely insufficient.
- Part of the problem lies in the fact that municipalities and other government institutions tend to ignore informal settlements that lack legal status, although they make up a significant share of the population in Afghanistan's major cities. The unwillingness to develop a pro-poor land policy that acknowledges informal settlements, and the absence of a coherent vision that includes these settlements in urban planning lead to the social exclusion of citizens. Their right to the city is neglected by a malfunctioning planning system that fails to recognize the urgency in releasing sufficient land for legal occupation.
- The minimal to non-existent provision of the most basic human needs to those residing in informal settlements forces families and communities to develop

burdensome and frequently health-threatening coping strategies. This is most obvious when it comes to water supply. Many urban households have no access to clean water and are driven to spend their already limited income on private water supply. Families who cannot afford to do so end up relying on polluted surface sources or travelling long distances to the nearest public pump or well.

- Polluted water, along with the absence of sanitation systems, contribute to chronic health problems. Illnesses that could be prevented are instead made worse by the absence of a health facility nearby and the high cost of private healthcare. This prevents many remote communities from seeking treatment for chronic illnesses or emergency care, much less preventive check-ups. Exclusion from such basic services makes families highly susceptible to diseases and health problems, compromising their ability to earn a living.
- Access to education is problematic for most poor urban households across Afghanistan. Children are required either to work for an income, or assist in performing household chores. For many children living in remote communities, attending school is nearly impossible with the distant location of learning facilities.

#### Urban labour markets and household consumption

- Informal employment, which lacks protection and income security, is the main livelihood source for the great majority of Afghanistan's urban population. While it provides poor households with an immediate source of income, families end up being more vulnerable with irregular, low-paying jobs that force them to deploy women and children – at times, to exploitative and hazardous types of work – for additional income. Moreover, households are often forced to be highly mobile to adapt to changing labour demands across different locations and seasons. As a result, they experience constant variation in income levels, reducing their ability to plan for the future.
- The two biggest types of employment for the bottom strata of the urban labour force are self-employment and casual wage labour, both of which are characterised by low and erratic incomes and high seasonality. Home-based work, as the third biggest type of employment, is largely the domain of women. It is characterised by even lower incomes. Dependency on home-based work varied across study sites. For example, home-based income activities account for more than a third of all paid work in Herat, whereas in Jalalabad, such work hardly takes place.
- Household structure and composition are key determinants of income levels: households able to mobilise male labour are better off than those unable to do so. There is a critical link between urban vulnerability and health, particularly that of male breadwinners. Their physical wellbeing impacts their ability to secure food, which in turn influences the health of the entire family.
- Insecurity of employment leads to income irregularity and chronic shortage of cash for the urban poor, making it hard for them to establish savings. Faced with the comparatively high cost of living in Afghan cities, a huge majority of households resort to borrowing money just to be able to afford basic food consumption, let alone pursue investments in healthcare and housing. In all cities, except for Herat, average expenditures for basic necessities exceed average incomes for members of the study population. A great majority of the households are in constant debt as a consequence.

### Household resources, social assets and representation

- The asset base of the studied urban households is not sufficiently diversified to lift them out of poverty in any lasting way. Their reliance on scant and inconsistent resources adds pressure on their coping mechanisms. This is the case for families that live on paid labour, as well as those relying on the goodwill and support of others.
- The most vulnerable households also shift residence regularly, both in pursuit of work and to avoid rising rent. This deprives them of a more permanent place to call home and decreases their chances of acquiring legal housing, which represents the most important physical asset for the urban poor.
- Crisis and emergency situations are usually cushioned by social relations, notably that of family and relatives. They serve as a safety net, an indispensable social asset for urban livelihood security.
- Informal social networks rarely reach beyond neighbourhoods or next of kin and there is very little evidence of efforts to promote or expand community relations among the urban poor in Afghanistan. A majority of the studied households appeared to have strong social connections that are indispensable to maintaining existing livelihood opportunities. However, their networks essentially serve as a means to survival; the resources acquired through them hardly allow urban families to rise above poverty.
- In addition, such social networks tend to be overused. Without basic material resources in place, mutual assistance is difficult to sustain and leaning consistently on social networks could overburden and compromise relations. Informal social protection systems may quickly erode, especially for households with the most

precarious livelihood strategies, who tend to borrow more than they could pay. These families are left even more vulnerable: once they have exhausted the resources of relatives and friends, they are left without a safety net.

- There is little evidence of poor and vulnerable households being involved in local level decision-making processes. This relates, in part, to the control of community organisations held by male elders, who do not always represent the more marginalised members. Thus, poor households bear the brunt of huge backlogs in service delivery and are excluded from urban planning.
- A responsive government is central to successful representation. The city case studies provided little evidence of city or national government responsiveness to the needs and interests of the poor. It is clear that there is a lack of capacity, resources and political will among civil servants.

### Recommendations

Stimulate broad-based labour intensive growth at the national and city levels

- Evaluate Afghanistan's open market approach and consider the possible economic and employment gains from import substitution and protectionism in some key industries, such as cement and cotton/textiles.
- Ensure that opportunities for good quality work are valued as much as the quantity of jobs created. Thus, a holistic strategy supporting urban employment creation must include market analysis of demand for higher value products and the labour and skill requirements associated with them. This must be combined with the development of vocational training and formal education programmes to develop a labour force with the appropriate skills.

- Develop a broad planning framework that anticipates the continuing increase in urban populations, resulting from the influx of returnees from neighbouring countries, as well as from pull factors drawing rural residents to urban areas.
- Facilitate the participation of women in the urban labour force under improved conditions, where their work is valued appropriately and they are given a real choice about place of work. In addition, the burden of household work must be reduced by supporting community child care initiatives and improving access to basic services.

Redress the imbalance caused by the predominantly rural focus of national development assistance in Afghanistan

- Design and implement nationwide urban poverty reduction programmes to improve the quality of life of the urban poor at a scale approaching the reality of the problem. These programmes must recognize the inter-linkages between the myriad problems underlying urban poverty and take an integrated versus sectoral approach, linking job creation, skills building and urban service provision, as well as improving urban governance.
- Streamline coordination and cooperation between line ministries and municipalities. Much of the backlog in service provision and barriers to pro-poor urban development derive from the inability and unwillingness of government agencies to work together. Incentives must be developed to ensure efficiency. Successful coordination structures from other countries could be studied and adapted in developing effective urban governance institutions in Afghanistan.
- Increase donor support for the development and implementation of urban poverty reduction and capacity building programmes within government

institutions. Supporting sustainable urban development requires medium to long term financial commitments, not short-term funded pilots that are not brought to scale. Donor support must be comprehensive to achieve successful institutional reforms.

Increase the human capital of the urban poor through improved access to quality healthcare and education

- Extend affordable and proximate health care facilities into or close to poor urban neighbourhoods, allowing low income groups to regularly access both preventative and curative care.
- Plans for the allocation of new schools must be made in a way that distributes access equitably across urban locations to promote school attendance.
- Efforts to provide proper school buildings should be accompanied by greater efforts to ensure quality teaching and teaching support.

Develop risk mitigating social protection programmes, supporting a shift away from reliance on the coping capacity and resourcefulness of the urban poor

- Develop and finance national social protection programmes to support the most vulnerable (families without able bodied male workers, families dependent on disabled members for income, etc.) and to invest in programmes supporting asset diversification for the poor to assist them out of poverty.
- Provide donor support for urban poverty reduction programmes that go beyond physical upgrading and technical service provision to address social insecurities.
- Build the political will and capacity of national and city level actors (both government and non-government) to improve their abilities to address social



protection issues at the required scale in the urban sector.

Negotiate a path between the reality of burgeoning informality and the rigidity of formal master planning

- Build capacity among municipal leaders and staff to move them away from a solely technical planning approach linked to a master plan. Help them accept the importance of including citizens in the planning process and to develop more flexible tools reflecting the on-the-ground reality of all urban residents, particularly the poor.

Recognize and legalise informal settlements

- Develop a national urban land policy in line with the aim of equitable development. Establish guidelines and categories for municipalities that would facilitate recognizing and legalising existing informal settlements. The policy must also consider how to accommodate the minority living on untenable land.
- Provide security of tenure to residents in recognized informal settlements, with recommendations for approaches to land titling coming from an analysis of best practices in other similar post-conflict and Islamic contexts.

Ensure universal coverage with basic services (water, drainage and sanitation, electricity, access roads); moving incrementally toward this goal will require:

- The political will among state institutions to serve the poor.
- Improved communication between government institutions involved in service delivery, including a detailing of roles and responsibilities and establishing a means of coordination.

- Improved communication and coordination between government and non-government agencies involved in service provision, for better distribution of responsibilities and to share lessons learned and best practices.
- Community consultation, involving both women and men, to devise appropriate service standards and allocate operation and maintenance responsibilities.
- Technical creativity in devising ways to deliver services to some harder-to-reach areas, ensuring that the work of disparate agencies links up at the city level.
- Recognition of the employment creation potential of service delivery and involvement of poor urban residents (women and men) as small scale entrepreneurs.

Acknowledge the important contribution of informal economic actors to the city

- Vendors and street sellers and their role in the urban market should be acknowledged, not as a nuisance, but as important contributors to the economic life of the city. Recognition can come through some form of licensing, transparently developed to avoid chances of unscrupulous rent-seeking.
- The needs of street vendors and the importance of local markets must be recognized in city plans; they must be planned for and not marginalised.
- Institute an inclusive consultation process to discuss how to regulate informal economic activity and to ensure that the needs of informal actors and the municipalities are represented. This means ending harassment and rent-seeking and guaranteeing that vending activities do not impinge on the effective operation of municipalities.



## 1. Introduction

All major cities in Afghanistan have experienced significant population growth during the last decade. Conflicts, drought and refugees returning home after the fall of the Taliban in 2001 have all contributed to the rapid pace of urbanisation unfolding in major cities. This trend is ongoing and has been accelerated by growth rates twice as high as in the rural areas of the country, with an estimated doubling of urban populations in Afghanistan by the year 2015<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, challenges for urban planning and management are manifold. Government agencies, municipalities and the international aid community alike are compelled to think about how to best address increased urban poverty and vulnerability occurring in the wake of such rapid growth. Despite this unprecedented and largely unplanned urbanisation in the country, little is formally known and documented about the living

conditions of urban residents in Afghanistan, and the real life challenges families face as they try to survive day-to-day.

It is against this background that the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) carried out research on urban livelihoods and vulnerability in five Afghan cities. AREU recognizes the need to address this crucial knowledge gap and to develop a detailed understanding of: the diverse livelihood strategies carried out by poor and vulnerable urban populations; the contexts in which people pursue particular livelihoods; their ability to access services; and how and why their adopted livelihood strategies change over time. This research has been undertaken with the overall objective of informing the national policy formulation process – to influence it in such a way that policy making responds more meaningfully to the needs and



<sup>1</sup> Government of Afghanistan (2004), *Securing Afghanistan's Future*, Kabul: GoA.



priorities of poor and vulnerable urban families and builds on their energy and capabilities.

The research also aims to help actors involved in international development assistance to implement appropriate, diverse, effective and practical interventions that strengthen the livelihoods of the urban poor. To achieve this objective, the research design developed indicators that explain why some households manage to achieve longer term wellbeing and even build asset portfolios, while others endure persistent poverty. In doing so, the research helps illustrate and explain the heterogeneous nature of urban poverty in Afghanistan.

This report draws on empirical data from individual studies conducted across five urban locations. As a synthesis report, it presents key findings from across these study sites, as well as a comparative analysis of the longitudinal research carried out in three large urban centres: Kabul, Herat, and Jalalabad; and short-term research in two

additional sites: Mazar-i-Sharif and Pul-i-Khumri<sup>2</sup>. In the first case, the life paths of poor urban households were observed and tracked over an entire year. Economic changes and shifts in the livelihood trajectories of households were documented and the movements of households tracked along a continuum of livelihood security and vulnerability. The complementary short-term case studies in Mazar-i-Sharif and Pul-i-Khumri were undertaken with a focus on specific livelihood situations in poor urban settlements, in order to cover a major city in northern Afghanistan and capture the dynamics in an intermediate-sized city.<sup>3</sup>

Building on the findings of these five individual city case studies, this synthesis report provides analytical commentary on the emerging themes and trends that are critical for understanding and responding to urban livelihood insecurity across all cities. The report also offers readers local context and peculiarities that distinguish each location, exploring both differences and similarities between study sites.

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<sup>2</sup> Schütte, S. (2006), *Searching for Security: Urban Livelihoods in Kabul*, Kabul: AREU; Schütte, S. (2006), *Gaining Some Ground: Urban Livelihoods in Jalalabad*, Kabul: AREU; Schütte, S. (2006), *Poverty amid Prosperity: Urban Livelihoods in Herat*, Kabul: AREU.

<sup>3</sup> Schütte, S. (2006), *Poor, Poorer, Poorest: Urban Livelihoods and Vulnerability in Mazar-i-Sharif*, Kabul: AREU; and Schütte S. (2006), *Dwindling Industry, Growing Poverty: Urban Livelihoods in Pul-i-Khumri*, Kabul: AREU.

## 2. The Political Economy of Afghan Urban Livelihoods

### 2.1 Background

In 2001, Afghanistan emerged from 22 years of war to face increased economic, political and social challenges. In the wake of a protracted drought (1999-2001) and a decade of relentless political violence through years of civil war and Taliban oppression, the predominantly rural economy was severely weakened. Livelihoods were devastated by the decimation of livestock and agricultural production. Falling incomes, loss of assets and the ravages of war saw over 5 million people displaced as refugees in neighbouring countries. As a recent World Bank report suggests, "Afghanistan was essentially left out of the last 25 years of global development, with virtually no increase in per capita income during this period and an average life expectancy of only 43 years."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Afghanistan remains one of the world's poorest countries, with an average per capita GDP of US\$300 per annum (including opium). It has persistently poor social indicators and a gender gap only exceeded by Niger.<sup>5</sup>

From this disheartening base the economy has recovered fairly well, although at a declining rate.<sup>6</sup> To a significant degree, economic growth has been associated with the cessation of drought and war, as well as the benefits of reconstruction, such as the booming construction industry. Sustaining the targeted nine percent growth rate will require higher agricultural yields, less dependence on the poppy economy and diversification of economic activities with the growth of other sectors.

Cities play a crucial role in stimulating the national economy through local economic

development and the facilitation of regional and international trade. At present many economic opportunities – and related livelihood opportunities – are confined to the informal economy. While it provides poor urban families with an immediate means of livelihood, operating in this unregulated informal economy also means no job security, earning income from temporary work that do not always translate into sustainable livelihoods. Moreover, when income is irregular, there is less capacity to afford basic services, much less own a home or save money for the future.

For internally displaced persons (IDPs), resources are even more limited. As refugees forced to live a transient life across rural-urban and regional and national boundaries, it is much more difficult for them to establish links with social networks. As a result, they lose an important safety net, given that access to employment, housing and loans depends on knowing people with influence and who are widely connected within a community. Opportunities that do arise as a result of growing political stability and reconstruction do not usually extend to those who are unconnected and vulnerable.

IDPs and refugees, who returned after the cessation of hostilities in 2001, found little to support a living in the countryside. In search of adequate income, many families made their way to Afghanistan's national and provincial capitals. Even those who remained in the rural areas diversified their livelihoods by sending some household members to towns and cities. This intensified competition for urban livelihood opportunities. While accurate statistics remain unavailable, it is generally

<sup>4</sup> World Bank (2004), *Afghanistan: State Building, Sustaining Growth and Reducing Poverty*, A Country Economic Report, Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Sector Unit, South Asia Region, Report No. 29551-AF, 9 Sept 2004, p. xvi.

<sup>5</sup> UNDP (2003), *Human Development Report: Millennium Development Goals: A Compact among Nations to end Human Poverty*, New York: UNDP.

<sup>6</sup> GDP growth rates were 25-30 percent in 2002-03, 15-20 percent in 2003-04 and estimated at 8 percent in 2004-05. See UNDP (2004), *Afghanistan National Human Development Report: Security with a Human Face*. Kabul: UNDP; and GoA (2005), *Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2005*. Kabul: GoA.

accepted that Afghanistan's urban population has been growing at an inexorable pace since the fall of the Taliban, adding to the population increases experienced during the Soviet occupation and mujahidin period. It is estimated that the urban population now constitutes between 23 to 30 percent of the total population of the country.<sup>7</sup> It is not clear, however, whether these trends are a temporary consequence of the collapse of rural livelihoods or a more permanent phenomenon, although there is evidence to suggest that once established, households do consolidate themselves in cities. This research, as a longitudinal study, contributes to a better understanding of these trends and the characteristics of urban livelihoods.

Afghanistan's political institutions and processes have been severely disrupted by years of conflict. By the year 2000, the central state had virtually collapsed as a legitimate political entity. It failed to maintain authority and security and it remains weak in terms of

administrative capacity, unable to implement effective policies and deliver public services, particularly to the poor. In theory, Afghanistan has a highly centralised state but in reality, it has experienced a form of *de facto* decentralisation. In many cases, the relative autonomy of regional authorities has been built around illegal seizure of local resources and revenue streams and is not always accompanied by local level public investment. "Warlordism" and the absence of the "rule of law" have been fuelled by opium production and the narcotics trade, which thrive in lawlessness and insecurity. It has been argued that "the opium economy is the lynchpin of a "vicious circle" of insecurity, weak government, powerful warlords and drug money,"<sup>8</sup> with the latter feeding into military assets that support local and regional fiefdoms.

Clearly, Afghanistan's economic and political future requires a vigorous approach to national unity and central state building, a strategy



<sup>7</sup> Beall, J. and D. Esser (2005), *Shaping Urban Futures: Challenges to Governing and Managing Afghan Cities*, AREU Issues Paper Series, Kabul: AREU, March 2005, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> World Bank (2004), *Afghanistan: State Building, Sustaining Growth and Reducing Poverty*, p. xvi.

explicitly expressed in the Government's *National Development Framework (NDF)* and *Securing Afghanistan's Future: Accomplishments and the Strategic Path Forward (SAF)*.<sup>9</sup> A new Constitution and successful presidential and parliamentary elections have constituted important first steps toward stability and national governance. As the political process continues to evolve, one outstanding challenge is to reform the bureaucracy. While public administration is highly centralised on paper, it has weak links with and control over provinces and municipalities, which, taken together, have been largely ineffective to date in achieving local level economic development, governance and service delivery. There is a critical tension between the national imperative to strengthen the centre and the need at the city level to ensure that effective municipal structures and processes are developed and supported. At present, only a small proportion of the population, mainly the urban and provincial elites, makes a decent living and has access to local level services such as good health-care, education, safe water supply and sanitation. Access to urban labour markets, infrastructure and services must be extended to the poor and vulnerable. This will involve breaking down existing power structures and removing the influence of vested interests – goals which may be formidable yet not impossible to achieve.

## 2.2 Sustainable urban livelihoods: Framing the analysis

The term “livelihoods” has been used to refer to assets, income-generating activities and the access to both (mediated by institutional and social relations). Together, these elements determine an individual's or a

household's quality of life.<sup>10</sup> The idea of *sustainable* livelihoods became very influential in the development community among those who recognized the need to move beyond money-metric concepts of poverty to include a more holistic and dynamic understanding of deprivation. Influenced by Amartya Sen's analysis of poverty and Robert Chambers' exploration of risk and vulnerability, development practitioners started looking at livelihoods with a multidimensional approach to social disadvantage, paying attention to people's vulnerabilities, capabilities and endowments.<sup>11</sup> Such an approach regarded a household's livelihood sustainable when it allows the family to cope with economic stresses, recover from shocks and consistently maintain or enhance its financial capabilities and assets without depleting its natural resource base.

A common feature across existing livelihoods frameworks is the assessment of the strength of people's “capitals” or “assets”. One of the most widely adapted frameworks is the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), developed by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID). The SLF identifies five types of capital: human, financial, physical, social and natural.<sup>12</sup> Human capital constitutes the labour resources available to households and their quality. Financial capital refers to the savings, credit, remittances and pensions, which allow households different income streams and livelihood options. Physical capital comprises basic infrastructure such as housing, transport, water supply and communications, as well as the equipment and tools by which people pursue their livelihoods. Natural capital refers to natural resources useful to livelihoods such as land, water and public resources: rivers or common

<sup>9</sup> GoA (2004), *Securing Afghanistan's Future: Accomplishments and the Strategic Path Forward (SAF)*, Kabul: GoA.

<sup>10</sup> Ellis, F. (2000), *Rural Livelihoods and Diversity in Developing Countries*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Sen, A.K. (1999), *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Chambers, R. and G. Conway (1992), *Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: Practical Concepts for the 21st Century*, IDS Discussion Paper No. 296, Brighton:IDS, University of Sussex.

<sup>12</sup> Carney, D. (1998), *Implementing the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach*, in D. Carney (ed.), *Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: What Contribution Can we Make?* London: Department for International Development, pp. 3-23.



land. Social capital consists of relationships based on trust and membership in a group or community. Such social networks are relied upon for employment, loans and other types of assistance. All of these assets help families undertake household responsibilities and gain access to labour and more institutions of society.

The various frameworks reviewed for the study also include analysis of vulnerability, the likely trends and shocks that could influence livelihoods, as well as the structures and processes that determine who gets access to markets, shelter or decision-making arenas. The latter is very important to livelihood analysis in the Afghan context, where systems and structures often operate on the basis of *wasita* – knowing influential people, who could provide access to livelihood assets and even positions of power. An analysis of urban livelihoods in Afghanistan demonstrates that reciprocal networks of support, while indispensable as an informal social protection, can sometimes become an obstacle to poor and vulnerable groups accessing decision makers beyond their community. For example, a weak *wakil-e gozar* may fall under the control of a commander and stand in the way of other citizens, who are more active in developing political assets through direct dealings with local officials, politicians or NGOs.

One criticism about the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework is its inadequate emphasis on institutional factors and governance issues, falling short in addressing the significance of politics and the role played by voice and rights in determining livelihood outcomes. These critiques are particularly important to understanding the dynamics around urban livelihoods and to adapting a framework that factors in social asymmetries, the complexities of the institutional context

and the prominent role played by politics and power in urban settings.<sup>13</sup>

Perceptions of poverty in many urban areas are not only associated with material deprivation but also include the more psychosocial issues of respect and dignity, stigma and exclusion. Also relevant is an assessment of which forms of social relationships people tend to align themselves with and how such connections relate to the immediate needs of their households, for instance, land and labour. It is important to recognize that in some cases, poverty is not necessarily exacerbated by exclusion from resources or employment, but by power imbalances, which influence how people gain access to resources. Individuals with less power in social relationships may have to make trade-offs between dependence on a source for employment, land or credit needed for immediate survival, and the ability to make independent choices that could lift them out of poverty in the medium to long term. They become locked in negative social relations, which may provide security today but at the cost of long term growth prospects.<sup>14</sup> For example, a family may obtain land through connections to a commander who grabbed it. This provides short-term security of tenure through the commander's protection but could then lead to future insecurity if the relation to the commander deteriorates, or land policy reforms are implemented, nullifying the commander's authority over the grabbed land.

In general, it has been a challenge to capture such dynamics in a livelihoods framework intended to address urban issues. Nevertheless, a strategic approach, including a framework specific to a certain setting, is necessary in tackling urban problems. Having a framework to start with allows planners to link micro-level analysis of how poor people cope and prosper, with how city institutions

<sup>13</sup> Some authors suggest the inclusion of a sixth category: "political capital," claiming that social capital does not capture the complexity of urban social and institutional interactions. See Beall, J. (2005), "Urban Livelihoods" in C. Toumain and B. Wisner (eds), *Towards A New Map of Africa*, London: Earthscan Publications, pp. 97-112.

<sup>14</sup> Wood, G. (2003), "Staying Secure, Staying Poor: The 'Faustian Bargain'", *World Development* 31(3): 455-71.

support or hinder opportunities for them to achieve quality of life. This linkage is particularly important in analysing urban livelihoods in the Afghan context, where formal and informal institutions largely hinder individual and collective efforts to secure livelihoods. Part of the obstacle to poverty reduction is the lack of capacity and political will among local government officials, whose personal interests often come before official duties. This prevailing attitude may not only lead to corrupt practices, it also deprives the poor of the services and security they need in order to have a chance at pursuing a better life.

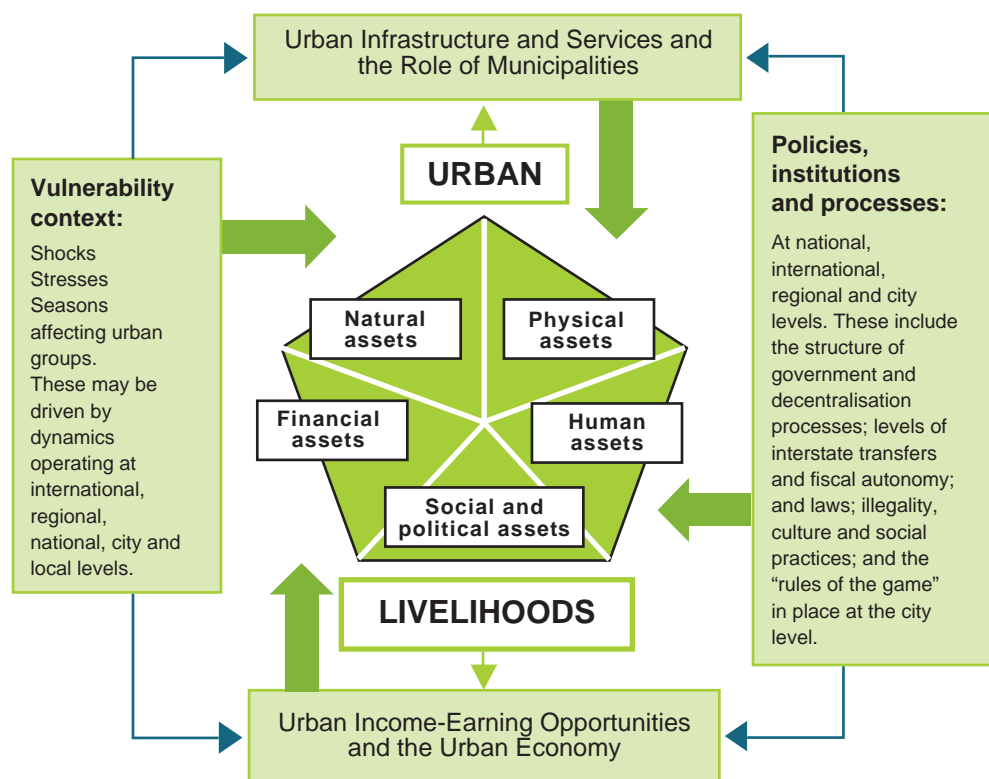
In the Afghan context, a livelihoods framework can structure an analysis of how poor urban dwellers navigate their way through a highly imperfect institutional environment (state, market, NGOs/civil society, family); how they

negotiate within different levels and structures of power to achieve the best possible outcome for their livelihoods. As it stands, this “best possible” outcome falls far short of the national government’s goal of achieving equitable development and pro-poor growth.

Figure 1 provides a framework adapted to urban settings, highlighting the key elements pertaining to a livelihoods perspective. In relation to the vulnerability context, the study findings clearly demonstrate that seasonality is an inevitable feature of low-income employment in urban areas. Moreover, some of the households investigated in this study combined seasonal work in cities with agricultural labour.

In addition, urban dwellers are subject to shocks and stresses experienced in cities.

Figure 1. A framework for understanding sustainable urban livelihoods<sup>15</sup>



<sup>15</sup> Adapted from DFID’s Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets; and Rakodi, C. and T. Lloyd-Jones, eds (2002), *Urban Livelihoods, A People-Centred Approach to Reducing Poverty*, London: Earthscan, p. 9.

Many towns and urban communities across Afghanistan have yet to recover from decades of conflict. Inflationary pressures also make the cost of living particularly difficult for poor urban dwellers. In Kabul, for example, an increased demand for housing due to the influx of foreigners, returnees and IDPs has led to rent hikes and pressure on land in the last several years. Confounding the problem was the prevalence of land grabbing – a profound shock to many families who lost their properties. The winter months also provide a regular source of stress for poor urban dwellers, who could barely afford the high costs related to fuel and ill health.

The policy and institutional environment in Figure 1, the box on the right, represents the role of institutions in the livelihoods of the poor. It is here that power, inequality and the terms of inclusion of the poor enter into the analysis of urban livelihoods. Thus, it is a central element of the framework that can provide not only a realistic assessment of the coping mechanisms of the urban poor, but also of the constrained environment in which many families struggle to eke out what is often meagre living.

Figure 1 also highlights the role of municipalities as an important area for analysis. In Afghanistan, their role relates primarily to land, housing, and local economic development but there can be areas of overlap and tension between municipalities and line ministries, particularly in the capital city, Kabul. The responsibilities of local authorities link to urban livelihoods in two important ways. In the first place they help determine how effectively people can undertake their day-to-day productive and reproductive activities. For example, cheap and reliable transport allows poor people in peripheral settlements to travel daily to central labour and commodity markets. Municipal functions are also critical in ensuring that people not only survive but are able to

save and prosper in a vibrant local economic environment. Below is a sample of the discussions clarifying the key role of local leadership vis-à-vis urban disadvantage:

*Urban poverty is much influenced by what city municipal governments do or do not do; also by what they can or cannot do. As an understanding of poverty widens – for instance to include poor quality and/or insecure housing, inadequate services and lack of civil and political rights – so does the greater current or potential role of local government to contribute to poverty reduction.<sup>16</sup>*

It is clear that the urban poor and the livelihoods they pursue are closely linked with municipal structures and patterns of local governance that largely determine their access to or exclusion from necessary resources. In the Afghan urban context, these structures and patterns are often inefficient, impeding the urban poor's search for sustainable livelihoods. Such institutional deficiencies may be attributed to a number of factors, including lack of political will, lack of capacity and resources, and a struggle between fulfilling personal interests and the state's responsibilities.

In general, cities are regarded as the engines that drive economic growth, where governments and their partners are best able to deliver infrastructure and services on scale. This is not always the case, however. The association between urbanisation and rising per capita income does not always hold and even when it does, not all urban dwellers benefit from the growth. In fact, some cities, in their efforts to become or remain competitive, introduce automation into industries and production processes, pushing wages down and excluding unskilled labour.

In Afghanistan, as the case studies show, trends in urban livelihoods are dictated by

<sup>16</sup> Satterthwaite, D. (2000), Editor's Introduction: "Towards more Pro-poor Local Governments in Urban Areas", *Environment and Urbanisation*, 11(2), pp. 3-11.

the shape of the urban economy in specific cities, all of which are characterised by small and stagnant labour markets or urban growth poles that reinforce inequality more than they address problems of poverty. Thus, the ability of Afghan cities to drive growth is patchy, to say the least, and even more questionable when viewed through the prism of public service delivery and employment generation.

The findings of the research also illustrate that acquiring jobs and income-earning opportunities are a fundamental pre-occupation for Afghanistan's urban poor. This is hardly surprising given their almost total dependence on cash for survival. It must be noted, however, that pursuing income-earning activities outside of the home goes hand in hand with care giving obligations within the household. Productive work, after all, requires good physical health and the durability of urban households depends on the wellbeing and education of younger and future generations. Without a decent living environment, it will be nearly impossible to stay healthy and productive, much less plan for the future. It is, therefore, important to examine how the responsibilities for various activities within and outside the household are distributed; and how such distribution influences livelihood opportunities and outcomes and the general wellbeing of individual members and households as a whole.

A livelihoods perspective offers an integrated framework for understanding the relationship between access, resources and power and its implications for asset building.<sup>17</sup> Any analysis of livelihoods must incorporate an

assessment of intra-household dynamics because nowhere is the complex relationship between access, resources and power more acutely observed than in the household. The research on Afghan cities shows how family dynamics, in and of itself, can be considered a livelihoods asset. Indeed, family support to income-earning activities can be crucial in explaining the survival or growth of one urban household over another in a similar external environment.<sup>18</sup> The research shows how the composition and structure of urban families (who is the head of the household, for example) influence a household's ability to mobilise labour and diversify strategies to maximize income – at times to the detriment of other members. This report, as well as the individual city studies on which it is based, is informed throughout by a gender perspective and sensitivity to household structure, headship and dynamics between generations.

In poor countries, such as Afghanistan, providing any form of social protection is extremely difficult. Moreover, given the country's history of political and economic turmoil, natural disasters and the ravages of war, the national response has been oriented toward household survival and promoting individual enterprise, rather than efforts toward redistribution, something that is being reinforced by current state policy and advice from international development agencies.<sup>19</sup> This government approach may very well be a recognition of the Afghan people's "widespread personal and private initiative"; that they are a "resilient, creative, opportunity-seeking and entrepreneurial people."<sup>20</sup> One can argue that:

<sup>17</sup> Bebbington, A. (1999), Capitals and Capabilities: A Framework for Analysing Peasant Viability, Rural Livelihoods and Poverty, *World Development*, 27(12), pp. 2021-2044.

<sup>18</sup> Moser, C.O.N. (1996), Confronting Crisis, *Environmentally Sustainable Development Studies and Monograph Series*, No. 7, World Bank; and Moser, C.O.N. (1998), The Asset Vulnerability Framework, *World Development*.

<sup>19</sup> Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (2003), *Nationwide Risk and Vulnerability Assessment* (NRVA), Kabul: MRRD; and World Bank (2004), Afghanistan: State Building, Sustaining Growth and Reducing Poverty, A Country Economic Report, Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Unit, South Asia Region, Report No. 29551-AF.

<sup>20</sup> World Bank (2005), Afghanistan: Poverty, Vulnerability and Social Protection: An Initial Assessment, Human Development Unit, South Asia Region, Report No. 29694-AF, p. i.



*Poverty and vulnerability in Afghanistan, while extensive, have always been and should continue to be principally managed by the poor themselves. As such, the challenge for future governments will be to harness and support the proven capabilities of the Afghan people toward collective national objectives for development and prosperity.<sup>21</sup>*

The resilience and fortitude of the Afghans is not in question. However, the research findings show that it is important not to see rural or urban dwellers as eternally energetic and resourceful, and local communities as constant repositories of social care. In many cases, poverty makes it nearly impossible for individuals to survive, pushing them to rely on others in their households and social networks to make ends meet. In such

conditions, it is unacceptable for the state and other development agencies to temper or even withhold intervention based on the resilience and resourcefulness of poor Afghans.

This research also shows that when people are above the subsistence level – in urban areas as much as anywhere else – social support systems and networks that offer mutual benefits continue to be operative and effective. However, when conditions are dire and shocks and stresses are relentless, this reciprocal support could come under a lot of strain. Reciprocity entails expectations and obligations, often not equal in outcome. When households in a community network come under heavy economic stress, conflicts arise not only in relation to access to resources, but also around whose interests are represented in appeals made to local and city level decision making processes.




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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

### 3. Methodology

With rapid urbanisation unfolding in Afghanistan, it is necessary to have a comprehensive and contextual understanding of urban livelihoods. AREU has conducted a number of earlier studies that provided a useful basis on which to build this more extensive research.<sup>22</sup> This study took a distinctive longitudinal approach to urban livelihoods in Afghanistan and was based on intensive fieldwork in three urban locations. This was supplemented by one-off fieldwork conducted in two additional cities in order to check for regional differences within the resource and time constraints involved.

In the long-term study areas – Kabul, Herat, and Jalalabad<sup>23</sup> – researchers worked with a permanent sample of 40 households in each site. They were visited monthly over a period of one full year, allowing for in-depth investigation of their circumstances and any changes over time. This fieldwork produced detailed evidence of the multiple livelihood and coping strategies used by different types of households and the same households at different times. The rationale for this approach was based on awareness that to understand urban poverty properly, research methods providing “snapshots” at a particular moment in time were inadequate. A longitudinal approach was considered essential in order to understand why, in so many cases, poverty persists and how in some cases, people do manage to find ways out of poverty. By mapping livelihood trajectories over time and by observing and documenting processes and changes to which people are exposed, how they cope with them and how they attempt to induce change themselves, this analysis provides a more nuanced understanding of the causal factors at work

in relation to urban poverty and vulnerability.

The selection of longitudinal study sites was driven by the aim to include, as much as possible, Afghanistan’s major cities and to capture the ethnic diversity of the country. There was also a concern to explore differences that may arise in terms of policies, institutions and processes that could affect urban livelihoods. Obviously, Kabul, as the capital and as a city that has exploded in size in recent years, had to be included. It was also important to include Jalalabad in the East as a Pashtun dominated border city close to Pakistan. Critical too was the inclusion of Herat in the West with its wide ethnic diversity and close proximity to Iran, believed to have a strong influence on the city’s livelihood activities. Afghanistan has two additional major cities: Mazar-i-Sharif and Kandahar. The former was included as a short-term supplementary case study to capture the dynamics at work in the largest urban centre in the north of the country. The adverse security situation in Kandahar made implementation of this part of the research plan impossible but it did allow the team to include, as a substitute, the medium-sized city of Pul-i-Khumri, which served as an interesting case study because of its smaller size but comparatively large industrial base.

The initial identification of neighbourhoods and households taking part in the three long-term study areas was accomplished by means of focus group discussions in different neighbourhoods, with local community councils, as well as through collaboration with NGOs working in the areas. In addition, researchers sought to include different types of households in the sample: those with

<sup>22</sup> Beall, J. and D. Esser (2005), *Shaping Urban Futures: Challenges to Governing and Managing Afghan Cities*, AREU Issues Paper Series; Grace, J. (2003), *100 Households in Kabul: A Study of Winter Vulnerability*, Kabul: AREU; Hunte, P. (2004), *Some Notes on the Livelihoods of the Urban Poor in Kabul, Afghanistan*, Kabul: AREU; Schütte, S. (2004), *Urban Vulnerability in Afghanistan: Case Studies from Three Cities*, Kabul: AREU.

<sup>23</sup> For detailed city descriptions and their contextual peculiarities, see the individual case study reports by Schütte.

diverse ethnicities, female-headed households and those headed by people with disability, returned refugees, or internally displaced persons (IDPs). This way, a broader sample was identified first, then gradually reduced to a select sampling of 40 households based on the diversity of household types, as well as pragmatic considerations, such as a household commitment to long-term participation in the research. Regular visits were made to households included in the final sample, with the first visit in February 2005 and continuing with repeated monthly visits through January 2006.

Through intensive fieldwork, the following aspects and issues were explored:

- Narrative household histories and household activity profiles using semi-structured questionnaires;
- Inter- and intra-household relations, credit relations, physical asset base and access to basic services, migration activities, and urban-rural linkages, using a set of structured questionnaires implemented once during the 12-month period;
- Economic changes through detailed monthly monitoring of labour market participation, income and consumption figures, credit and indebtedness and self-help and support activities among all 40 households, with the support of a structured questionnaire; and
- Changes in activity and asset portfolios and in livelihood conditions among a sub-sample of 10 selected households, through detailed monthly qualitative monitoring interviews. These narrative interviews, guided by a checklist, were typically very time-intensive, which is why it was decided to carry them out in a sub-sample of households.

Due to time constraints, a different methodological approach was applied to the short-term study sites of Mazar-i-Sharif and

Pul-i-Khumri. In these two sites and in consultation with NGOs and local municipalities, poor urban settlements were selected and group discussions held with representatives of the local communities. These discussions addressed a variety of themes and provided a picture of neighbourhoods, their histories and the status of infrastructure and service delivery from the perspective of community members. The research here also explored perceptions of differences in the livelihood situations of the members of these communities. This initial step was then complemented by questionnaire-guided interviews with families, bringing in a household perspective.

This rather ambitious research programme was carried out without major problems, although in the long-term study sites, working with the same households over an extended period with a high frequency of visits, posed some difficulties for both researchers and respondents. A particular challenge was keeping the sample intact over the entire study period, despite relocation of households during the course of a year or seasonal migration to different urban or rural locations. Efforts were made to ensure that dropouts remained at a tolerable minimum. Even under such transient conditions, the monthly monitoring of changes and economic activities was carried out with a success rate of over 94 percent across all sites, with the remainder consisting of a few dropout households – those which temporarily left the sample during a migration period, or those which permanently shifted their residence to another location. Another challenge was the tense security situation that prevented the research team from conducting fieldwork in Kandahar altogether, and interrupted and delayed research in Jalalabad when violent demonstrations hampered the team's movement for one month.

In sum, the approach chosen proved to be effective in facilitating an in-depth understanding of households, their activities, and living situations. Researchers were able

to build relationships with respondents and in virtually all cases have been welcomed to revisit households to learn about their lives, the changes they encountered, and how they adapted. As such, the chosen research methodology with its focus on a long-term understanding provided an extraordinary opportunity to observe and document urban livelihoods from a household perspective, and it has generated data on which to build an assessment of livelihood strategies prevalent among the urban poor in

Afghanistan. However, given that the selected approach required the team to work in a comparatively small and not randomly selected household sample in each city, the survey is unable to claim that it is representative; the results reported relate only to the studied households. Still, they do raise issues and challenges facing a broader selection of urban poor residents in the study sites. An overview of the characteristics of households in the three longitudinal study sites is provided in Table 1.

*Table 1. Household sample characteristics in the longitudinal study sites*

	Kabul	Herat	Jalalabad
Returned Refugees	12	13	13
IDPs	15	13	9
Long-term residents	13	14	18
Female-headed	11	12	3
Headed by person with disability	4	3	8
Have disabled members (not household head)	4	8	2
Nuclear household	28	27	22
Extended household	12	13	18
Pashtun	8	8	32
Tajik	24	21	7
Hazara	8	4	0
Turkmen	0	4	0
Uzbek	0	1	0
Other	0	2 (Arab)	1 (Pashaie)
Total number of households	40*	40	40*
Average household size	6-7 members	7-8 members	7-8 members
Share of sample members below 18-years of age	65% (N=266)	64% (N=287)	59% (N=322)

\*In Kabul and Jalalabad, two households split during the study period. They were subsequently included in the sample as separate units, such that in these two sites, the research was continued with 42 households. Accordingly, the average household size in these two sites is calculated on the base of 42 households.





## 4. Land, Services and Social Infrastructure

Basic services and social infrastructure play a critical role for human asset building and increased household and individual wellbeing. There is a huge backlog in service delivery apparent all over urban Afghanistan. The problem is principally shaped by widespread tenure insecurity and what generally has been termed the “urban land crisis” in Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> It is further fuelled by lack of municipal resources and what appears to be a low commitment to serve dwellers in poor urban settlements. The problem is massive and has major implications, not exclusively but most critically so for the urban poor in the country, a majority of which reside in urban settlements that are informal and lack legal status. *Zor abad* is the local term used for these informal settlements – literally meaning “a place taken by force” – where people enclosed public lands and established residence without seeking official permission. The mushrooming of informal settlements in

Afghan cities has been accelerated by drought, conflict, displacement and refugee return after the overthrow of the Taliban regime. It would be cynical to fault the people as they are driven by the basic need for shelter and job opportunities in the city. The responsibility rests in a malfunctioning urban planning system that has failed to provide public services, particularly the release of sufficient land for legal occupation. The minimal to non-existent services extended to remote and informal settlements force households to develop often burdensome and health-threatening strategies in order to access infrastructure, compromising their abilities to achieve sustainable livelihoods. Legal tenure is often the first step to service delivery, as well as a key asset contributing to urban livelihood security.

The following evidence taken from the experience of households living in the cities



<sup>24</sup> Mc Auslan, P. (2005), Urban Land Law in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, An Issues and Options Paper, draft 12 August 2005.

studied provide insights as to how people cope with these conditions of informality and service backlog, and how they actually access basic infrastructure.

#### 4.1 Land, housing and security of tenure

The problem of informality of land and housing is widespread but takes on different forms in the various study locations. Most pressing is the situation in Kabul, where the World Bank estimated that 69 percent of its total urban area is informal and lacks municipal acceptance, thereby accommodating 80 percent of the total city population.<sup>25</sup> This development has been very effective in preventing homelessness in the Afghan capital, but lack of legal status and exclusion from service provision in these settlements pose serious problems for inhabitants.

In Jalalabad, the problems are quite similar, although no figures on the degree of informality are available. Repatriation of returnees from abroad and severe drought conditions in rural areas led to a constant influx of people to Jalalabad and eventually to the occupation of formerly public spaces during recent years. Many spacious residential areas were developed only in the last two decades and bear no resemblance to the outdated Master Plan still serving as the main planning tool for municipal decision makers. This leaves inhabitants insecure and exposed to the threat of eviction. Nonetheless, there has been some movement in policy interpretation recently, with the municipality deciding to formalise what used to be a refugee colony (but only after initially intimidating residents with bulldozers ready to destroy the entire settlement). The successful regularisation of the settlement, it has to be said, was made possible only because the neighbourhood is located in a so-called “white area”, i.e. outside the space covered by the Master Plan, which gave some room for negotiation with officials. At the

very least, this example shows that land titling is a viable option. Affected families were willing to sacrifice and invest for a legal title, proving that a lasting solution can be the outcome of a decision-making process that involves community members, who are the ultimate beneficiaries. (Every household was required to pay a substantial sum of 62,000 Afghani – the equivalent of US\$1,265 – which did not include the resources required to rebuild housing on newly assigned plots.)

Herat represents an exception in that tenure insecurity is not so much a problem with most houses erected on legal land. The issue is more on the shortage of affordable housing or urban land on which to build. This is reflected in the comparatively lower rate of house ownership in Herat and higher number of rental housing (see Figure 2). Tenure insecurity is most critical to the estimated 400 IDP households, which have been living in two camps not far from the city-centre for more than 12 years. Families taking shelter in these makeshift houses are under constant threat of eviction from the military, which owns the land.

Likewise, the short-term study sites in Pul-i-Khumri and Mazar have high degrees of occupied land with informal status. Mazar, for instance, has a large number of low-income groups settling on lands formerly grabbed and then redistributed by commanders mostly on the fringes of town – all of which lack basic services. Pul-i-Khumri, in contrast, is characterised by a huge degree of tenure insecurity concentrated on the hillsides framing the narrow valley on which the city spreads out. The municipality estimates that about 85 percent of the city’s space is informal and illegally occupied, reflecting the situation in Kabul. Informal settlements in both sites are acknowledged, for the time being, by municipalities in the absence of a clear land policy, although the erection of new buildings in informal areas is prohibited and controlled by local neighbourhood representatives.

<sup>25</sup> The World Bank (2006), *Kabul Urban Policy Notes Series n.2*, Washington, DC: World Bank.

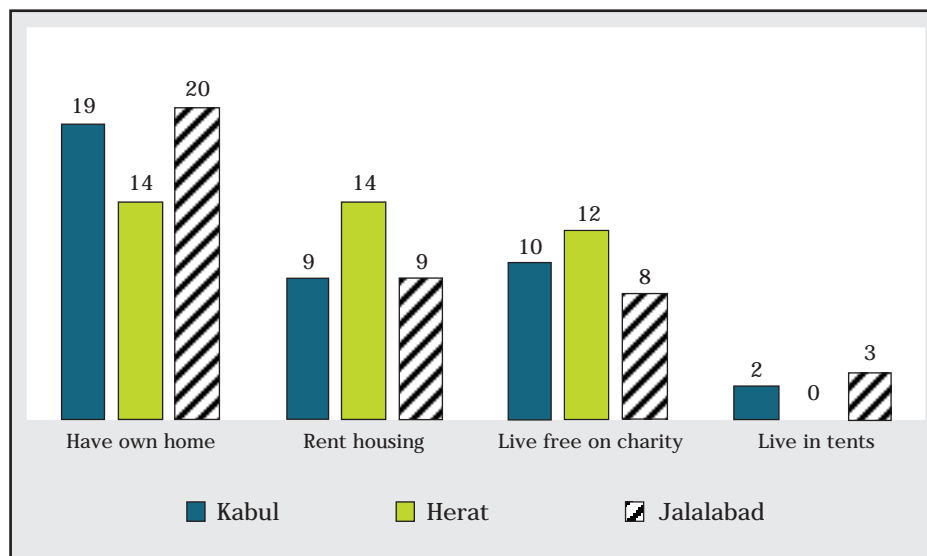
With the exception of Herat, the enclosure of public lands and subsequent establishment of informal settlements all over urban Afghanistan represents an opportunity for poor urban dwellers and low-income groups to self-build and gradually improve on their housing, establishing a foundation for managing their livelihoods in the city. When talking about housing, however, two things must be considered when it comes to informal settlements. Depending on the length of residence and the imminence of eviction, housing can be very makeshift and often fails to provide adequate and durable physical shelter. At the same time, there was evidence of many single room units erected leading to high occupancy rates and over-crowded living situations: on average, four to five persons share one room among the study population in all three longitudinal research sites.

Forty-four percent of the households studied managed to establish their own housing, while 33 percent live free of rent on charity basis. Five percent live in tents and 18 percent on rent (see Figure 2). Proof of house ownership was claimed only on rare occasions. Few people possess customary deeds, such as documents signed by a local neighbourhood representative, or other papers indirectly proving ownership, such as electricity bills

issued by the municipality (*kitabche barq*), or more often municipal sanitation papers (*kitabche safahi*). In fact, among the study population, only six households in Jalalabad had acquired an official title for their land in the wake of the recent formalisation of their ex-squatter settlement; 10 in Herat. Not a single study household in Kabul owns a legal title or can claim a right to the land on which their house stands.

Worth highlighting is the high degree of families living free of rent in houses belonging to relatives or friends across sites. Often, family-oriented households sacrifice one of their rooms to accommodate another family. In other cases, people are allowed to squat in houses belonging to refugees, who have yet to return, or households migrating for labour opportunities. These circumstances show the high value attached to social relations and community networks as a source for securing shelter, or a means to avoid rental payments that are a heavy burden on already tight household budgets. Across all study sites, it was observed that rents can be paid only very irregularly by poor urban households living in rental housing, leading to a high dependence on a landlord's benevolence and often to unproductive indebtedness. Rental payments are a constant

Figure 2. Access to housing in the study population (120 households)





pressure on households relying on irregular and poorly paid jobs, and the inability to pay rent on time often leads to eviction and subsequently to the loss of established neighbourhood networks.

Housing certainly represents the most important physical asset a household can possess in urban Afghanistan – both in terms of saving rent and the potential for using it productively, but also in providing a foothold in the urban economy. Given a chance, people are willing to go into much hardship and risk if only to own their homes. This is apparent in Jalalabad’s recently formalised settlement (see Box 1).<sup>26</sup> People will also allocate scarce resources to invest in improving their homes. In Kabul alone, investments in informal housing are estimated to reach as high as US\$1.3 billion.<sup>27</sup>

The significance of secure and solid housing to livelihoods adds another critical argument for speeding up the search for a solution to the urgent problem of tenure insecurity. Many households residing on insecure land understandably refrain from housing improvements. Examples where such investments in informal housing had been completely lost because of subsequent eviction were encountered in Jalalabad. However, where there is a perceived security of tenure, as was the case in a newly emerged hillside settlement in Kabul, people put all resources available into the gradual improvement of their dwellings. In fact, physical asset building in the Kabul case was a deliberate strategy to secure tenure and to press the municipality for a guarantee to let people remain on the enclosed land (settlers did not request for a formal title; they asked for the right to stay). It could be argued that tackling the problem of urban tenure in Afghanistan expediently and efficiently may require a general amnesty applied to informal enclosures. This may be worth considering first, before thinking about

#### *Box 1. Regularising the informal*

*A sustainable solution to the problem of informality in urban settlements and tenure insecurity was found in one neighbourhood in Jalalabad. After residents were able to prevent eviction and bulldozing of their houses, the municipality, in consultation with the Ministry of Urban Development (MoUD) and the local community, decided to implement a land titling programme leading to secure ownership of small plots of land for urban residents. While this was only possible because the settlement is located outside the original Master Plan for Jalalabad, the example shows that finding solutions to the problem is possible. Households, however, were required to pay, but in spite of the 62,000 Afghani needed to obtain a title and the huge additional costs to rebuild houses on allotted plots, the original dwellers succeeded in raising the money as a group. This involved hardship, depletion of physical assets, taking on high debts and other risky money-raising strategies, but people were willing to go through such adversity to have a secure place to live in. The whole area was restructured according to a newly produced map delineating new roads, marking the location of public buildings, as well as social infrastructure for future construction. Individual plots bestowed to each paying household were also identified. Although by the end of the study, people were still waiting for water access, a health clinic and a school, the construction of boundary walls delineating private space and a slow and gradual reconstruction of housing had commenced. It needs to be seen how quickly the municipality and MoUD will be able to provide basic infrastructure to the new settlement, but its provision had been part of the original arrangement negotiated. What this positive example shows is that a regularisation of the informal is indeed possible – if official actors are willing to commit, and if local communities are involved in the planning process. Still, the very precondition for the successful formalisation process had been the peripheral location of the settlement outside the Master Plan of the city. Thinking beyond this central planning instrument would allow realising similar projects in other informal neighbourhoods. This is a necessary step to take in order to find a lasting solution to the problem of informal settlements in Afghanistan – not only in Jalalabad, but also in its other urban areas.*

<sup>26</sup> Schütte, S. (2006), *Gaining Some Ground: Urban Livelihoods in Jalalabad, Kabul*: AREU.

<sup>27</sup> The World Bank (2006), *Kabul Urban Policy Notes Series n.2*.

more complicated, costly and less enforceable titling procedures. Such approach could provide immediate security to informal dwellers and stimulate private investments in housing. However, a prior assessment of the feasibility of this approach would be in order, as vested interests in urban land might hamper such an initiative. This is especially obvious when looking at the well-documented incidences of land grabbing that have taken place in Kabul and elsewhere. They betray the shortcomings in governance and the lack of pro-poor policy direction in Afghanistan's current urban politics. What emerges is a "culture of impunity" among those in power, whose self-interest lead them to apply double standards to the enclosure of urban land, often at the expense of the vulnerable settlers. The most prominent example of this occurred in the settlement of Sherpur in central Kabul, where high-ranking government officials received plots of land on which they

built extravagant houses; this after evicting and destroying the houses built by families, who had resided there for decades.<sup>28</sup>

This predation on urban land by the powerful and influential is not an isolated case by any means. According to one observer, it represents "*a microcosm of what has been happening all over the city and the country.*"<sup>29</sup> The impoverishment of the bulk of urban populations residing on informal land and the unwillingness to provide them with services and infrastructure may well go hand in hand with land grabbing that is somewhat legitimised by the fact that the perpetrators are in positions of power. This provides a striking example of the current lack of governance or mismanagement over urban areas, which begs the question: *How committed is the government to promoting equitable development?*



<sup>28</sup> Constable, P. (2003), in an article written for the Washington Post: "Land grab in Kabul embarrasses government," 16 September.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

## 4.2 Basic services: Water supply, sanitation and electricity

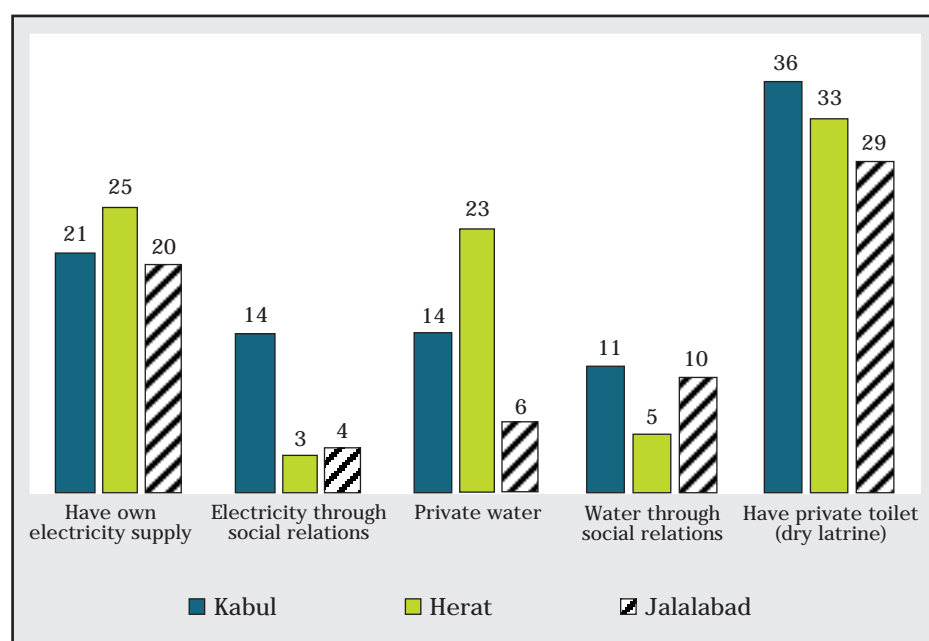
Addressing the problem of tenure insecurity in urban Afghanistan must be in conjunction with infrastructure development. This is especially needed in informal settlements, where shortfalls in basic service delivery create conditions hazardous to the health and wellbeing of residents. Although the kind of exclusion from services and infrastructure vary from city to city and even across communities within a city, the lack of safe water and proper sanitation systems is a common problem. In Kabul, only 29 percent of the population has access to safe water, with a huge majority relying on shallow groundwater sources accessed through wells and hand pumps.<sup>30</sup> To make matters worse, groundwater levels are steadily regressing due to over-exploitation by a rising population. In addition, improper waste and waste-water disposal result in the tremendous

pollution of such water sources, contributing to the high infant mortality rates in the country.<sup>31</sup> Situations in Jalalabad (50 percent access), and especially Herat (85 percent access), are better than in the Afghan capital, although the water supply system in the eastern city of Jalalabad had sustained damage over the years through drought, civil war, and poor maintenance.<sup>32</sup>

Evidence from the household study reveals the following patterns and urgent issues:

- Supporting the findings of broader studies, private water access in the study population is a luxury (see Figure 3). Consequently, poor urban households are forced to send members out to haul in supplies, a task often assigned to children. Fetching water is time consuming, especially when the residence is far from the nearest public well. If this is not an option, availing of clean, private water requires substantial payments. For hillside

Figure 3. Access to basic services in the longitudinal study sites (40 households in each city)



<sup>30</sup> GoA (2004), *Securing Afghanistan's Future*, p. 54.

<sup>31</sup> Himmelsbach, T. et al. (2006), *Urban Impacts on Groundwater Resources and Quality in the Kabul Basin, Afghanistan*, Geophysical Research Abstracts, Vol. 8.

<sup>32</sup> Banks, D. (2002), *Water Assessment Mission to Afghanistan*, January-February, Oslo.



dwellers in Kabul and Pul-i-Khumri, as well as for the numerous settlers in the desert areas around Mazar, fetching water is even more difficult. People in those areas are forced to buy water from small entrepreneurs, who turned the water shortage into a livelihood opportunity. Some households cope by collectively sharing a donkey to carry water uphill. In Mazar, people in remote settlements end up relying on a polluted stream for their water supply. In Jalalabad, access to a public source is closer, but the lines are usually very long, with too many households having to rely on a single hand pump or public well. Herat, in contrast, has a comparatively high number of poor urban households with access to private water, but this usually comes in the form of wells that do not provide potable water due to groundwater pollution and soil salinization. There are a number of urban poor families in this western city, which rely on insufficient public sources. About 200 households living in one of the two IDP camps in town share just two public wells, after six others dried out a while ago.

- In addition to lack of private water, access to clean sources is highly restricted for many urban households; this appears to be especially the case in Pul-i-Khumri and Mazar. The fact that many poor households in these cities rely solely on surface water from contaminated rivers or streams exposes them to serious health problems, particularly young children. There have been incidences of widespread chronic diarrhoeal diseases among members of poor urban households.



- In many cases, water supply is acquired with the help of social relations, when neighbours with private sources share their well or water tap. This is more evident in Kabul and Jalalabad, where private water access is more rare than in Herat. Good neighbourly relations have proven to be essential in accessing water; this is also apparent in the case of electricity supply (see Figure 3).



- Proper sanitation systems are absent in the disadvantaged neighbourhoods across all study sites. While a majority of households have access to a private toilet (see Figure 3), this is in all cases a dry latrine, where human waste is collected on the spot without any kind of septic system in place. The result is a highly

polluted body of water that flows freely onto public roads and is channelled into small streams of night soil in the middle of streets and alleys. Children play in this highly unsanitary environment – a perfect breeding ground for bacteria – making them highly vulnerable to chronic diseases.

- Exclusion from access to electricity is widespread as well. Many urban settlements in all cities studied have yet to be connected to local supply networks. But even in neighbourhoods receiving electricity, poor urban dwellers do not automatically get access. Running costs are expensive and the set up of wiring, poles and transformer facilities usually has to be financed by communities, as municipalities are seldom willing to contribute. Herat, with the most reliable power supply among all five study areas, also has the highest number of households able to establish private access; not because they could afford to buy a meter.



Many of the households studied in the western city – where house ownership is less extensive than in other sites (see Figure 2) – already have electricity in their residences, given that their occupancy is either based on renting or charity. Neighbours often assist those who cannot afford their own electricity by allowing them to tap into their supply. This kind of sharing is more common in Kabul (see Figure 3), although some arrangements are reciprocal. For example, a household running a home-based bakery provides bread in exchange for electricity. In most cases, however, access is granted based on charity.

### 4.3 Health and education

Delivery of infrastructure includes proximity to adequate basic healthcare and educational facilities. This is especially crucial when there is high reliance on unsafe water sources and a lack of sanitation services that lead to unhygienic living environments and increase health risks dramatically. Children are the most susceptible to such conditions. Not surprisingly, there is a high incidence of young children being regularly sick among the studied households. There were study families in all cities, which lost their children due to unaffordable healthcare and medical treatment.

It is in the areas of health and education and the build-up of human assets that the notion of access needs to be further clarified. Poor urban communities may have a school nearby but what good is it if children are deployed to work instead of being sent to school? There may be a clinic in the neighbourhood, but what good is it if families could not afford emergency care or even the most basic check-up?

Across study households and cities, there were variations in: proximity to adequately resourced and affordable social infrastructure, health status and educational attainment, as illustrated in the following sections.





## Health

The cities of Afghanistan are the hubs of healthcare in the country, with countless rural dwellers visiting urban centres to access treatment on a daily basis. This does not mean that facilities are abundant, or that clinics or hospitals are well resourced. Each of the urban sites studied has one or several government clinics offering free service, but medicine seems hardly available. For the urban poor, these free but apparently low quality facilities are the main means of accessing healthcare. In addition to government services, each city hosts private hospitals and NGO clinics, both of which are viewed to offer better quality care. However, in spite of all sites providing some form of healthcare, facilities remain insufficient. The cost of consultation in the more reputable private clinics is too expensive for the urban poor. Moreover, many poor neighbourhoods are located far away from health facilities, making emergency treatment difficult to obtain.

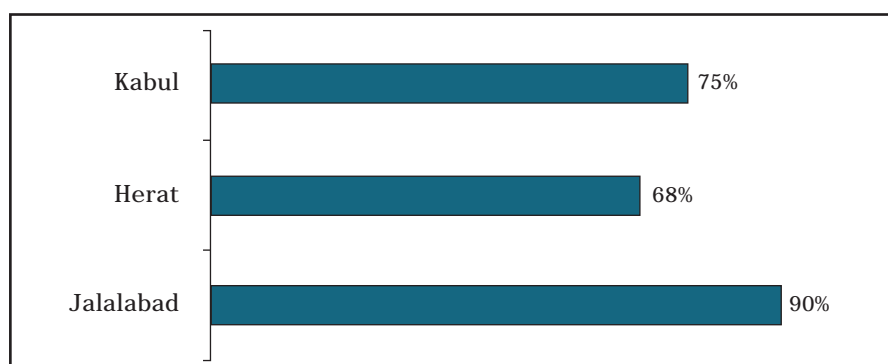
This combination of distance, low quality and under-resourced facilities, and unaffordable private healthcare prevents the urban poor

in Afghanistan from seeking preventive or emergency treatment.

Susceptibility to poor health, arising out of exclusion from basic services and the inability to access quality treatment, is well reflected in the survey data collected over the study period. The frequency of spending for health issues indicates a general predominance of health problems among the surveyed families. A significant percentage of households cope with health-related expenditures almost every month. Figure 4 details the frequency of health expenditures in each study site. The city of Jalalabad had the highest evidence of ill health, with medical expenditures reported in 90 percent of the monthly monitoring interviews across all households; median monthly spending on medicine or treatment reached 380 Afghanis. In contrast, Herat had the lowest reported incidence of medical expenditures, but exhibited the highest level of spending (450 Afghanis median monthly expenditure). The higher cost may reflect the comparatively better status of service delivery in the western city.

The in-depth study in a sub-sample of households in each site confirms the

Figure 4. Frequency of expenditures on health problems (recorded during monthly monitoring interviews)



quantitative results. On almost every visit by the research team, respondents reported serious health problems encountered by different family members in any given month. Disability, chronic illness and children being sick on a regular basis lead to huge difficulties in coping with necessary health expenditures. As a result, urban families fall easily into debt, or lean heavily on relatives and social networks for support.

It is important to stress that the urban poor's susceptibility to health problems is a cumulative result of inadequate shelter, use of polluted water sources and the lack of sanitary waste and sewage disposal systems. Moreover, poor health is a major determinant of household vulnerability. Serious illness of the breadwinner, or the health demands of a sickly child or an aging family member can push poor households to insurmountable levels of poverty. This becomes particularly evident when the earner in a one-income family falls ill; the household will have to find ways to cope with the loss of income. If the degree of income diversification is low, the wellbeing of the entire household can be at risk.

In general, there was no evidence of preventive healthcare sought by the household samples. The trend was to act only when confronted by a health issue, rather than be proactive about healthcare. In many cases, coping with an illness or disease requires mobilising resources (i.e. money and credit) from social networks. But with the high cost of healthcare, poor urban families could not afford to make it a priority.

#### Box 2. Illness, coping and vulnerability

There are countless examples in all study sites of chronic sickness and ill health affecting poor urban households and seriously hampering their efforts to manage a sustainable livelihood. People do not have the means to cope with a sudden health shock, more often than not requiring them to go into debt, to settle an early marriage arrangement for a daughter, or to delay necessary treatment. Chronic illness likewise puts a heavy burden on poor urban households, with regular medical expenditures disrupting tight household budgets. Some examples illustrate the coping strategies pursued when it comes to health issues. The first example is from Kabul, where the disabled head of a household, who is a cart puller and single breadwinner, was hospitalised after an accident. Suddenly confronted with medical expenditures and total loss of income, the extended family provided support. Many visitors to the hospital brought gifts and money; his brothers, both mobile vendors also facing insecure situations, provided whatever help they could; neighbours stepped in and contributed; and the local shopkeeper gave him a bigger loan to help overcome the difficult time. Another example is taken from Jalalabad, where the household sold jewellery, which came as part of the marriage arrangement of its female head, to cope with expenditures and income loss after her husband suffered a blood infection. In Herat, one household settled a marriage for its six-year old daughter to afford the regular expenditures required for the treatment of the aging head of the family. A similar strategy was applied by a household in Jalalabad, where the bride price for a daughter engaged in her early teens is gradually being paid to the household and presently serves as the means to treat the chronically sick head of household. Some families, however, lack the physical assets to dispose of, or their social networks are not able to provide sufficient support. This defencelessness have led to fatal consequences. As revealed during interviews in Pul-i-Khumri and Mazar-i-Sharif, many families lost a child to illness, which may have been treatable, even preventable, if only medical expenses were affordable.

## Education

The role of education as a means to livelihood security is perceived by the study population as a crucial requirement to overcome poverty in the future. People send their children to school whenever possible, and the urban centres of Afghanistan mostly provide educational facilities. Many study households revealed a preference for practical education for their children in the form of skills training, or a combination of apprenticeship and formal education. However, there are a number of problems hindering many poor households from providing education for all their children:<sup>33</sup>

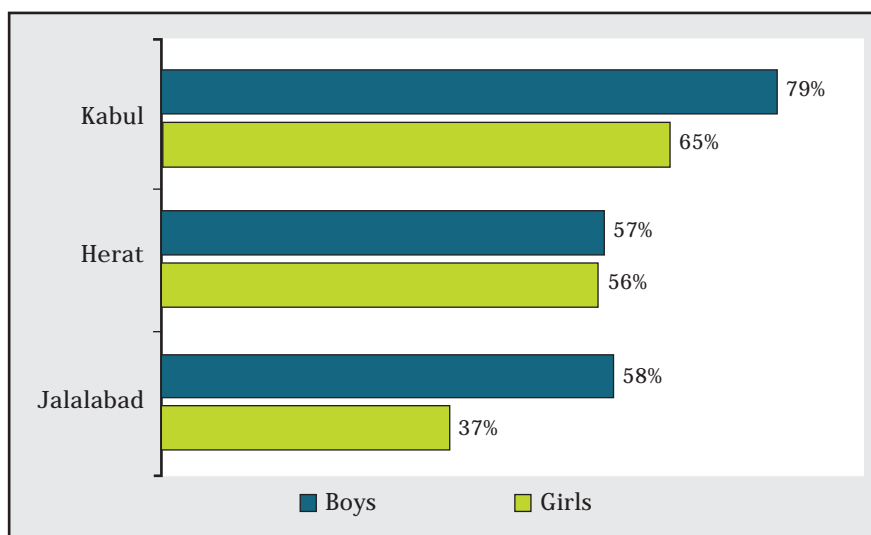
- Some households face a dilemma: sending children to school would mean not having enough income to make a living in the present; on the other hand, depriving them of education could mean passing on poverty to the future generation. This is the view for 20 percent (N=22) of the households studied, most of which cannot
- afford the outlay of income and time involved in sending their children to school. Families normally rely on boys for additional income and on girls to perform both household chores and productive work. In families with female breadwinners, daughters are fully responsible for household tasks.
- Girls are generally much more likely to be excluded from education. It is rare for girls in poor urban households to still be enrolled after they have reached puberty or after their engagement. This is especially the case in the city of Jalalabad, where culturally, girls' education is not a priority. Thus, many households do not even think about sending their daughters to school (see Figure 5).
- Some 46 percent (N=50) of households with school-aged children send at least some of them to school (see Figure 6). Elder children are more likely to be



<sup>33</sup> Hunte, P. (2006), *Looking Beyond the School Walls: Household Decision-Making and School Enrolment in Afghanistan*, Kabul:AREU.



Figure 5. School enrolment rates among study households



excluded because they are relied upon to earn an income or take on household work. Younger siblings usually have a better chance to be educated. There are also many incidences of children successfully negotiating between work and school. In fact, a majority of working children also attend school. However, in many cases attendance is irregular because children are made to prioritise earning an income.

- The proximity of learning facilities is an important parameter for school enrolment rates. When the location of schools are at a considerable distance – as is the case for many remotely located neighbourhoods in all cities except for Herat – children are more likely to be excluded from education. Long distance has been cited as a major reason why children, particularly girls, stay at home in remote communities.
- Thirty-three percent of households (N=36) with school-aged children are able to send them to school. This is largely due to a favourable household composition, such as a higher number of male adult workers. Also, the type of work a

household is pursuing strongly influences school enrolment. Those who have members with a comparatively secure job and regular income – the exception among the study population – can afford the opportunity cost for schooling. This only affirms the value of a regular and predictable flow of income to poor urban families. For the few households that are deeply embedded in a network of family and social relations and who can utilise the resources of co-residential relatives, having these reliable social assets has been decisive in their ability to provide education for their children. Likewise, the health status of potential workers strongly influences decision making on school enrolment. Households that send all children for education usually have sons who work at the same time. Thus, school enrolment does not necessarily mean that children are spared from earning a living.

- Jalalabad has both the lowest enrolment rates, as well as the lowest number of households allowing education for all children. This may be attributed to the distant location of schools, as well as the low priority given to girls' education.

Kabul has a comparatively high enrolment rate for both girls and boys, which can be linked to the relatively well-placed school facilities all across the capital city. In Herat, enrolment is relatively weak,

although schools are in closer proximity to most city neighbourhoods. This is due to the exceptionally high number of both boys and girls working for an income (see Figure 7).

Figure 6. Number of households by school-going status of children

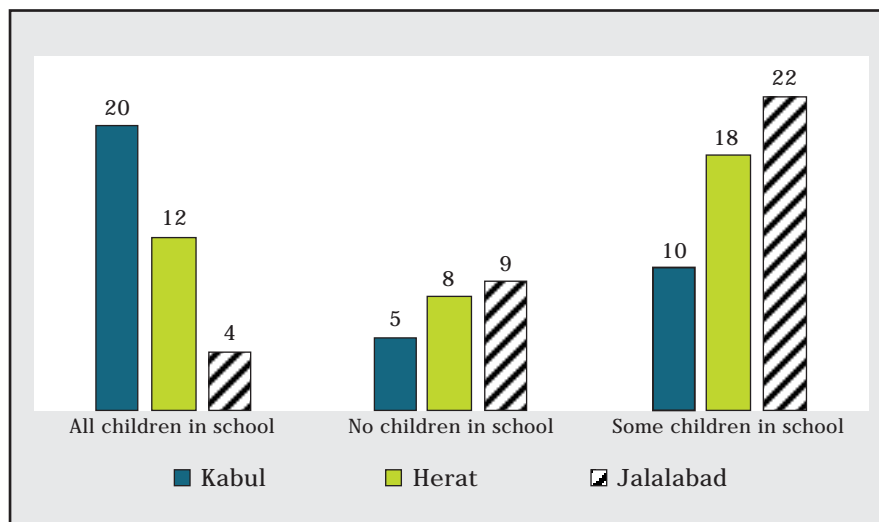
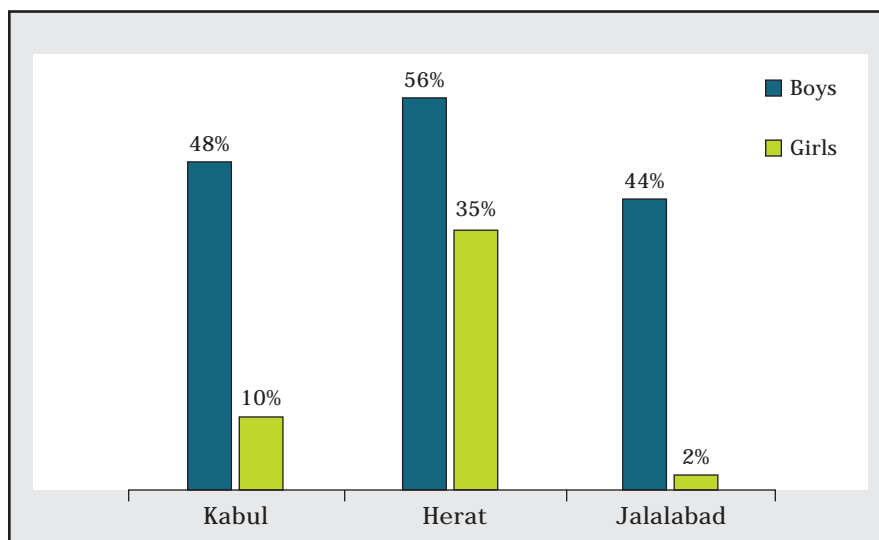


Figure 7. Share of school-aged boys and girls working for an income





## 5. Urban Labour Markets and Household Consumption

### 5.1 Urban labour markets and income-earning opportunities

Informality is the basic feature of urban livelihoods in Afghanistan. This is not only in terms of land and housing, but also in relation to work and income opportunities. Informal employment is a lifeline for the great majority of the urban population. The problem is, as the main source of livelihoods, the informal economy is characterised by irregularity, low wages, unreliability, high competition and seasonality. In spite of being the single most important source of work, its size is not sufficient to accommodate the steadily growing urban population. It has been elaborated upon elsewhere that globally:

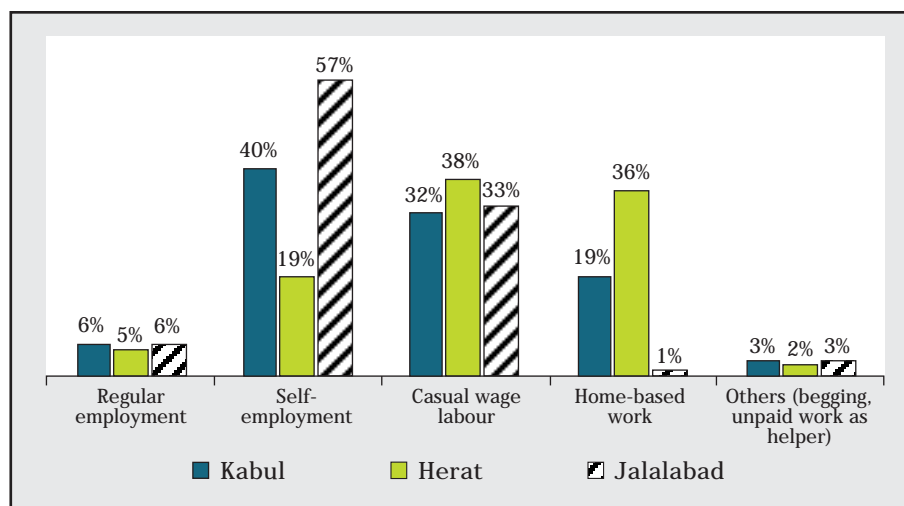
*... most informal workers (are) the active unemployed, who have no choice but to subsist by some means or starve.<sup>34</sup>*

This need to create one's own marginal economic opportunities in the informal

economy was clearly articulated by the study sample in the three longitudinal sites. Many livelihoods totally depend on women and children working for extremely low income, with some resorting to begging, experimenting with new income activities, changing areas of work frequently – all to grasp at every small opportunity to earn. Reducing urban poverty and vulnerability involves seriously implementing what is advocated in the Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy (I-ANDS): “unemployment and under-employment are chronic problems that require a pro-poor growth strategy.”

To be able to afford living in the city, what kind of employment strategies do poor urban households engage in? To answer this question, it would be helpful to examine broader occupational categories that fit the study population's income-earning activities (see Figure 8), before breaking the categories down into more precise household livelihoods and discussing issues around the quality of available opportunities (see Table 2).

Figure 8. Economic activities of working individuals across the study year (share of reported incidences of work falling under each employment category)



<sup>34</sup> Davis, M. (2004), “Planet of Slums, Urban Involvement and the Informal Proletariat”, *New Left Review*, p. 5-34.

**Table 2.** *Livelihood activities of the study population across cities*

Self-employment	Casual wage labour	Home-based work
Petty trade and mobile vending of various purchased and home-produced goods – both with wheelbarrow or on foot	Unskilled and skilled construction labour	Washing clothes
Manual cart pulling and operating animal-drawn carts	Goods loading	Weaving carpet
Shop keeping	Shop employee	Tailoring
Trading recyclable materials, especially old iron	Cash for work as part of NGO programme	Embroidery work
Selling phone calls and top-up cards	Well digging	Running home-based bakery
Tonka driving	Agricultural wage labour	Spinning wool
Rickshaw driving	Harvesting in urban agriculture	Processing dried fruits
Fetching water for neighbours	Bus conducting	Cleaning animal skin
	Brick making	Livestock keeping
	Car washing	Cleaning houses
	Rubbish collecting	
	Food for work	
	Working as apprentice	
	Smuggling	

A striking finding from Figure 8 is the low occurrence of regular employment. Regular salaried work occurs in the study sample only on a few occasions in the form of low paid governmental jobs (teaching, cleaning), or private company labour (security, construction) paid on a daily wage. Such opportunities promise a certain amount of security and benefits more than other types of informal occupation, but often the returns to these types of work are inadequate – this is particularly the case for government jobs. The low percentage of households actually having access to jobs with regular pay (independent of seasonal variations) illustrates the chronic under-employment prevalent across urban Afghanistan. Excluded from more secure job opportunities, households alternatively engage in temporary work, often in the diverse sectors of self-employment and casual wage labour.

The third most important type of employment is home-based work, largely the domain of women. It is especially in this category that the most striking differences between study sites were recorded. Home-based work in Herat, for example, plays a far more important role in labour mobilisation strategies than in the other two sites. The possible reasons for this are expressed below.

Disaggregating the broad occupation categories into specific jobs that fall under each category demonstrates the enormous variety of informal livelihood strategies pursued by the study population over the research year, as given in Table 2.

There are distinctions between livelihood activities. Some resemble more what has been called, “informal petty bourgeoisie,” comprising, for instance, of households able to establish a functioning micro-enterprise such as a store or workshop for which they



may even be able to employ workers. The vast majority is made up of own-account and piece rate workers and day labourers belonging to what is referred to as the “informal proletariat.”<sup>35</sup> In a few cases in Kabul and Jalalabad, households were able to establish well functioning shops that serve as a relatively stable source of livelihood. In one particular case in Kabul a household even managed to hire workers. These examples were the exception, however, as most of the study households are marginalised workers with insecure and low wage jobs, who have to strive hard in order to get by.

The nature of job opportunities in the study cities point to why poor urban families are struggling to survive. First, access to quality work opportunities is often determined by connections, which not many people have. In addition, the types of occupations usually available in the informal sector do not offer regular numbers of workdays, leading to lower compensation. Other jobs are also seasonal, forcing workers to frequently jump from one employment to the next. High flexibility is required to make and maintain a living. Many members of the study population regularly switched between and within occupational categories and households pursued various labour mobilisation strategies in response to seasonal changes, ill health and other shocks.

Seasonality is a major challenge in urban as well as rural areas in Afghanistan. For instance during the cold winter months, casual wage labour opportunities largely cease to exist and self-employment activities become much more difficult to pursue. There appears to be a trade-off between casual labour and self-employment driven by seasons. The number of floating workers in self-employed micro activities peak during winter across all cities, while the number of those engaged in casual work tends to decline. These movements between and within different work sectors are usually unplanned and are

**Box 3. Weak urban governance and livelihood security**

*Self-employed workers in the informal urban economy not only take on jobs with low and uncertain incomes, they are also operating in a highly unregulated environment. Without legal rights to carry out their activities, they are exposed to multiple threats and a lot of difficulties. This is the case for many mobile vendors making their living through petty trade all across Afghanistan's cities. Mobile vending is an important source of livelihood for the urban poor, but repeated official harassment impinges on their ability to generate a sufficient income. Forging out bribes, forced eviction and the constant danger of losing stock shape their daily activities. To date, municipalities have not taken any steps to protect the rights of informal workers or to assign spaces where they can legally carry out their small enterprise. In Mazar, there was a policy decision to ban mobile vendors from the busy market areas because their presence was deemed harmful to the image of the city. This severely disrupted one of the most important livelihood opportunities for the urban poor. The vendors' relocation to another area far away from the centre of economic activity cannot be considered an option. The decision invited huge protests, but they did not help resolve the issue. Municipalities continue to ignore the positive role these micro-scale activities play in the urban economy as a whole. Vendors provide a wide range of goods and services useful for other sectors of the urban population – both poor and non-poor – and there is an urgent need to plan for informal workers, not against them. Their need for public space should be incorporated into urban planning processes and their activities regulated, possibly by means of licensing programmes. This would legitimise their existence in ways that benefit both the municipality, in terms of increased revenue, and workers, who would be less exposed to harassment and exploitation, often by people in power.*

immediate responses to short-term opportunities, rather than calculated employment choices. One example is when a household member, with the help of a friend, accepted a temporary job in construction during summer because it offered a fixed daily income for several weeks, as opposed to the insecure returns from most self-employment activities.

An immediate outcome of the high seasonality affecting urban labour markets is the difficulty

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

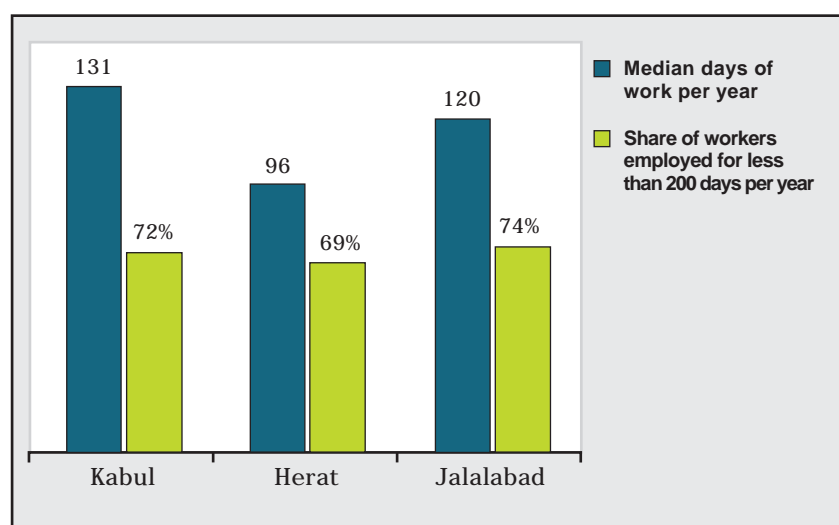


to access a sufficient number of workdays over the year. Work opportunities are highly affected by weather conditions, fluctuations in demand and the health status of workers, and most respondents faced huge difficulties in finding work over extended periods. This is reflected in the overall low number of productive workdays among study households across sites (see Figure 9). In Kabul, 72 percent of all workers found employment only for less than 200 days a year; in Herat 69 percent; and in Jalalabad 74 percent. These values are estimated to be at the minimum levels for creating secure livelihoods in rural areas.<sup>36</sup> Median days of work are considerably below this floor. Given that living costs in cities are usually higher than in rural areas, this minimum seems too low and this incapacity of individuals to find or create more working days illustrates the present critical state of urban labour markets in Afghanistan. This is more obvious when looking at actual incomes earned vis-à-vis necessary expenditures required to afford basic household consumption (see Section 5.3 and Table 6).

A way to deal with the problems of seasonality, insecurity of labour and erratic incomes is to diversify income sources by mobilising other household members as earners. Diversification of livelihoods is usually carried out through children and in case of Kabul and especially Herat, also women (see Figure 10). Thus, household structure and composition plays a critical role when it comes to diversifying sources of livelihoods and the management of urban livelihoods in general (see Section 5.2). Figure 11 depicts the labour force composition for one year in one study household from Herat. The eight-person household employed different members at different times and frequently changed the number of mobilised workers, in response to needs and opportunities, while still managing to keep at least three people working regularly. It was largely dependent on female and child labour, with only occasional contributions from the male head of the family. Although the household maintained a more stable labour profile, this was achieved at the cost of the children's education, compromising the next

<sup>36</sup> Scoones, I. (1998), Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: A Framework for Analysis, IDS Working Paper 72. Sussex: IDS.

Figure 9. Median days of work and share of workers employed for less than 200 days per year



generation's opportunities for sustainable livelihoods.

Differences in shares of workers in the households across the study sites and other key variables of interest further support the relevance of demographic factors and household composition in shaping urban livelihood strategies (see Table 3). Households in the Herat sample mobilise more labour than in the other two cities and achieve the highest median per capita monthly income (see Table 4). When comparing the labour mobilisation strategies of female-headed households and those without male labour, one can see that female-headed households mobilise far more workers than households on average and than those without male workers in both Kabul and Herat. Jalalabad is different, likely due to the stronger influence of Pashtun culture (80 percent of respondents are Pashtun). This explanation

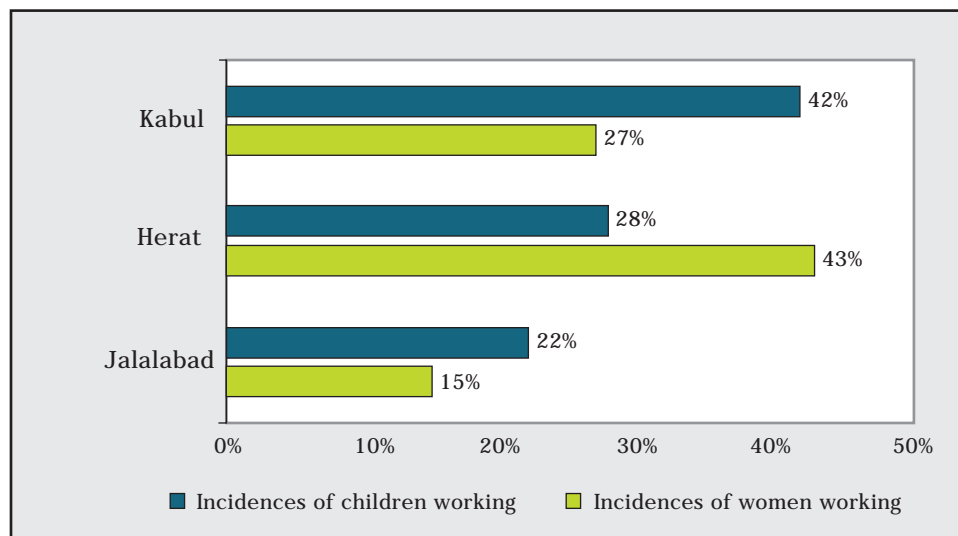
is supported by the very low labour mobilisation among Jalalabadi households without male labour, illustrating the rather extreme barriers to women working, even when there are no others in the family available to work. The difference in share of workers in the household by ethnicity further supports the influence of Pashtun culture on labour mobilisation, and particularly on mobilising women's labour.

Figure 10 shows the share of children and women in overall work incidences documented among the study population in different cities over the study year, whereby Kabul had the highest share of working children. Most occupations for children, however, involve low paid petty trades (e.g. shoe polishing, selling chewing gum, biscuits, etc.) or apprenticeships aimed at skills building or very poorly remunerated assignments as shop employees. While occupations carried out by

Table 3. Mean share of workers in the household

Share of workers	Overall	Female head of HH	No male labour	Pashtun	Tajik	Hazara	Turkmen
Kabul	.27	.36	.21	.23	.24	.41	NA
Herat	.38	.49	.24	.22	.41	.33	.50
Jalalabad	.25	.25	.13	.22	.37	NA	NA

Figure 10. Share of women and children among all workers

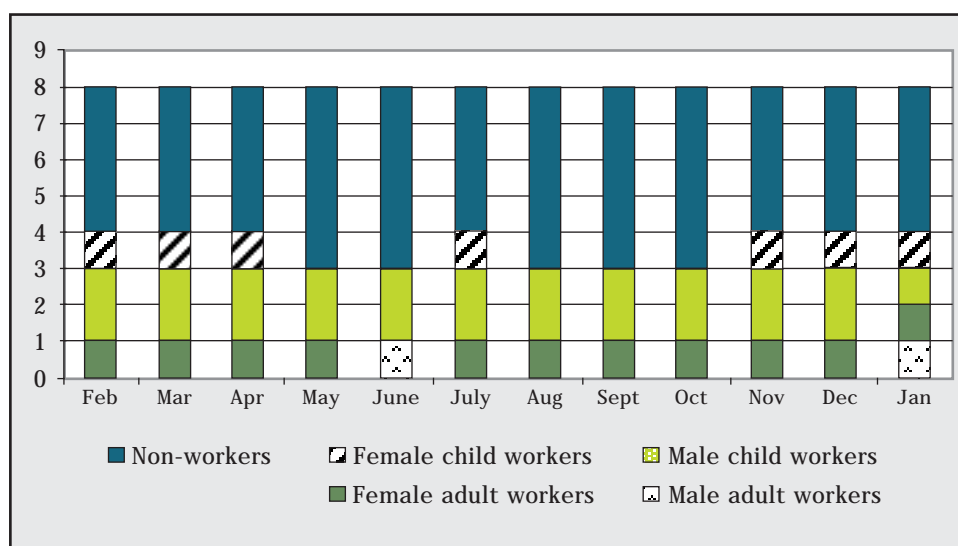


children tended to be similar in all cities, Herat and Jalalabad have altogether lower shares of employed children among all workers. For Herat, the reason is most likely the high involvement of women in productive activities and a somewhat better economic situation that leads to a wider array of informal job opportunities for the urban poor.

In Jalalabad informal work activities were characterised by higher stability; people did not swap occupations as frequently as they did in Kabul. There was also high incidence

of seasonal city-to-city migration over summer, which is when many residents of Jalalabad seek employment in the milder climate of Kabul. The low share of both children and women contributing to household incomes, however, led to a very low degree of livelihood diversification in Jalalabad. In fact, 55 percent of Jalalabadi households rely on a single income source and are, thus, highly vulnerable to complete loss of income. The figures for Kabul (27 percent) and Herat (15 percent) indicate less vulnerability – in most cases, women and children were

Figure 11. Labour mobilisation pattern of one study household in Herat





responsible for bringing in additional income. Surprisingly, the lower share of children working in Jalalabad does not mean that school enrolment rates are higher (see Figure 5). In fact, Kabul with the highest incidence of children working also has the highest enrolment rates.

The degree to which women are involved in productive labour activities varies extraordinarily between study sites, showing the clearest difference when comparing the results in Herat and Jalalabad (see Figure 10). In Herat the share of women working reached surprising heights, making up 43 percent of all incidences of work in the local study population. This is likely due to labour markets being more vibrant in the western city, providing more opportunities for women to engage in home-based income activities (see Figure 8). As it is, women's contribution to income is not only needed, but also viable even in a conservative social environment such as Herat, where *pardah* and honour limit women's activity spaces, but do not completely constrain their ability to earn an income.

In Jalalabad women account for only 15 percent of all workers and home-based work makes up a mere one percent of all work activities. Contrary to Herat, the orthodox social environment hinders women's engagement in productive activities. In addition, typically female dominated home-based activities, such as processing of dry fruits, washing clothes, weaving carpets or spinning wool, do not appear to have a market

in Jalalabad. The few incidences of women working in the eastern city virtually all relate to households not consisting of able-bodied male members. In Kabul, women were responsible for more than a quarter of all recorded work activities, often also due to unfavourable household compositions requiring them to take on paid work, or to augment the male earner's income when his job is characterised by uncertainty.

Altogether, the findings on female labour participation show that women in urban Afghanistan contribute significantly to household income generating strategies, and it is clear that in spite of prevalent orthodox views about women, their access to work is a critical asset and important means of managing urban livelihoods. Yet women are still generally excluded from urban labour markets. Most female dominated employment is extremely poorly paid that women's income hardly justifies the effort required to carry out the job. However, the widespread evidence of very precarious household situations makes involvement of women and children in labour activities mandatory.

While labour markets across sites tend to offer only unprotected, low wage and altogether insufficient work opportunities, there are significant differences between cities as to the extent of vulnerability. Looking at the quantitative data on actual income generating activities documented in the three longitudinal study sites, Herat by far offers the best chances to access work. The 40 study households in the city engaged in 1,274

Table 4. Median monthly per capita income levels of households with and without a female head and access to male labour

Median monthly per capita income in:	No access to male labour	Access to male labour	Female head	Male head
Kabul	111 Afghanis	494 Afghanis	435 Afghanis	403 Afghanis
Herat	327 Afghanis	678 Afghanis	749 Afghanis	610 Afghanis
Jalalabad	294 Afghanis	580 Afghanis	438 Afghanis	551 Afghanis



different work activities over one year. The figures for the other study sites were much lower, in Jalalabad, 778, and Kabul, 625. Most of these differences between Herat and the other sites can be accounted for by the high share of women working, but they also point to the comparatively higher economic vibrancy of the western city as a central hub for cross-border traffic with Iran.



Kabul as the capital city seems miles away from Herat's economic position. This despite the fact that even in the western city, more informal work opportunities for low-income groups do not translate into secure livelihoods. It must be noted that the majority of study households in Herat were in highly precarious positions during the study.

Nowhere do children compose such a large share of the labour force, and nowhere do seasonal fluctuations have a greater impact on income-earning opportunities than in Kabul. Even in Jalalabad, where the actual number of work activities among study households is not much higher and where livelihood diversification is very low because less women and children join the workforce, the ability to steadily access work is apparently easier.<sup>37</sup> The bustling bazaars in the city are still able to provide low but at least steady incomes for healthy adult male workers in informal occupations. Harassment of mobile vendors or cart pullers is also much less in Jalalabad than it is in Kabul. This, together with the smaller impact of seasonality, likely serves as an important reason why realised incomes in Jalalabad show less variance than in the capital city.

## 5.2 Household structure and the division of labour

Household structure and composition are critical contextual factors determining vulnerability and livelihood security. They are decisive for a household's ability to mobilise labour and therefore they influence the possible degree of income diversification. Further, household relations, both internal and external, represent a critical livelihood asset that governs access to and control over resources for the household and its individual members, and this is key to managing the division of labour inside the household. Depending on specific household structures – i.e. nuclear or extended, female-headed, those led by persons with disability, those without male labour, or those which form part of a network of co-residential relatives – the task of managing labour and other household concerns takes on different forms.

The changing shape of urban households

Urban households in Afghanistan are fluid and flexible, constantly adapting to life stages, their needs and the environment.

<sup>37</sup> It has to be taken into account, however, that due to security restrictions only 11 months of study were accomplished in Jalalabad. Therefore, it is possible that the number of work activities among the studied households may be higher than what was recorded.

Such changes in the course of the domestic life cycle include the marriage of sons and daughters and the consequent formation of separate units, also in response to crises or internal conflict. In all three longitudinal study sites, there was evidence of households splitting or merging for various reasons, showing that the adjustment of household size, structure and composition serves as a strategy for poor urban households to cope with shock and crisis.

More specifically, the following incidences have been documented among the households in the study sample.

*Households split:*

- When a planned transformation from a nuclear to an extended unit after the marriage of a son did not go smoothly and conflict among women around household tasks occurred.
- When non-altruism led married sons, along with their spouses, to split in order to avoid obligatory contributions to the costs of major health treatments or life cycle events of family members. This shows that in the face of low and erratic incomes and poverty conditions in general, people may frequently aim to avoid collective burdens that potentially hinder the pursuit of their own opportunities, even if it comes at the price of putting stress on the family and jeopardising future social links.
- Out of economic rationality, given that bigger and extended households are more difficult to maintain in urban areas. This is why in general, smaller household units are predominant in Afghan cities, a fact that is also reflected in the shape of the study sample (see Table 1).

*Households merged:*

- As a response to health shocks, when a main breadwinner fell ill or died, a formerly independent household of a son or daughter rejoined the conjugal unit.

- When a widowed household joined a brother-in-law's family.
- To deal with economic decline, when households failed to generate sufficient income and needed to sell property (house); they moved in with relatives.

*Households adjusted their size and composition:*

- Out of food insecurity, children were sent away to relatives in rural areas to decrease dependency rates and to release pressure on income generation in the city.
- To enable education for children, who were sent to school in native villages to stay among relatives.
- When members left the household for temporary labour migration to a neighbouring country, another city or rural province.
- When rural relatives were accommodated during their labour migration period in the city.
- When sons and daughters of relatives were accommodated to support income generation and other household activities.

*Household structure and vulnerability*

It is clear that family structures influence the capacity of households to manage a sufficient income in the city and thus are a crucial determinant for urban livelihood security. However, the labelling of households according to different types or groups could be misleading. Although female-headed households often find themselves at less advantageous economic and social positions, the conclusion that all female-headed households form a homogeneous "vulnerable group" is not accurate, as the results in Table 4 show. In fact, households who are headed by women are not necessarily worse off in terms of realised incomes. On the contrary, in the Kabul and Herat study sample, male

and female-headed households have similar per capita monthly income, or female-headed households do better, respectively. It is only in Jalalabad where male-headed households have the expected advantage.

One important finding of this research is that the gender composition of the household labour force is a major determinant of household wellbeing in terms of earned income, rather than the gender of the head of the household alone. This is supported by income data collected over the study year, showing that households having no access to male labour generate significantly lower returns from work activities than those who have (see Table 4). This is because female occupations are often less valued and do not generate fair incomes, and access to work usually is highly restricted for women, making affected households particularly vulnerable to income shocks. Herat again is the exception, although there appeared to be sufficient opportunities for women to access paid work. Only four among the local study households did not have women working.

The inclusion of women in the labour market is often characterised by inequity and dependent relationships with employers. This is apparent in the data on median daily earnings for females and males in the three longitudinal study cities, where in Herat women earn an extremely low daily wage (40 Afs compared to 60 Afs in Kabul and 90 Afs in Jalalabad). Thus, even though many women hold jobs, their income contribution is insignificant in terms of lifting their families out of poverty or increasing their own status in the household.

Another broad category of households involves those who have to take care of disabled members or those headed by persons with disability. Job opportunities are much fewer in these cases as disabled persons usually cannot compete for wage labour in the informal labour market and their restricted mobility makes it difficult for them to engage in many self-employment activities. The ability to mobilise labour of able-bodied sons is again a critical asset for these types of household, as is the capacity to activate support from social networks. There are cases in the study sample where households headed by persons with disability are highly dependent on intricate social networks or are supported by co-residential relatives living in the same compound. These strong social assets are often needed to access labour, to cope with health problems or to receive support and assistance. This is especially apparent in Jalalabad, where households headed by disabled persons realise the highest incomes across the three long-term study sites because of their ability to access opportunities through membership in social networks (see Table 5 and Box 5).

In general, however, households with disabled members are income-poorer than others, as shown in Table 5, which also emphasises how critical health is as a household asset for poor urban families.

Internal household relations and the division of labour

Households are not solely a unit of sharing, cooperation and altruism. Internal relations are often characterised by negotiation,

*Table 5. Median monthly per capita income levels of households with and without members having a disability*

Median monthly incomes in:	Have members with a disability	Do not have members with a disability
Kabul	260 Afghanis	446 Afghanis
Herat	481 Afghanis	678 Afghanis
Jalalabad	500 Afghanis	570 Afghanis

bargaining and conflicting behaviour, which influence intra-household arrangements and the wellbeing of its members (i.e., pooled vs. non-pooled income, cooperative vs. non-cooperative decision making, etc.). In addition, there are several socially defined categories making up the household, notably gender, but also age, generation and marital status that determine different status, roles and responsibilities.<sup>38</sup> As households themselves are microsystems of resource allocation this hierarchy may well work to the disadvantage of some members (for instance when some children are excluded from education), and the actual modes of labour division and quality of internal relations can be critical factors determining household vulnerability.

Internal divisions of labour across study sites are characterised by traditionally ascribed gender roles, with women assigned to household chores and men largely responsible for income generation. The fact that many women also work for an income, however, has consequences. Often, it means women have to carry the double burden of performing household chores, as well as supplementing the household income. In households where women work extensively, as is the case mainly in Herat and Kabul, daughters are burdened with the household chores, leading to their exclusion from education. Many women and young girls additionally have to deal with restrictions in terms of their mobility, with their movements and behaviour controlled and monitored by men and senior women in the household. This hampers women's access to services and employment across the study sites. Likewise, participation of women in internal decision-making processes is generally low, and the patriarchal nature of families puts control over income in the hands of men.

While it is difficult to assess a general trend in intra-household relations among the diverse study population, it is clear that the social

institution "household" by no means can be perceived as a completely cooperative unit. Rather, many study households are characterised by:

- Competing interests between different members, i.e. when daughters are excluded from education because they reach puberty or are required to work in the house, or when sons are made to work for an income instead of continuing their education;
- Conflicts between spouses about marrying off daughters in order to obtain bride price; daughters are never consulted when it comes to deciding about their future fate, and child marriage turned out to be a very common feature among most study households;
- The need to adjust to external events, leading women and children to enter paid work;
- Patriarchal behaviour, non-cooperative decision-making processes;
- Cash resources largely being controlled by men;
- Permeability of boundaries, in that co-residential members of the extended family or kin often influence decision-making processes;
- Undervalued household responsibilities and the perception of women's contribution to household wellbeing as "natural" rather than necessary; and
- Constraints on the freedom of movement of women.

From a livelihoods perspective, these issues have implications. Non-cooperation, non-pooling and conflict in any given household may put the livelihoods of individual members at risk. Evidence suggests that economic poverty and a cycle of unemployment may

<sup>38</sup> Dupree, N. (2004), "The Family during Crisis in Afghanistan", *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 35(2):3-11.



work to disrupt intra-household relations and trigger domestic violence.

### 5.3 Coping with risk: consumption, credit and debt

Cash is indispensable in the urban environment, where commoditisation of virtually all aspects of life requires poor urban households to generate an income that is sufficient to afford basic consumption and food security. This is a challenge for the study population across the board. Cost of living in Afghan cities is high, and with low and erratic incomes, cash is not always available to feed the family, to pay rent, or to buy fuel or medicine. In fact, the overall findings on income and consumption – monitored on a monthly basis among the 40 study households in each city – clearly show that on average and over time, the cost for the most basic needs usually exceeds income, (see Table 6). Again the city of Herat is an exception. It is the only place where the urban poor on average generate sufficient income to cover their expenditures. This is most likely due to the higher degrees of labour diversification and income opportunities and the large number of women contributing to household incomes.

Consumption structures among study households show the high share of income required for basic food expenses. High shares of food expenditures in relation to total expenses are typically considered a good indicator for income-poverty, as shares usually decrease with a rising income. However, in

the cold winters of Afghanistan food is not the only factor that puts pressure on budgets. Expenses on fuel and medicine can also put a dent on income. Food expenses, however, always account for more than half of total expenditures (see Table 6) but costs for fuel in Kabul and Herat, and medical expenses across sites, take major shares of monthly consumption for poor urban households. Those who have to pay rent on top of these basic necessities are in the least advantageous position. Many cannot afford to pay house rent in the first place and accumulate debts with their landlords. For those who do pay, rental expenses have a high share in total consumption: 30 percent in Kabul, 28 percent in Herat and 17 percent in Jalalabad.

The income and consumption data collected clearly point to a central problem for poor urban households: the inability to establish savings that they can rely on during emergencies, or to cope with seasonality, income loss and other shocks. In all cities, the numeric evidence shows that living hand-to-mouth is widespread, severely constraining the capacity to cope with a health crisis, for example. Under these conditions, people are forced to obtain cash through other means, which is where access to credit becomes a critical livelihood strategy.

The significance of credit becomes evident when looking more closely at specific households and their financial flows over the year. Figure 12 provides a detailed overview of the experience of one study household from Kabul, which exemplifies the constant

*Table 6. Median per capita incomes and expenditures in three study sites*

	Median monthly per capita incomes	Median monthly per capita expenditures	Median share of total expenses		
			Food	Medicine	Fuel
Kabul	409 Afghanis	578 Afghanis	52%	8%	9%
Herat	640 Afghanis	555 Afghanis	58%	11%	9%
Jalalabad	543 Afghanis	600 Afghanis	68%	11%	5%



threat of income insecurity and to what extent households cope with loss of income through access to credit. This household made most of its earned income by home production of birdcages, which was supplemented by the female head going out on excursions to Kabul's rural vicinity with a larger group of females to trade cosmetics for a small profit. However, it is apparent from the figure that seasonality has a crucial effect on this household – home production came to a complete halt in the winter because the fine wood used in this craft cannot stand up to moist conditions. Meanwhile, the female member's outdoor cosmetic sales had to stop as well. In addition, the female head suffered from a chronic health issue, severely hindering her income activity. Subsequently, there were times in the study period where this household had no earned income at all and needed to borrow in order to meet expenditures for basic consumption. Heavy cuts in consumption were implemented as a coping strategy during various months of the study and subsequently, patterns of spending became very erratic while the household tried to adjust to its



changing income and flows of credit.

The experience of this household is not unique, and finding access to informal sources of credit probably is the most widely implemented livelihood strategy in urban Afghanistan. Virtually all study households regularly approach relatives, friends or shopkeepers for a loan, and a great majority of study households are almost constantly in debt because their income is insufficient to pay for their basic needs. There are however some differences across study cities, and although most households in all sites have to

Figure 12. Financial flows in a study household from Kabul

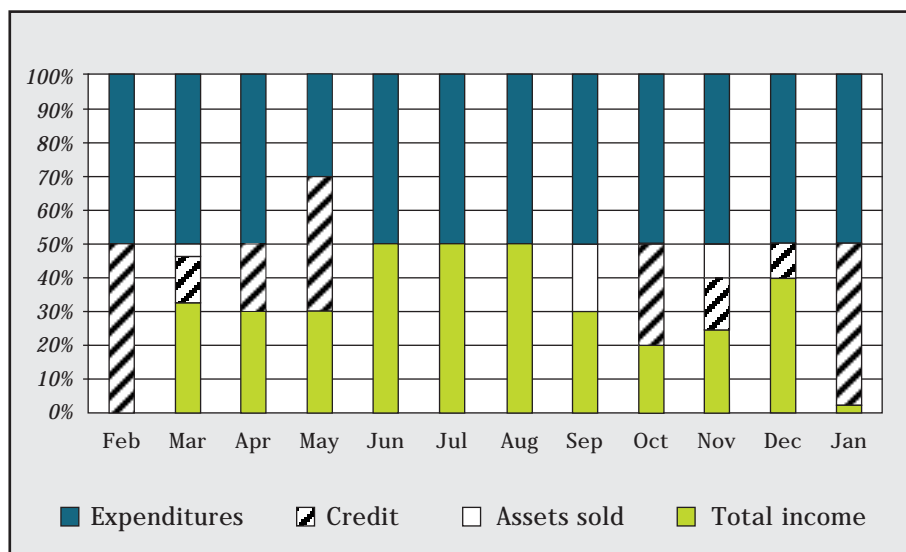


Table 7. Reasons for taking credit among the study population

City	Median levels of indebtedness	Reasons for outstanding stocks of credit	Reasons for current flows of credit
Kabul	18,400 Afghanis	<i>N = 38 households</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consumption 90%</li> <li>• Healthcare 76%</li> <li>• Rent 18%</li> <li>• House maintenance 18%</li> <li>• Productive assets 15%</li> <li>• Ceremonies 16%</li> <li>• Other 7%</li> </ul>	<i>N = 247 responses</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consumption 64%</li> <li>• Healthcare 21%</li> <li>• Fuel 11%</li> <li>• Rent 7%</li> <li>• House maintenance 3%</li> <li>• Productive assets 3%</li> <li>• Ceremonies 5%</li> <li>• Other 8%</li> </ul>
Herat	5,000 Afghanis	<i>N = 35 households</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consumption 67%</li> <li>• Healthcare 36%</li> <li>• Rent 9%</li> <li>• House maintenance 3%</li> <li>• Productive assets 9%</li> <li>• Ceremonies 15%</li> <li>• Other 9%</li> </ul>	<i>N = 119 responses</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consumption 56%</li> <li>• Healthcare 19%</li> <li>• Fuel 6%</li> <li>• Rent 3%</li> <li>• House maintenance 3%</li> <li>• Productive assets 5%</li> <li>• Ceremonies 9%</li> <li>• Other 4%</li> </ul>
Jalalabad	15,000 Afghanis	<i>N = 36 households</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consumption 72%</li> <li>• Healthcare 69%</li> <li>• Productive assets 11%</li> <li>• House maintenance 17%</li> <li>• Ceremonies 22%</li> <li>• Other 8%</li> </ul>	<i>N = 195 responses</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consumption 68%</li> <li>• Healthcare 31%</li> <li>• Productive assets 2%</li> <li>• House maintenance and rent 12%</li> <li>• Ceremonies 3%</li> <li>• Other 11%</li> </ul>

rely on credit, there are differences in degrees and frequency.

Kabul has the most people relying on constant credit to afford basic consumption – 56 percent of respondents answered affirmatively when asked if they had taken credit in a given month over the study period. In Jalalabad, this value reached 41 percent, and in Herat only 25 percent. This is congruent with findings on incomes and expenditures, and Herat with its relative economic prosperity and high degrees of livelihood diversification consequently has the lowest frequency of credit use. However, the figures are not that much different between cities when it comes to current outstanding debt among sample households. Virtually all households reported being presently indebted in varying amounts, often for big family events such as weddings or funerals, or for investment purposes such as procuring productive assets used for income generation, or for maintaining housing. An overwhelming majority of the households, however, take a

loan just to afford basic food consumption and medical expenses (see Table 7).

Sources of credit for study households in almost all occasions have been informal, and buying food on credit from shopkeepers and indebtedness to a relative, friend or neighbour were most frequently reported across study sites (See Figure 13).

Other important findings on credit and debt include the following:

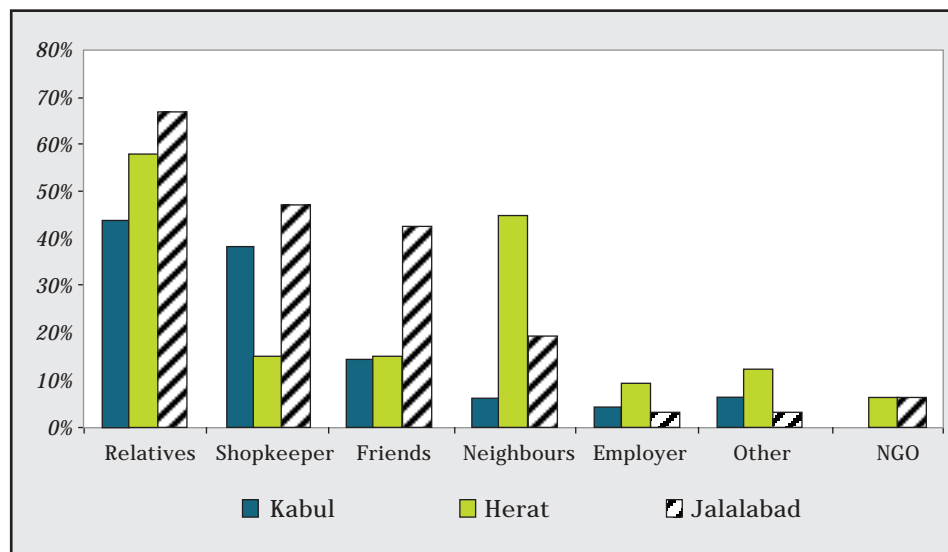
- Having strong social assets are needed to have regular access to credit.
- For poor urban households, residence in a neighbourhood with a heterogeneous population eases access to credit from neighbours. This is the case in Herat, where settlements are usually more diverse and neighbours serve much more prominently as creditors (Figure 13).
- Endowment with vertical social relations is decisive in order to access larger credits

necessary for investments in productive assets or ceremonial events.

- Repayment of credit often involves much hardship, but is necessary to keep up social relations and to re-access credit from the same source. Strategies applied to repay debts often involve child-marriage to obtain bride price, mobilising additional household members for income generation, or simply counting on the patience of a creditor. Inability to repay

often yields consequences. For instance, one household literally escaped from its debts by moving from Jalalabad to Kabul, while another household was raided by the lender and left bereft of any physical assets. Often, households living in rental housing accumulate debts to a landlord because they cannot afford paying rent, in many cases leading to eviction and the loss of neighbourhood networks (see Box 4).

Figure 13. Credit sources for the study population in three cities



#### Box 4. House rent and the downward spiral of indebtedness

Informal credit is a basic livelihood ingredient for the urban poor. While this fact helps to bridge times of emergency, to afford critical investments in health treatment or productive assets, at the same time, it poses the danger of being caught in a downward spiral of indebtedness that is difficult to escape. Examples of this are provided by households that regularly need to take credit in order to find the money for house rent. There are a number of examples where households failed to cope with the constant need to produce an income high enough to account for rent, on top of basic food consumption. Inability to pay, more often than not, leads to eviction, forcing many households to regularly face unwanted residential mobility, along with a huge burden of debts stemming from unpaid rent. The matter appears especially pressing in Kabul, where inconsistency of rent payments is highest, but also in the other study sites, where households go into debt to pay for their housing, sell physical assets to afford rent, or are evicted because they are not able to pay or cope with rising rent. Most affected households aim to resettle in their old neighbourhood, where informal networks of support or work opportunities for women have been already established. Consider the example of one household living in Kabul: the head is a bazaar worker. His wife set up a home bakery but fell sick and needed treatment. They were already indebted to members of the extended family to pay their house rent of 2,000 Afghanis, never knowing how to eventually repay the accumulated amount. A new loan was needed for health treatment, and shortly thereafter, the landlord raised the rent to 3,000 Afghanis, an amount that was not affordable and for which relatives were not able to provide further credit. The solid neighbourhood relations they managed to create, the regular gatherings of the women of the neighbourhood, their self-organised literacy courses, the bakery of the female household head, the nearby school for their three daughters – all these things were seriously endangered. Fortunately, the household managed to find a cheaper place not far from their old residence, enabling the family to keep up social relations. Still, the downward spiral of debts is likely to continue, as the insecure and highly seasonal income of the main income earner cannot guarantee that rent will be regularly paid.



## 6. Asset Building through Collective Action and Representation

The poor and vulnerable in urban Afghanistan carry out a wide range of livelihood activities, using a variety of assets over which they have some control. However, given their limited total assets and the uncertainty of the country's political economy, social assets are particularly important in preventing or managing urban vulnerability. This section examines how and when people are able to rely on social assets beyond the immediate household. People's networks are first explored in relation to social support and reciprocity at the neighbourhood and family levels, and then through a review of some of the more strategic attempts at asset building through collective action and representation within the context of local politics and urban management in Afghanistan.

### 6.1 Neighbourhood and family networks

In the urban context, networks of reciprocity are generally considered to be more fragile and unpredictable than in villages. This has been attributed to the heterogeneity and increasing fragmentation of Afghanistan's urban populations.<sup>39</sup> While this is the case for some urban dwellers, the present study shows that there is considerable variation both between and within cities. The continued salience of customary social networks and patterns of reciprocity apparent in many urban communities in Afghanistan is supported by the fact that family and neighbourhood connections overlap quite significantly. For instance, a large majority of study households has relatives living in their vicinity, who act as an important source of assistance. This appears to be a coping strategy used by poor urban households in Afghanistan, and the resulting safety net represents the most reliable defence mechanism against hardship and multiple challenges.

<sup>39</sup> See Beall and Esser (2005).

This informally organised social support can prove decisive in maintaining the livelihood security of vulnerable households. The present research encountered numerous examples of this: relatives employing women to care for their children, neighbours providing food and credit during times of extended income loss, or sharing information about work opportunities. Thus, it is not surprising that poor and vulnerable people invest seemingly disproportionate amounts of time and energy in developing and protecting their social assets: visiting distant relatives, attending festivals together, investing time and resources in supporting people through life cycle events, such as weddings and funerals in the confident knowledge that their efforts will be reciprocated. Social support can also take the form of community level collective assistance, exercised on behalf of members victimised by social injustice. This was illustrated by a settlement in Herat (see Box 5).

The informal social networks of the urban poor, however, very rarely extends beyond their own neighbourhood or circle of relatives. There is very little evidence of bridging social relations among the urban poor in Afghanistan, which poses a particular problem. While the majority of them appear to be endowed with strong social assets that are indispensable to maintain existing livelihood outcomes, their networks basically work on a survivalist level and the resources that can be acquired through them rarely allow people to rise above poverty. This is also the reason why the urban poor's social networks remain highly vulnerable to overuse: without basic material resources in place, mutual assistance is difficult to sustain and continued reliance on social assets is likely to erode existing networks. Informal social



protection systems may thus quickly reach their limits, especially among those households forced to pursue the most precarious and vulnerable livelihood strategies. They are more at risk of over-reliance on such social connections and are less able to reciprocate. As such, the issue of informal safety nets is double-edged. Their critical importance for urban livelihood security can hardly be overemphasised, yet under conditions of poverty the maintenance of social networks can become a laborious and sometimes even impossible task. The avoidance of every collective burden that potentially hinders the pursuit of their own opportunities turns into a deliberate strategy for many among the urban poor, even if it

*Box 5. Access to opportunities through social networks and neighbourhood support*

*The importance of informal support networks is especially apparent in this example of a household in Herat, headed by a man caring for his mentally ill wife: they lived a destitute life in a destroyed house with a single room without windows, bathroom, or kitchen. Elders of the neighbourhood met to address the issue and decided to provide this household with a small room attached to the mosque to use as a shop, plus a loan to invest in supplies. It is conveniently located next to a school making children the main customers. The store provided the household with a feasible livelihood opportunity. When the owner of their residence decided to reconstruct the building where they squatted, the family was evicted and the entire household needed to move into the tiny shop for temporary shelter. Again, the local community stepped in and allowed them to construct a bigger room made of mud inside the spacious compound of the mosque. Another example is provided in Jalalabad, where the head of a household is an active member of the "Afghan Disabled Union", a local grassroots organisation. He developed a fruitful relationship with a government official in the course of his voluntary work for fellow disabled persons. This vertical relation to a powerful person eventually led him to get hold of a piece of agricultural land on lease, which he sublet. The money earned allowed him to open a grocery store, which has become this household's main source of livelihood.*

comes at the price of putting stress on the family and jeopardising future social links. This fragility built into the architecture of informal safety nets under poverty conditions poses a serious risk for those who have to rely on the family as their basic fallback system, especially when there is no state-provided or other formal social protection system in place, as is the case in Afghanistan. As such, strong social assets do not automatically lead to improved well being, and certainly not when generated out of "networks of survival" – a phenomenon that has been observed in other contexts as well.<sup>40</sup> The apparent high levels of resilience of the urban poor thus come at a price and do not relieve the Afghan government and international donor community from their responsibility to pursue investments in institutionalised social protection systems, employment programmes and physical and social infrastructure. The small degree to which this happened in the past in fact contributed to the present over-reliance of the urban poor on their informal social networks.

## 6.2 Social assets and collective action

The seizure of land and establishment of informal settlements is one of the physical signs of collective action in pursuit of urban livelihoods. When people encroach on public lands and build without seeking official permission, this is rarely done on an individual basis. Evidence from Kabul and Jalalabad confirms that land enclosures are the result of actions undertaken by people known to each other and loosely organised in some way. Collective action is invariably organised by groups with something in common, often ethnicity. In one of the newer settlements in Pul-i-Khumri – established for 16 years and comprising around 110 households at the

<sup>40</sup> Landolt, P. (2004), Eine Abwägung der Grenzen Sozialen Kapitals: Lehren aus den transnationalen Gemeinde-Initiativen El Salvador, F. Kessl and H.U. Otto (eds) *Soziale Arbeit und Soziales Kapital, Zur Kritik lokaler Gemeinschaftlichkeit* Opladen; Beall, J. (2001), Valuing Social Resources or Capitalising on Them? Limits to Pro-Poor Urban Governance in Nine Cities of the South, *International Planning Studies*.

time of the research – land was claimed initially by 10 Tajik families and thereafter encroached upon by other Tajik and Pashaie households originating from Parwan and Kapisa Provinces, respectively. One woman narrated what took place:

*Those who came first captured a lot of land. Afterwards, they brought in their relatives and gave them some space to build their house on. Some of them also sold land to other people.*

Neighbourhood support is not simply confined to one-off actions such as land grabbing. In the process of establishing and maintaining settlements, there are other institutionalised systems of self-help and mutual support as shown in Box 6. In older urban settlements, it was found that residents continued to work together to attain services or security of tenure. In Pul-i-Khumri, for example, the most established settlement studied was between 60-80 years old. There, the 1,000 or so majority Tajik but ethnically mixed households had achieved security of tenure; the neighbourhood had even built three mosques, indicating a degree of collective action and representation. Patterns elsewhere suggest that when land titling, upgrading and service provision occurs, then more commercialised relationships and transactions take over, often accompanied by increasing social heterogeneity within settlements.

Collective activities can help inject a feeling of commonness and solidarity among community members, even when they originate from different places and include returning refugees and IDPs. For example, the study found evidence of people pooling money for a school tent or toward the building of a mosque. Still, where there was diversity within a community, reciprocity was more limited than in homogeneous settlements. Hence, in a number of contexts it was found that self-help systems were delimited by tribal or ethnic boundaries. For instance in a settlement studied in Pul-i-Khumri, mutuality was confined solely to the Ismaili

**Box 6. Indigenous systems of self-help: How *ashar* and *pandusi* (*pandavachi*) are used among study households**

*Indigenous practices of self-help and mutual support in urban Afghanistan seems to be more widespread than the common perception. This is especially so in the case of *ashar*, which is a reciprocal system of sharing work in urban areas, most commonly in house construction or housing maintenance. Through this practice, labour costs are kept at a minimum, since neighbours are required to work without payment – although once given, they have the customary right to access labour for their own use in return. While the practice is also used in established settlements whenever there is bigger maintenance work required, it is most common in newly emerging settlements where many people are collectively busy with the construction of dwellings. Though this was not exactly the case in the newly formalised settlement studied in Jalalabad, it came close to “starting from scratch”, as everybody living there had to give up their old houses and were forced to reconstruct on assigned spaces. As such, there was a lot of activity, and all six households studied from this specific neighbourhood were, at one time or the other, involved in *ashar*, extending or receiving help from their neighbours to be able to afford rebuilding of housing in the first place. It is fair to state that without this system in place, a number of residents would not have been able to rebuild so quickly, if at all, given the high levels of debts and hardship all of them endure to afford the legal title for their land.*

*Pandusi (also called *pandavachi*) is very common, although not as widespread. Still, among the 40 households studied in Jalalabad, two have taken a cow in terms of *pandusi* from relatives, using the dairy products either for their own consumption, or for sale. In one case, this is a long-term agreement where the taking household kept the cow for the entire study period. Meanwhile, a new calf was born and the household extended its physical assets through this system. The second case was not as long: the household took a cow from a brother living in the village because he went for a period of labour migration to Pakistan. Khana Gul, the head of household, had difficulties feeding the cow and spent considerable time finding food from natural sources in the city or the countryside. This posed high opportunity costs, since he could not be productive during those periods. Also, the daily portion of milk could not make up for the lost income. Consequently, as soon as his brother came back, he returned the cow, walking all the way with it to the village. The experience was not lucrative enough to sustain for Khana Gul, showing that, at times, *pandusi* may also come as a burden for the receiver. In this case, however, Khana Gul's brother gained from the system, as he could be sure that his livestock had been cared for.*

community and none of the Hazara households living there was included in the system. By the same token, in Mazar-i-Sharif it was found that minority groups, the Hazara for example, were excluded by the bigger groups in the settlements.

Moreover, collective action is not always sustained and it often stands in conflict with the drive toward individual property rights that lie at the heart of urban real estate markets, whether formal or informal. This can lead to possible tensions between interventions aimed at land titling on the one hand, and those aimed at community participation in service delivery or maintenance on the other. Nevertheless, the research suggests that where security of tenure is absent, people living in informal settlements often work in concert to ward off eviction or lobby to secure land titles.

In spite of all collective efforts, establishing *wasita* or access to influence in government remains a challenge for the urban poor. In the absence of social connections to those in power, people sometimes try to achieve some influence by way of bribery, as has been attempted by a community of returned refugees squatting in tents on private land in Kabul. The community pooled a significant amount of money and approached government officials to pursue a process of land allocation in their native area but to no avail. The money was taken, but the distribution of land never occurred. This incident again exemplifies the current degree of misgovernance in Afghan cities and the vulnerability of the urban poor to a multitude of problems that require the attention of a receptive urban government. Attitudes need to change, to counter what was bluntly expressed by a higher official in one of the municipalities of the study sites: “*First we have to look after ourselves, then we can think about the poor in our city.*”

### 6.3 Social assets and representation

In some contexts relationships based on trust that extend beyond the household and family are seen as an indicator of what has been called “bridging social capital.”<sup>41</sup> This refers to the ability of organised groups or individual households to link into decision-making and political processes. But as demonstrated in Section 6.1, analysis of the situation in Afghanistan has to be more nuanced, given that in many settlement communities, the line between kinship and ethnic affiliations on the one hand, and place of residence on the other, can be very blurred. Moreover, collective actions on the part of vulnerable households and communities are often reactive and responsive rather than forward looking and strategic. When the bonds of mutuality and reciprocity can be transformed into civic engagement and representation of collective community interests in decision-making arenas, social assets can be transformed into political assets. There is, however, only little evidence of this occurring in the communities studied. In fact, the Afghan Disabled Union from the city of Jalalabad represented the single example encountered during the study, where a disadvantaged social group became organised, entered the political arena, linked up with formal governance institutions and articulated demands. Some of its individual members were able to establish vertical social relations traversing their own social boundaries, which allowed them to access opportunities for improving their wellbeing.

However, extending bounded networks of social support to those that can bridge across to policy makers, planners and intermediaries is clearly difficult in urban Afghanistan. In Kabul, for example, where vulnerable communities have suffered displacement, households are subject to insecure tenure

<sup>41</sup> Putnam, R.D. (2000), *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon and Schuster; Woolcock, M. (2001), “The Place of Social Capital in Understanding Social and Economic Outcomes”, *Canadian Journal of Policy Research*, 2(1) Spring, pp. 11-17.



and feel remote from government and powerless in the face of authority. There is little evidence of poor households being involved or represented in local level decision-making processes. Moreover, rumours abound that when the Master Plan for Kabul is enforced, there would be a clampdown on informal settlements in the areas covered by the Plan. Feelings of even greater vulnerability and insecurity were expressed by residents of informal and newly emerging settlements. This development has to be seen in the context of poor levels of urban governance in the capital city, huge backlogs in service delivery and a poor track record in socially inclusive urban planning processes.

It needs to be acknowledged that Kabul faces particular problems in terms of urban governance. As the capital city and the seat of national government, there is evidence of poor coordination and even competition between Kabul Municipality and the relevant line ministries. NGOs working to deliver basic services in poor urban settlements in the city are rarely coordinated with those agencies planning bulk infrastructure. Moreover, international donors work according to their own delivery priorities – whether it is the promotion of land titling, or area-based infrastructure development projects – which may not be in line with the strategic priorities of the Afghan government. There have been some irregular attempts to coordinate efforts mainly through the Urban Management Consultative Group located in the Ministry of Urban Development. UN-Habitat's involvement and leadership in this process has been important in ensuring that lessons on community representation and management of urban upgrading programmes have been fed into this forum, although greater local ownership of the coordination process is necessary for it to be sustainable over the longer term.

The cultural heritage conservation programmes initiated by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture directly involve local communities and have been important both for providing platforms for local representation and as a means of demonstrating the value of community level involvement in decision-making and urban planning.

All urban communities in Afghanistan have an informal council of elders or *Shura* that assembles on a regular or irregular basis as



needs dictate. In addition, the *wakil-e gozar* or neighbourhood representative is recognized as the official appointee of a community and is deemed to be the one to work closely with the municipality and speak for community interests. Such individuals can potentially play an important role as an intermediary between communities and other urban actors, including government officials, private developers or NGOs. For example, in one of the settlements studied in Pul-i-Khumri, an international NGO installed a new water distribution system in concert with the local *wakil-e gozar* who, together with representatives of other neighbourhoods benefiting from the installation, organised community participation in carrying out manual labour, as well as the collection of household contributions toward the project.

In some cases, members of the *Shura* work effectively in advocating for the interests of the communities they represent. In others they do not. In this case, the system usually breaks down. Even when it works well it is often in a context where women, younger people and other marginalised groups are excluded. In Pul-i-Khumri, the city does not have a formal *Shura* system that could be used to represent community interests, or articulate community problems to municipal or other government officials. The study also

shows the limitations of the informal selection process for a new *wakil-e gozar*, as illustrated in Box 7.

Hence the *Shura*, as a council of elders, constitutes not only an informal system of social support, but also a formal system of representation by which communities can access government decision-making and other agencies working at the local level. There are informal systems to ensure that the *wakil-e gozar* and the elders are effective and fair but there are no systematic mechanisms to ensure accountability and women's participation. Even when community representatives are sincere in their efforts to improve the living conditions of their settlements through active citizenship, they do not always get a responsive government, as shown in Box 8, drawn from the research undertaken in Herat.

*Box 7: Selecting a new wakil-e gozar in Pul-i-Khumri*

*The research team in Pul-i-Khumri had the opportunity to observe first hand a rare occasion in one of the settlements studied – a meeting of community elders. The purpose of the meeting was to select a new wakil-e gozar for the neighbourhood to replace the last one after he resigned. The meeting was taken very seriously because the position of wakil is perceived as very important for the community. About 25 people from the settlement attended, all men. They assembled on open public ground and the meeting began with a speech by the retiring wakil explaining the reasons for his resignation. Thereafter, potential successors were put forward and discussed in terms of who would be most appropriate to take on the role. A number of elders were put forward, alongside a much younger man in his early twenties who had attained the highest level of education in the neighbourhood. Many participants felt that he would be the best choice to represent the community because his education would be an asset. However, he declined the offer saying that his position would be extremely difficult among the elders and that he might not be taken seriously by the elderly representatives of other neighbourhoods and by government officials. Thereafter, there was extensive discussion and great effort to convince the second candidate on the list, a 40 year old man who earned his living through unskilled daily wage labour. Although without education he was considered honest and deliberate but he too was reluctant to take on the assignment because of the adverse impact it might have on his income-earning activities. It was only after the community expressed their full solidarity and support that he agreed and the following day he was introduced to the municipality as the new representative of the settlement. The whole meeting took a little over half an hour but almost all those present spoke up and the verdict was reached by way of collective agreement. Nevertheless, women were not present and, nor were their ideas evidently taken into account.*

Mazar-i-Sharif is fairly unique among Afghan cities in that it has functioning elected community councils. They represent the residents of all 10 city districts and this arrangement has been in place for more than a decade. The Community Forum Development Organisation (CFDO), a local NGO established by UN-Habitat in the mid-1990s, was responsible for steering the process. Whereas similar community level organisations in Kabul and Herat involve themselves in community-based upgrading activities, in Mazar, elected *Shuras* have concentrated on addressing the pressing issue of insecurity of income. Hence, most of the 199 neighbourhoods that make up the city have introduced a variety of skills building, income-generating activities, such as embroidery, tailoring, pottery and baking, as well as projects tackling literacy, computer training and English classes. In principle, these community councils are inclusive of women and younger people, and in fact many skills building programmes are headed by women and the youth.

The interviewed neighbourhood representatives (referred to as *Kalantar*), which often work in cooperation with the



**Box 8: Communities and the failure of urban governance**

*Attempts by community representatives to establish links with municipal or government authorities in order to improve living conditions in their settlements are not a common occurrence. When they do happen, they could turn out to be a futile endeavor. Two examples occurred during a year of studying vulnerable communities in Herat. The first relates to a settlement of internally displaced people living in the city. They had repeatedly sent delegations to government authorities in pursuit of security of tenure, but all efforts taken to demand their right to the city were not yielding results, and insecurity of tenure remains a serious and threatening problem for dwellers in the "camps". The second example refers to a community delegation representing a settlement predominantly inhabited by Hazaras, who contacted the municipality and demanded the improvement of a short stretch of road that connects their neighbourhood to the rest of the city. The bad condition of the road posed a serious problem to the community in which a majority makes a living by pulling cart or mobile vending, as people cannot traverse easily with their vehicles. However, although the delegation was received and their problem acknowledged, no subsequent municipal action had been taken.*

*Shuras* in Mazar, also reported that they repeatedly went to see government officials to address issues critical to their communities, such as inadequate water supply, deficient

electricity networks or the absence of educational and health care facilities. However, due to lack of capacity and resources the municipality of Mazar is not in a position currently to pursue even minor infrastructure projects, so that efforts at representation are fairly futile.

Thus, while social assets often lead directly to community level collective action, they translate less easily into representation. In the first place, social asymmetries at the community level mean that not all members are similarly represented, with the interests of more powerful groups usually prevailing. Moreover, representation involves a two-way street, implying a responsive government, which is not always forthcoming in the urban context, whether due to resource constraints or lack of political will. There is overlap and competition between national and local government agencies operating in cities and this leads to a confusing institutional dynamic, where, in a highly politicised environment, the responsibility for urban development rests in everybody and nobody. Thus, in exploring the impact of collective action, representation and local governance on urban livelihoods, it is imperative that the power dynamics at work are recognized and taken into account.



## 7. Urban Livelihoods and Implications for Policy

This report reinforces the understanding that Afghan people are resourceful. They have survived decades of war and displacement. In the absence of significant economic activity and responsive governance, they have proven to be capable of providing for themselves, both through individual household effort, as well as collectively. When opportunities for interaction have presented themselves, they have invariably engaged creatively with government. Under such circumstances it can be tempting for policy makers to continue to rely on the energy and resourcefulness of vulnerable people, setting aside their own responsibilities to deliver even the most basic services to poor urban residents. One of the key issues highlighted by this report is that there are limits to the resources of the urban poor. The disruption characterising the last 30 years has significantly depleted their material assets. The weakness of the national economy renders them even more vulnerable, with very limited access to employment and income-earning opportunities and high dependence on borrowing. Moreover, the onerous burden placed on customary patterns of communal support and reciprocity intensifies the pressure on their social assets and threatens their ability to rely on social relations as a safety net in times of crisis. Against these insights, the most important lesson for policy makers and urban planners is: while it is important to recognize the resilience and resourcefulness of the urban poor, this is not a strategy. Poor people already face many barriers within a dysfunctional institutional environment. It is the responsibility of the state to rectify its own misgovernance and create an environment supportive of the livelihoods of the urban poor. This final chapter examines the implications of the study's findings for national level policy, as well as urban policy and city planning and practice.

### 7.1 Key findings

The key findings of the research directly inform policy implications as enumerated

below:

- Poor and vulnerable urban households are exposed to constant variation and change. This is manifested in high insecurity of labour and income, which forces people to constantly adjust and readjust their occupational activity. This means they have to rely on erratic and short-term income flows.
- The most vulnerable households also regularly shift residence, both in pursuit of work and to avoid steadily rising rents, leading to insecurity of shelter. This is in a context where housing represents the most important physical asset poor urban households can aspire to and acquire.
- Household structure and composition is a key determinant of wellbeing – with those households able to mobilise male labour being better off than those unable to do so. Urban vulnerability is critically linked to health, particularly those of male breadwinners. This affects food security, which influences the health of the entire family.
- Labour is the most important asset that can be mobilised by the urban poor. Coping with shocks and insecurity leads many households to activate additional labour in the form of working women and children, invariably at very low remuneration. This tends to erode the health status and educational attainment of such households. Moreover, some occupations for women and children, such as carpet weaving or begging can be a threat to health and safety.
- Social infrastructure and access to basic services is highly restricted for the urban poor due to a combination of unwillingness to serve the poor, low resources and lack of capacity among responsible agencies. The lack of access to services affects the capacity of the urban poor to earn adequate income and acquire the necessary human assets to take advantage

of available opportunities for advancement.

- The asset base of many vulnerable urban households is not sufficiently diversified to lift them out of poverty in any lasting way. Their reliance on scant resources puts pressure on their coping mechanisms. This applies to households that depend on paid labour, as well as those that rely on the goodwill and support of others. Social networks are vulnerable to overuse and tend to deteriorate, if not collapse, when relied upon extensively.
- There is little evidence of poor and vulnerable households being involved in local level decision making processes. This relates to the control of community level organisations by male elders, who do not always represent the more marginalised members. Confounding the situation is the poor quality of urban governance currently being exercised in Afghan cities. The latter is evident not only in the huge backlogs in service delivery but also in terms of the absence of socially inclusive or even consultative urban planning.

## 7.2 Implications for national policy

The most critical policy issue drawn from the research focuses on the economy and on strategies to stimulate broad-based labour intensive growth at the national and city levels. The acute insecurity of income, the high level of dependence on poorly paid casual work, as well as the proliferation of livelihoods pursued across the informal economy are all evidence of an economy in which the potential for urban job creation remains limited. This must change. Possible policy approaches include:

- Evaluating Afghanistan's more open market approach against the possible economic and employment gains from import substitution and protectionism in

some key industries, such as cement and cotton/textiles.

- Ensuring that opportunities for good quality work are valued as much as the quantity of jobs created. Thus, a holistic strategy supporting urban employment creation must include market analysis of demand for higher value products and the labour and skill requirements associated with them. This must be combined with the development of appropriate vocational training and formal education programmes to develop a labour force with the appropriate skills.
- Developing a broad planning framework that anticipates the continuing increase in urban populations, resulting from the influx of returnees from neighbouring countries, as well as from pull factors drawing rural residents to urban areas.
- Facilitating the participation of women in the urban labour force under improved conditions, where their work is valued appropriately and they are given a real choice about place of work. In addition, the burden of household work must be reduced by supporting community child care initiatives and improving access to basic services.

A second critical national policy issue is to redress the imbalance caused by the present predominantly rural focus of development assistance in Afghanistan. The implementation of genuine nationwide programmes is imperative in order to combat urban as well as rural poverty on a scale that will have impact. The efforts of the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) to support livelihoods and to enable poor people to better manage risk are fairly well advanced but its location in the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development suggests a rural bias. Urban poverty is a complex and growing problem in Afghanistan that requires a policy response now. Recommended responses include:

- Designing and implementing nationwide urban poverty reduction programmes to improve the quality of life of the urban

poor at a scale approaching the reality of the problem. These programmes must recognize the inter-linkages between the myriad problems underlying urban poverty and take an integrated versus sectoral approach, linking job creation, skills building and urban service provision, as well as improving urban governance.

- Streamlining coordination and cooperation between line ministries and municipalities. Much of the backlog in service provision and barriers to pro-poor urban development derive from the inability and unwillingness of government agencies to work together. Incentives must be developed to ensure efficiency. Successful coordination structures from other countries could be studied and adapted in developing effective urban governance institutions in Afghanistan.
- Increasing donor support for the development and implementation of urban poverty reduction and capacity building programmes within government institutions. Supporting sustainable urban development requires medium to long term financial commitments, not short-term funded pilots that are not brought to scale. Donor support must be comprehensive to achieve successful institutional reforms.

Another national level policy implication is the need to increase the human capital of the urban poor through improved access to quality healthcare and education. In many of the settlements studied, government clinics were limited in number or in their ability to adequately serve the growing numbers of poor urban residents. Distance to schools and the quality of education were also key factors that bring down enrolment rates of girls and boys. These outcomes lead to the following policy needs:

- Extend affordable and proximate health-care facilities into or close to poor urban neighbourhoods, allowing low income groups to regularly access both preventative and curative care.

- Plans for the allocation of new schools must be made in a way that distributes access equitably across urban locations to promote school attendance.
- Efforts to provide proper school buildings should be accompanied by greater efforts to ensure quality teaching and teaching support.

A final national policy requirement is to develop risk mitigating social protection programmes, supporting a shift away from reliance on the coping capacity and resourcefulness of the urban poor themselves. Their asset portfolios are not sufficiently diversified to protect households against economic trends and shocks or to lift them out of poverty in a lasting way. Thus, it is the state's responsibility to protect the most vulnerable and to promote asset diversification to reduce livelihood insecurity. The following are recommended to fulfill this responsibility:

- Develop and finance national social protection programmes to support the most vulnerable (families without able bodied male workers, families dependent on disabled members for income, etc.) and to invest in programmes supporting asset diversification for the poor to assist them out of poverty.
- Provide donor support for urban poverty reduction programmes that go beyond physical upgrading and technical service provision to address social insecurities.
- Build the political will and capacity of national and city level actors (both government and non government) to improve their abilities to address social protection issues at the required scale in the urban sector.

In sum, when poor urban households do not have the asset base to withstand stress, then precautionary efforts aimed at reducing the impact of potential shocks rest with national level policy. Similarly, when household coping strategies do not enable families to recover from shocks, then reactive solutions designed



to soften the impact of adversity also rest with the national government, as well as international development agencies involved in both relief and development.

### 7.3 Implications for urban policy and city planning

The biggest challenge facing urban policy and city level planning in Afghanistan is negotiating a path between the reality of burgeoning informality and the rigidity of formal master planning across all its major cities. The commitment to Soviet-style urban planning is understandable among those trained in this way. However, master planning has been discredited due to its top-down nature, inflexibility and lack of ownership among city residents. Instead, more flexible tools that are responsive to the diversity of urban needs and voices need to be adopted. This is particularly true in urban contexts characterised by informality – whether in economic activity or the development of settlements – where flexibility and inclusion of the marginalised are necessary to achieve more equitable urban development. Thus, the first recommendation involves:

- Building capacity among municipal leaders and staff to move them away from a solely technical planning approach linked to a master plan. Help them accept the importance of including citizens in the planning process and to develop more flexible tools reflecting the on-the-ground reality of all urban residents, particularly the poor.

Another vital point for city-level action, supported by national policy is the recognition and legalisation of informal settlements. It is important that policy makers value the huge housing investments informal settlement dwellers have made and recognize their “right to the city”. Continuing threats of eviction and failure to engage in negotiations over upgrading and tenure security are

unacceptable, especially when made in the name of moribund master plans. Required actions include:

- Developing a national urban land policy in line with the aim of equitable development. Establish guidelines and categories for municipalities that would facilitate recognising and legalising existing informal settlements. The policy must also consider how to accommodate the minority living on untenable land.
- Rectifying past land grabs to ensure that the perpetrators are stripped of “ownership” while protecting current residents from immediate eviction.
- Providing security of tenure to residents in recognized informal settlements, with recommendations for approaches to land titling coming from an analysis of best practices in other similar post conflict and Islamic contexts.

Informality and reliance on master plans that do not recognize informal settlements are often the reasons given for not extending services to certain areas. Thus, establishing clear legal status for informal settlements and including them in future planning processes are the first steps on the long road to ensuring universal coverage with basic services (water, drainage and sanitation, electricity, access roads). This will not be a simple task due to the range of line ministries involved, the competing roles of municipalities and other government institutions in service provision, the resources (human and financial) required, and the difficult issues of service standards, cost recovery and subsidies. However, the benefits to the urban poor of improved access to basic services will be substantial in terms of improved health status and productivity. Moving incrementally toward universal coverage will require:

- The political will among state institutions to serve the poor.

- Improved communication between government institutions involved in service delivery, including a detailing of roles and responsibilities and establishing a means of coordination.
- Improved communication and coordination between government and non-government agencies involved in service provision, for better distribution of responsibilities and to share lessons learned and best practices.
- Community consultation, involving both women and men, to devise appropriate service standards and allocate operation and maintenance responsibilities.
- Technical creativity in devising ways to deliver services to some harder to reach areas, ensuring that the work of disparate agencies links up at the city level.
- Recognition of the employment creation potential of service delivery and involvement of poor urban residents (women and men) as small scale entrepreneurs.
- Institute an inclusive consultation process to discuss how to regulate informal economic activity and to ensure that the needs of informal actors and the municipalities are represented. This means ending harassment and rent-seeking and guaranteeing that vending activities do not impinge on the effective operation of municipalities.

## 7.4 Conclusion

The need for cooperation and collaboration between different government and non-government agencies has been raised repeatedly in this report. Its importance for making any progress on urban poverty reduction cannot be stressed enough. Governance-related issues relevant to urban poverty reduction include:

- Establishing more transparent processes of serving the poor that reduce opportunities for rent-seeking.
- Developing systems to hold all agencies involved in the urban sector accountable for positive results.
- Involving representatives of poor communities in consultations, at the very least, and in other more substantial ways (i.e. through employment) as appropriate.

It will be difficult not to have multiple agencies involved in urban poverty reduction programmes because of the range of expertise required. Government officials and private contractors often have the technical expertise required for programme delivery, while NGOs and community-based organisations are better equipped to undertake needs assessments and to mobilise urban residents into decision making and cooperative processes. Similarly, there are complex negotiations to be had when pursuing security of tenure through land titling. This is especially so in the wake of displacement, multiple occupation of land and repair and extensions to property. The

There are important opportunities at city level for recognising the important contribution of informal economic actors to the city and not associating “informal” with “backward”. This is particularly the case for vendors, street sellers and cart pullers, who are among the most excluded informal actors. Some suggestions to rectify this include:

- Vendors and street sellers and their role in the urban market should be acknowledged, not as a nuisance, but as important contributors to the economic life of the city. Recognition can come through some form of licensing, transparently developed to avoid chances of unscrupulous rent-seeking.
- The needs of street vendors and the importance of local markets must be recognized in city plans; they must be planned for and not marginalised.

difficulties involved in consultative and collaborative planning, whether around service provision and maintenance or land allocation and titling, are often considerable. They require willing and cooperative interaction between residents, city officials, private sector developers and local and international agencies. However, the research suggests that it is sometimes very difficult for city governments to work effectively and in concert with the Ministry of Urban Development and other line ministries, such as those concerned with roads and transport. Their interactions tend to be disrupted by misunderstandings or competition over resources, or complicated by different approaches to common problems. The institutional environment is rendered even more complex by the presence of a wide array of international development agencies intervening in the urban context, ranging from the World Bank, UN-Habitat and a number of bilateral funders, to international NGOs such as the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and CARE. Coordination and cooperation among them and with national ministries and municipal governments are critical for the achievement of effective urban policy and city planning.

The application of a livelihoods perspective to urban settings can serve to obscure the social asymmetries at work within individual settlements and citywide, as well as the complexity of the institutional context in which both local and national politics and power dynamics are played out. This is not the intention of this report. On the contrary, an important aim has been to identify how the presence or, more often, absence of urban governance has influenced the asset portfolios of the urban poor. In the case of Afghanistan, our findings suggest that the livelihoods of the urban poor have been deeply affected by the inability of national ministries and municipal governments to manage the country's cities and the rapid social, political and economic changes they face. When they are well managed, city

governments can mitigate the need for ex-ante and ex-post strategies in relation to urban livelihoods, through preventative measures that protect the urban poor, for example in relation to service delivery, public safety and the liveability of the environment. If urban policies and city planning are to yield real results, they have to take place in a context where city governments have sufficient powers, resources and staff to be able to deliver services. There needs to be a spirit of collaborative planning and partnership involving local citizens and the private sector, as well as cooperation between different levels of government. Urban governance and city planning that is supportive of the livelihoods of the poor cannot evolve in a climate of mistrust between citizens and those who govern them. Similarly, accountability must replace the current practice of finger-pointing and blame-game between those responsible for service delivery. Achieving these goals will take time and requires a great deal of effort and collaboration among stakeholders. It is hoped that the energy and resilience of the poor and vulnerable urban dwellers of Afghanistan will provide the inspiration to alleviate urban poverty. They deserve nothing less.



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