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Working Paper Series

URBAN VULNERABILITY IN AFGHANISTAN: Case Studies From Three Cities

Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

By Stefan Schütte

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Executive Summary

As the number of urban residents in Afghanistan rises dramatically, the international donor and assistance community is increasingly looking at ways to address the challenges of urban planning and poverty. The term "vulnerability" has been developed as a recognised conceptual framework and analytical approach to address marginality and poverty through means other than economic terms alone. Vulnerability has been defined as "the exposure to contingencies and stress, and difficulties coping with them. Vulnerability has thus two sides: an external side of risks, shocks and stress to which an individual or household is subject; and an internal side which is defencelessness, meaning a lack of means to cope without damaging loss."[1]

The present study attempts to shed light on the myriad forms of urban vulnerability in Afghanistan. Based on focus group discussions in three cities — Kabul, Jalalabad and Herat — the study tries to move beyond the broad category of "vulnerable groups" to concentrate instead on the "asset-vulnerability"[2] of different communities, households and individuals. The research team also sought to find out about the biggest problems and risks faced by the urban poor (perception of risks), how individuals deal with the identified problem (coping strategy — what is actually done in face of the specific problem), possible solutions (suggestions from the affected persons themselves) and existing modes of self-help and mutual support.

The focus group discussions revealed four intertwined forms of vulnerability in urban Afghan settings:

- Vulnerability to income failure;
- Vulnerability to food insecurity;
- Vulnerability to poor health; and
- Vulnerability to social exclusion and disempowerment.

A key finding of the study is thus that the widely used term "vulnerable group" is not a concise category, because there are differences within all groups studied. Vulnerabilities tend to be a-spatial, i.e., not confined to a specific urban location, and affect different social groups across all three cities in similar ways. However, *inside* certain groupings, differences do exist, and it is not the social group per se that is vulnerable, but certain households and individuals belonging to these groups.

In attempting to move beyond a group-focused approach, Moser's asset vulnerability framework may offer a more realistic view of the situation in Afghanistan's cities. This framework looks at human, financial, social, physical and environmental factors, as well as both positive and negative potential coping strategies and outcomes. The framework could be a useful tool for practitioners to improve the impact of programming for so-called vulnerable populations.

Other recommendations to begin to tackle urban vulnerability include the following:

- Generate longer-term income opportunities that enable people to earn cash throughout the year and build up stocks to cope during "lean" times;

[1] Chambers, R. "Vulnerability, coping and policy." *IDS Bulletin*. 1989. 20: 1-7.
[2] Moser, C. "The Asset Vulnerability Framework: Reassessing Urban Poverty Reduction Strategies." *World Development*. 1998. 26(1): 1-19.

- Support housing reconstruction efforts and establish some form of tenure rights for squatter settlements on the periphery of cities;
- Increase balanced food assistance options and nutrition awareness to combat the widespread phenomenon of “hidden hunger;”
- Develop credit-cycle schemes that allow for low or interest-free loans, to reduce dependency on family and shopkeepers for financial assistance;
- Build on local potentials of self-help and establish access to social participation; and
- Conduct further vulnerability research to explore risks and coping strategies at the household level.

1. Introduction

Urbanisation is accelerating worldwide, and Afghanistan is no exception. Recent estimates give the number of urban dwellers in the country to be 6.4 million, which is about 30 percent of the total population.[3] Most cities are currently experiencing a steady influx of returned refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and by 2015, the number of urban residents in Afghanistan is expected to double, growing at a rate twice as high as the average growth rate in the rural areas.[4]

At the same time, Afghanistan is considered one of the most destitute nations in the world in terms of human development. The country is confronted with many problems in rebuilding heavily destroyed infrastructure, especially houses and roads.[5] Thus, rapid urban growth is very likely to lead to an increase in the number of poor and vulnerable populations, thereby posing great challenges to urban planning and development. Municipalities and the international aid community alike are compelled to think about how to best to address issues such as urban poverty.

In Afghanistan two years after the fall of the Taliban, however, knowledge about the actual situation of urban residents is still scarce, and the realities in which the urban poor and vulnerable lead their lives still need to be better understood. This is where the term "vulnerability" comes into play, and where the present study, with its general aim to broaden that understanding, takes its point of departure. This paper attempts to shed light on the multiple forms vulnerability may take in urban Afghan settings, and is based on qualitative data gathered during eight weeks of focus groups in three cities: Kabul, Jalalabad and Herat. The research explores the risks faced by vulnerable groups in these areas, the strategies they employ to cope with those risks, and who is most susceptible to these risks.

The next section of this paper provides further background on the term "vulnerability" as it is applied in the social science literature. This is followed by a description of the methods employed by the research team and the key findings of the study. The final section offers initial recommendations on how policymakers and programmes can begin to tackle issues of vulnerability.

[3] Government of Afghanistan (GoA). *Securing Afghanistan's Future*. Kabul: GoA. 2004. Urban Annex.
[4] Ibid.
[5] In Kabul alone 63,000 houses need to be rebuilt, about 60% of the roads have been destroyed, and only 20% of inhabitants have access to piped water (ibid).

2. Approaching Urban Vulnerability in Afghanistan

Vulnerability has become a catchword for the international donor and assistance communities in Afghanistan. The term quietly entered the scene in the late 1980s, after researchers and practitioners expressed discomfort in defining marginality and poverty solely through economic terms. Since then, vulnerability has become a recognised conceptual framework and analytical approach in research and applications dealing with uncertainty and risks, especially in terms of livelihood security. In practical terms, the concept is predominant in guiding actions taken by government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) trying to identify and target recipients of their services.

To date, however, there is only a vague understanding as to what is actually meant when referring to vulnerability and vulnerable populations. The term largely remains nebulous, and there is little agreement as to how to define, let alone how to measure, it.[6] This lack of common usage, including among agencies operating in Afghanistan, is considered a hindrance to coordinated action.[7] Criteria for identifying the vulnerable may well reflect different agency mandates and may not be commensurable.[8] The problem is that the concept of vulnerability addresses complex realities, which can hardly be classified within a few operational variables without loss of accuracy. It is important to take into account the dynamic and multi-dimensional nature of vulnerability as an ecological, socio-cultural and political-economical concept.[9] It is precisely this multi-dimensional approach, which led to a widespread use of the concept in many corners of the social sciences[10] and subsequently to its abundant appearance in current development practice. (See Appendix A for a more detailed discussion of vulnerability as an analytical framework.)

As a complex and relational phenomenon, the reality of vulnerability is not easy to grasp, and the classical definition of Chambers (1989) in many ways still provides the most comprehensive approach to it. Chambers defines vulnerability as:

> *"The exposure to contingencies and stress, and difficulties coping with them. Vulnerability has thus two sides: an external side of risks, shocks and stress to which an individual or household is subject; and an internal side which is defencelessness, meaning a lack of means to cope without damaging loss."*[11]

This definition emphasises that vulnerability has a "double structure," i.e., that it is subject to external *and* internal factors, and that it is relational in nature (i.e., people are vulnerable *to* something). Following this line of thinking, the modest aim of the present study is to find out more about the factors leading to urban vulnerability and to *what* people actually are vulnerable in urban Afghanistan. Are there, for instance, significant differences compared to the vulnerability in rural areas? Are there different forms of vulnerability to which different urban groups are subject? Are there inherent vulnerabilities *within* different so-called vulnerable groups?

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[6] van Dillen, S. "A Measure of Vulnerability." *Geographica Helvetica* 2002. 57(1): 64-77.
[7] Rodey, B. *Strategic reflections….A 2003 Evaluation of the Medair Kabul Vulnerables Programme and Recommendations for Future Direction.* Kabul: Medair. 2003.
[8] Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI). *Assessing needs and vulnerability in Afghanistan. Identifying vulnerable populations and assessing needs in a complex emergency: an inter-agency evaluation of the UN humanitarian response in Afghanistan.* Bergen: CMI. 2001.
[9] Watts, M. and Bohle, H.-G. "The space of vulnerability." *Progress in Human Geography* 1993. 17(1): 43-67.
[10] For a comprehensive summary of the conceptual debate, see Prowse, M. *Towards a clearer understanding of "vulnerability" in relation to chronic poverty*. CPRC Working Paper No 24. Manchester: Chronic Poverty Research Centre. 2003.
[11] Chambers, op cit., 1.

The wide range of factors that have to be employed in exploring the causes of vulnerability are mainly determined by scale and focus of analysis. In the face of restricted resources and the impossibility to meet all needs by external support, aid agencies in Afghanistan are currently setting priorities to identify those sections of the population that are considered relatively more vulnerable.[12] Focus of analysis is thus mainly a short-term response to crisis in terms of a humanitarian approach rather than addressing causes leading to heightened vulnerability. Temporary assistance for survival might nevertheless be insufficient in the end, as many people identified as vulnerable in Afghanistan suffer from chronic poverty rather than short-term disturbances in their livelihoods, and tackling their problems thus requires long-term strategies.

This paper attempts to deepen the understanding of vulnerability with regard to the situation in three Afghan urban locations. The study aims to find out in what ways vulnerability actually manifests itself in these urban contexts, and in the lives of different individuals, households and communities. By applying a focus group approach, risks faced by different segments of the urban population are identified. Further explorations into the perceived causes of vulnerability as well as how people actually cope and manage to secure their livelihoods attempt to shed some light on the "human face" behind the analytical term.

As already indicated, vulnerability can be approached in manifold ways. For the purpose of the present study and in line with Chambers' definition cited above, it is here suggested that vulnerability analytically might best be conceived as a function of conditions (socio-economic and natural environment), coping (action), and endowments (assets), as graphically outlined in Figure 1 in the appendix to this paper. These interdependent categories have to be considered, but as initially proposed by Moser in her "asset vulnerability framework," endowments with assets are more generally viewed here in terms of their actual and potential vulnerability in different Afghan urban contexts, rather than being quantified.

Four interrelated factors inform this approach to vulnerability in urban Afghanistan. First, there is recognition that the mechanisms and processes through which vulnerability actually occurs in urban Afghanistan are not yet fully understood. This is partly due to the lack of proper conceptualisations that takes into account the complexity of the phenomenon. Another reason is the shortage of in-depth research on the causes and forms of vulnerability in Afghanistan — mainly because assessing vulnerability requires extensive fieldwork and is therefore time-consuming and not applicable to inform immediate actions. Currently, quantifiable attempts in the form of the National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA) are being made countrywide via extended questionnaire surveys, which are supposed to provide a spatial and temporal mapping of vulnerability. However, these important and very comprehensive approaches focus exclusively on rural areas. Moreover, it is doubtful that vulnerability can be assessed by quantitative methods *alone*. Such methods are unable to shed much light on the everyday struggle of vulnerable populations and to find out the perceptions of the affected people themselves.

While it is not possible to go into very much depth in an eight-week study, the data nevertheless can illuminate the diverse manifestations urban vulnerability may take. As such, the study can answer whether an aid focus on particular vulnerable groups is necessarily the best way to deal with the matters concerned, or if other ways to handle vulnerability might be more feasible.

[12] CMI, op cit.

Second, the study aims to move beyond the broad categories often used to identify the urban vulnerable in Afghanistan. Groups like widows, people with disabilities or refugee returnees are far too heterogeneous, though in situations of emergency assistance, where it is often not possible to gain diversified data, this approach is seen as the only one feasible. These categorisations often hide wide differences in vulnerability within these groups, while people affected by less evident sources of vulnerability (by illness, domestic violence, discrimination, etc.) are forgotten. In moving beyond humanitarian approaches it is suggested that rather than using the category of social groups as a marker for vulnerability, a concentration on the "asset vulnerability" of different communities, households or individuals might prove to be more effective in addressing vulnerability in general, as well as inherent vulnerabilities within groups.

Third, not many studies have tried yet to assess vulnerability in urban Afghan settings.[13] This is a definite shortcoming, given the fact that issues affecting urban livelihoods are very different from those impacting on rural areas.[14] Causes for urban vulnerability as well as resilience to withstand heightened vulnerability in Afghanistan still need to be identified and examined more clearly, and this study may be seen as a modest attempt to this end.

Fourth, the study aims to inform a long-term research project envisaged by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) on urban livelihoods in the three cities mentioned. By providing contextual information and by assessing the "spaces of vulnerability"[15] between and within groups and households residing in urban areas, this research establishes important criteria for selecting households and localities to be addressed longitudinally in a probable successive project.

[13] A recent paper from Action Contre la Faime (ACF) (2004) about "vulnerable neighbourhoods" in Kabul is an important exception, as is Grace's paper on winter vulnerability in Kabul (2003) and a study carried out by Caritas Germany on "Women in Kabul" (2004).
[14] See Satterthwaite, D. "Urban Poverty. Reconsidering its Scale and Nature." *IDS Bulletin*. 1997. 28(2): 9-23.
[15] Watts and Bohle, op cit.

3. Field Methodology

This report presents the results of qualitative empirical research that took place between January–March 2004 in the three cities of Kabul, Jalalabad and Herat. A single research team, consisting of the author and two local research assistants,[16] intended to assess the current state of urban vulnerability in Afghanistan by means of focus group discussions and interviews with people from groups generally classified as vulnerable by aid and government agencies. Participants in these semi-structured discussions included widows, refugee returnees, IDPs, children, people enrolled in cash for work or vocational training programmes, and people with disabilities. Most of these groups were assembled in cooperation with various local and international NGOs working in the three cities and consisted of beneficiaries from their programme activities. There were, however, also discussions in each city with groups of people not benefiting from any NGO activity, and additionally in Jalalabad with members of local community councils, the *shuras*. These additional discussions were organised by the research team itself, sometimes with the valuable help of local counterparts. Discussions usually took place in the field centres of the respective organisations or, in the case of self-organised groups, in private homes. Each session lasted between one and two hours, and was followed by a short summary of the session as direct feedback to the respective group.

Altogether, 38 discussion rounds were conducted (13 in Kabul, 13 in Jalalabad, 12 in Herat). The number of participants ranged from between three and 14, with a total of 369 individuals participating in the sessions. Nineteen of the discussion rounds were with groups of women and 19 with men. Table 1 provides a further breakdown of participants by vulnerability category.

Table 1: Composition of discussion groups in the three cities

	Widows	Returnees	Cash for work/ vocational training	People with disabilities	Children	People with health problems	IDPs	Shura	People living in squatter settlements
Kabul	1	1	5	4	1	0	0	0	1
Jalalabad	1	1	2	3	2	0	1	1	2
Herat	1	1	3	0	2	2	1	0	2

The discussions were structured into three main thematic blocks: the most significant problems and risks of any kind (perception of risks), how to deal with the identified problem (coping strategy — what is actually done in face of the specific problem), and possible solutions (suggestions from the affected persons themselves). Questions regarding specific modes of self-help and mutual support, the significance of social networks, intra-household relations, and the evolution of vulnerability (trends and changes) comprised a fourth block. Subsequent investigation of life histories from selected individuals complemented each discussion. Further activities included a ranking of problems and the exploration of the perceived roots and effects of the dominant risks in the shape of problem trees.

[16] One male person travelled with the researcher to all locations, whereas female assistants were employed from the respective cities.

To avoid raising the expectations of participants, the team made clear in the beginning of each session that there would be no immediate support for those taking part in the discussions. Instead, the intention was to provide a "platform" for the members of each group on which they could talk freely about their problems, their actions, and what kind of solutions to their problems they envisaged. The most important observation was that the participants actually appreciated the exercise very much, even if the talks tended to be dominated by their serious problems and daily hardships. People were happy that someone actually listened to their voices and opinions, and almost all discussions were very lively, sometimes also emotional. Certainly, people were not shy in expressing their thoughts and feelings, and this was especially true for the women's groups. In all three locations, women were apparently very eager to take the chance and talk openly about a wide range of subjects. This methodological finding points to the fact that structures that enable people to freely articulate their thoughts and feelings are actually very much wanted but largely absent.

There are, however, certain limitations to the focus group approach. Focus group discussions hardly allow for much depth, and participants may feel reluctant to express sensitive issues in front of a group, though it was felt that this was not often the case. The restricted period of the study did not allow for follow-up regarding questions that arose out of the discussions, and ideally, there would be scope for meeting members of the groups again in their places of living. However, that was not possible due to time constraints.

A related problem is the difficulty to explore the endowments of participants in detail. This limitation was partly balanced by conducting life history interviews after each discussion, which provided case study material illustrating the points made during discussions. Nevertheless, at this stage it was not considered essential to obtain "hard" data regarding socio-economic assets. Rather, an impression of the general situation and potential asset vulnerability of the urban poor and vulnerable was sought, and in this respect, the study is able to provide rich illustrative material. This material will also prove to be very valuable to inform the foreseen long-term, in-depth research project on urban livelihoods in the three cities.

This study is not able to contribute substantially to establishing indicators for vulnerability in urban Afghanistan, but can provide initial guidance around what those indicators may be. The search for consistent and weighable indices is, however, very time-consuming and hard to generalise beyond specific empirical contexts.[17]

[17] For instance, van Dillen's assessment of vulnerability in a south Indian village and her subsequent development of an "experimental livelihood security index" required one full year of extensive and detailed fieldwork. See van Dillen, S. "Different Choices. Assessing Vulnerability in a South Indian Village." *Studies in Development Geography*. Saarbrücken: Verlag für Entwicklungspolitik. Forthcoming in 2004. Apart from that, it has to be taken into account, as Bohle generalises from empirical findings in Nepal, that meaningful answers to the question as to how exposure to and coping with risks affect livelihood security can be appraised only on the household level. See Bohle, H.-G. "Coping with Vulnerability and Unsustainability. The Case of Nepalese Upland Farmers." In Lohnert, B. and Geist, H. *Coping with Changing Environments. Social Dimensions of Endangered Ecosystems in the Developing World*. Brookfield: Ashgate Publishing. 1999. 55-74.

4. Coping with Adversity: Evidence from Three Afghan Cities

Despite regional differences in the three locations of the present study, there are also significant similarities with respect to the situation of the urban poor and vulnerable across the sites. In basic terms, important factors shaping the external side of vulnerability in the Afghan context may generally be related to the existence and functioning of several "regional economies" within the country. These are infused with different and intertwined "types" of political-economic systems that have emerged during a generation of conflict and war in Afghanistan. Pain and Goodhand characterise these systems as the dominant war economy, whose functioning in turn shapes a strong black economy and the coping economies of survival.[18] Though the explicit focus of the authors is on the situation in rural areas, the proposed typology of differing economies certainly offers a useful framework for studying urban Afghanistan as well. In fact, the participants in all three surveyed cities mainly act in the so-called coping economies, and to a certain extent also in black economies.

The coping economies are characterised by a widespread struggle for survival in a high-risk environment. Faced with depleting asset bases, people often rely on the employment of child labour, leading to long-term negative effects on health-status and education.[19] More explicitly for the urban context, coping economies tend to be characterised by widespread unemployment, a subsequent loss of income, insecure and expensive housing, food insecurity, and lack of long-term investment and tenure rights. Involvement in the urban coping economies of Afghanistan poses rather similar conditions for the poor and vulnerable, and these tend to be more encompassing than the differences between each city. However, there are also differences between the groups under study, with gender and physical health being an important marker.

4.1 Contexts – brief profiles of the three cities

Kabul

The capital of Afghanistan, with an estimated population of 2.8 million, has suffered immensely from war and destruction, leaving large parts of the city in a desperate condition. Moreover, the recent high influx of refugee returnees or people migrating from drought-prone rural areas[20] has put additional pressure on an already overloaded service infrastructure and the limited job market. A recent study carried out by Action Contre la Faime (ACF) in 2003 aimed to identify vulnerable neighbourhoods in Kabul by mapping spatial access to infrastructure, housing, health services, water, sanitation and job opportunities. This resulted in a characterisation of different "livelihood zones" in the city.[21] The survey also indicated that spatial categories influence levels of social vulnerability, a finding that is also supported by other studies in different contexts.[22]

However, vulnerability may not be easily explained using spatial indicators alone. For instance, people living on the remote hilltops in Kabul without close access to clean water

[18] Pain, A. and Goodhand, J. *Afghanistan: current employment and socio-economic situation and prospects*. InFocus Programme on Crisis Response and Reconstruction, Working Paper 8. Geneva: ILO. 2002.
[19] Ibid.
[20] UNHCR estimates that 393,582 refugees from Iran and Pakistan returned to Kabul from March to December 2002. Above that, 32,646 IDPs arrived in 2002. See also Grace, J. *One Hundred Households in Kabul. A study of winter vulnerability, coping strategies, and the impact of cash-for-work programmes on the lives of the "vulnerable"*. Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. 2003.
[21] Action Contre la Faime. *Kabul Vulnerability Mapping*. Kabul: ACF. 2004.
[22] Ravallion, M. and Wodon Q. *Poor areas, or only poor people?* The World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper 1798. Washington: World Bank. 1997.

and basic services are disadvantaged spatially, but might still have good reasons why they have chosen to settle there. A house illegally built on a steep hillside with poor sanitation, no water and electricity, and exposed to environmental hazards, but owned by the household, may still be perceived as a better option than renting an expensive room in a less remote area of Kabul. There are different choices possible even under very constrained circumstances, and though the ranges of these are certainly not very broad, they still influence levels of vulnerability and livelihood security.

Ecologically, life in Kabul poses the additional problem of quite harsh winters. However, as Grace pointed out in her study on winter vulnerability in Kabul, people who are vulnerable to the threats of winter are also sensitive to stresses and shocks throughout the year.[23] Winterisation programmes try to address the immediate needs of the people under stress by providing income opportunities mainly through cash for work initiatives. Though these provide important sources of income through the winter months and thus enable participants to cope better with attendant difficulties, there seems to be no lasting effect beyond the project end. However, in the face of high unemployment rates and the predominant reliance on uncertain daily or casual labour, gaining access to NGO programmes is a major coping strategy in Kabul, especially in terms of getting food assistance.[24] In contrast, the high number of international organisations in Kabul also has quite adverse effects on urban livelihoods, as due to their presence, prices in the city have increased significantly. This is true especially for housing, with rents eating up a high proportion of monthly incomes of the poor.

The urban poor and vulnerable in Kabul thus face multiple constraints beyond their immediate control. The current prospects and hopes for lasting peace in Kabul are somewhat relaxing psychologically, though for many the situation is still too difficult to overlook and latent fears of a new escalation remain.

Jalalabad

The city of Jalalabad forms the urban centre of eastern Nangarhar Province. Population figures are somewhat variable, ranging from about 181,000 to 500,000.[25] There is wide seasonal fluctuation in population numbers, with people moving in to temporarily escape the winter months in Kabul. In addition, the city's proximity to Pakistan results in patterns of seasonal migration, mostly in search of work abroad. There is a significant proportion of IDPs living in Jalalabad or in camps very close to the city, many of whom sought refuge in the years of war and decided to stay rather than return to their native places.

Jalalabad's closeness to the border of Pakistan makes the city an important trading centre for all kinds of goods and foodstuffs. The volume of imports from the neighbouring country is considerable, seasonally constituting about half of the city's requirements. The importance of trade relations with Pakistan for the local economy is further reflected in the fact that Pakistani Rupees are the preferred currency in the market. Some traders in the busy markets of Jalalabad do not even accept Afghanis as a proper means of payment.

Urban vulnerability seems to be present largely in the form of food insecurity for many households, though the overall situation has been judged more favourable than in Kabul.[26] Living conditions for the poor and vulnerable in squatter settlements and IDP camps are

[23] Grace, op cit.
[24] Action Contre la Faime and World Food Programme. *Nutritional & Mortality Survey, Kabul City*. Kabul: ACF/WFP. 2000.
[25] The first figure is an estimate coming from the Central Statistics Office (CSO). *1382 (2003) Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook*. Issue No. 24. Kabul: CSO. September 2003. The latter figure comes from the government's *Securing the Future* document (GoA, op cit.).
[26] Clarke, P. "Food Security in Afghanistan: 1999 to 2000." *Afghanistan Outlook*. Vol. 2. Kabul: UNOCA, UNSMA and the World Bank. December 1999.

characterised by widespread lack of basic services like water and electricity. Livelihood strategies try to take advantage of job opportunities in Pakistan, but even more so from efforts in finding access to employment in the agricultural wage labour sector of Nangarhar District.

Herat

The city of Herat is located in western Afghanistan in close proximity to Iran and Turkmenistan. Quite similar to Jalalabad in the east, its location makes Herat an important commercial centre with significant trade relations to neighbouring countries. The city, with its very rich and ancient cultural heritage, has an estimated population of 249,000.[27] Unregulated customs duties from border traffic and a high trade volume contribute to the city's development and relative wealth. As such, a well-maintained infrastructure in Herat gives the impression of prosperity, especially when compared with other towns in Afghanistan. In spite of this, urban poverty is highly visible, especially in the numerous squatter settlements on the outskirts of town.

Additionally, the city has attracted a large number of migrants from drought-affected rural areas, as well as returned refugees from Iran. This has put pressure on an already limited job market and resulted in a decrease of the price of labour and falling daily wages.[28] As such, there is a wide difference in living standards in Herat, with a huge number of inhabitants able to take advantage of a relatively stable political situation and the position of the town on major trade routes. Yet living conditions of the urban poor and vulnerable in Herat are similar to those in Kabul or Jalalabad. Malnutrition has been observed,[29] squatter settlements are widespread, insecure casual and daily labour function as sources of income and an overall decline in entitlements is abundant. However, Herat's proximity to Iran also provides opportunities. Labour migration of male household members is widespread and remittances from abroad are often the most important means for managing livelihoods.

4.2 Risk exposure and coping strategies – the nature of urban coping economies

The local contexts in the three cities pose somewhat different opportunities for people involved in the respective coping economies of urban Afghanistan. However, as has been indicated above, significant similarities between the cities remain. These relate mainly to the "nature" of risks faced by the urban poor and vulnerable, which tend to be rather place-unspecific and, in a way, not exclusively confined to specific groups. Coping strategies, on the other hand, take advantage of local opportunities and vary by location.

This section explores the main risks to livelihood security in urban Afghanistan as they are perceived by participants of the focus group discussions in the three cities. It investigates the roots and effects of, and ways of coping with, livelihood risks in detail by using a fourfold approach: i) the initial identification of risks, ii) exploring the possible ways to deal with the risks identified, iii) highlighting the susceptibility of different groups, households or individuals to these risks, and iv) providing illustrative examples from different life contexts in the three locations.

However, it is not always possible to draw sharp lines between different risks and coping strategies. Risks come in bundles, and applied coping strategies need to address these simultaneously, as illustrated in the next sections.

[27] Central Statistics Office, op cit.
[28] Action Contre la Faime and World Food Programme. *Nutritional & Mortality Survey, Herat City*. Kabul: ACF/WFP. 2000.
[29] Ibid.

4.2.1 The risks of unemployment, loss of income and indebtedness

> "*I need a proper job to pay my rent and feed my family, but so far, I am not able to find something permanent. Sitting on the street all day and waiting to get work for one or two days does not help much, but that is all I can do. The problem is that I do not have any relations to the powerful, and that is why I do not find work.*" (36-year-old man living in a squatter settlement of Kabul)

One specific feature of the urban coping economy is its almost complete immersion in the cash economy and the reliance on urban labour markets. Subsistence production is scarce, and housing, food, health care and transport require ready amounts of currency, thereby putting constant pressure on poorer households to achieve a sufficient income that meets their needs. This is especially true in Kabul, where rents increased considerably after the fall of the Taliban. In fact, housing and the accompanying high rents in Kabul are perceived as the single biggest problem for the urban poor and vulnerable, with only very few participants in the group discussions owning their own living spaces, and then usually illegally built.

Urban labour markets in Afghanistan are generally highly diversified, but for the unskilled and less literate labour force, access to opportunities is usually limited to the heterogeneous sector of informal employment. This includes daily and casual labour such as construction work, pulling carts and running mobile shops on wheelbarrows (the "*Karachi*"). In Kabul, and to a lesser extent in Jalalabad and Herat, finding access to employment and training programmes from various NGOs are a further option. However, access to informal work is very competitive, and in light of current urban growth rates, the situation does not appear to become more favourable in the near future.

Job opportunities for unskilled persons are unreliable, irregular and subject to high seasonal variance. Most people interviewed have huge difficulties in finding constant and secure sources of income, which keeps their available cash at an erratic and low level. Total loss of income of the main breadwinner is not infrequent, and the constant stress to pay rent and purchase food is a steady source of worry.

Coping with loss of income and indebtedness

Common forms of coping with unemployment and irregularities of income are the employment of child labour and establishing access to credit. The former often leads to a depletion of educational levels, the latter to indebtedness.

For the majority of participants in the group discussions, household survival depends to a great extent on working children. From a young age onwards, boys are sent out in the street to realise meagre incomes, for instance by selling various items, polishing boots, working as servants in shops or through begging. Apart from that, children are collecting garbage as heating material and for shelter. All these activities are time-consuming and inhibit regular school attendance, thereby contributing to an overall decrease in education and further reducing the range of future options for children and their families. Many households are entrapped in a vicious cycle of having to decide between either sending their kids to school to learn or in the streets to make money, leaving very limited space for children to negotiate between school and work.

> "*Our children are the same as we are — uneducated. It is a trap — if they go to school we stay hungry, if they work they will be illiterate.*" (30-year-old man, enrolled in a rubbish-collecting programme with Medair, Kabul)

This trap of finding no access to "human capital" (education) poses long-term effects on a household situation, as illiteracy further reduces opportunities to diversify sources of income, and levels of vulnerability may be transferred to coming generations. Educated individuals also have difficulties finding employment in present day Afghanistan. Their participation in cash for work activities, like picking garbage and digging ditches, is perceived as very humiliating and reveals a certain degree of despair among the educated urban population.

In some cases, male children are able to negotiate successfully between school and work. They visit school in the mornings and pursue work in the afternoon, thereby keeping up hopes of a better future for themselves and their families. Some even go to school in secret, as their parents do not allow them to do so. Similarly, young girls more often than not face constraints in attending school. In Jalalabad, most girls are generally not allowed to go after sixth grade, i.e., when they have reached puberty. Generally, attitudes toward girls' education remain conservative, especially in Jalalabad and Herat, and sometimes it is even considered harmful. "Nobody wants to marry an educated woman" is a statement often heard, and bride prices fall if women are too knowledgeable.

Box 1. Access to schooling in Jalalabad
Aisha is nine years old and attends 3rd grade at a private school on the outskirts of Jalalabad. She is living in an IDP camp, where her parents arrived before her birth and settled permanently. Her father died two years ago, and her mother married again, becoming the second wife of a neighbour. The stepfather does not want her to go to school. He beats her frequently, and she tries to hide from him and lives in constant fear of his tempers. But Aisha wants to continue school, and with support from her mother, she manages to do that in secret, without letting her stepfather know.

Sometimes children are the sole breadwinners of the family, particularly when their parents have reached an age that makes it more difficult for them to compete with younger persons for daily wage labour, or if health problems prevent them from going to work. This puts a high responsibility on still very young shoulders, literally leaving them with no choices.

> "*I have friends, but no time to meet them. I like to play, but have no time to do it. I have to feed my family, and that is what takes all my time.*" (16-year-old boy and the main breadwinner of a 12-headed family, enrolled in vocational training with Medair, Kabul)

In light of these difficulties, access to vocational training programmes and basic literacy courses may be helpful to build up human capital and to enable potential access to steadier sources of income in the future. However, following up beyond the end of a programme cycle will be important to judge lasting effects of such programmes.

In the face of constant cash-flow problems, taking loans is often the only way to meet daily requirements and basic needs, resulting in high levels of indebtedness. Access to loans has become increasingly difficult for many. People encounter trouble in paying back their debts and do not easily find creditors. "Nobody is putting trust in us anymore" was often expressed in all three cities.

Sources of credit are often diversified, with women having different supplies than men. Establishing a friendly relationship with shopkeepers is certainly one of the most important strategies of securing food intake without sufficient cash at hand. This is mainly done by women, who build relationships with two or three retailers to broaden choices and opportunities to access loans and food assistance. Men try to approach friends and

neighbours or, if they happen to have a job, their employers, though often without great success. Generally, the extended family serves as a basic security net, but more often than not, it is not possible to extract material support from close relatives. Either there is limited potential to do so, or relations are already disturbed because of adverse living conditions. External sources of credit in many cases are increasingly gaining more importance for securing cash than relying on support from the extended family, which is often perceived as not being very reliable.

Further strategies to cope with loss of income noted by all the study participants include:

- Begging in the streets (mainly carried out by women and children and to a lesser extent by men);
- Selling physical assets to meet urgent needs;
- Reducing the number of rented rooms to save on rent; and
- Getting involved in black market activities.

Women from Kabul enrolled in cash for work programmes by CARE stated, "We are doing things that are on the dark side of society. If our children and relatives would know about that, they probably will kill us." Their activities were not specified, but it can be assumed that they referred to stealing and possibly even prostitution.

Generally, employment opportunities for women are very limited. A kind of "cultural vulnerability" leaves little space for them. With their mobility harshly restricted, some women may manage to find work as servants, cleaning staff, or carpet weavers, but more choices hardly exist. Having found a job, women have to carry the double burden of productive and reproductive activities, especially when there are no or too young daughters to assist with household chores. This tends to make women in particular vulnerable to health problems.

Another widespread and sometimes humiliating method to raise cash is what is often referred to as the "disposal of daughters." Young girls are treated like a commodity and are valued for the money they may bring in as a bride price. This can have devastating consequences for mental and physical health, especially when they are sold to a cruel husband, who beats his wife and children regularly. This has been reported frequently, and intra-household relations are put under high pressure, with women and children usually the ones to suffer.

Spatial differences

Location-specific coping strategies try to take advantage of local opportunities to minimise the impacts of adversity. In Kabul, many people decided to move to the remote hilltop areas far away from basic services and infrastructure. Their attempts to escape the high and often unaffordable prices for housing have facilitated the emergence of the vulnerable neighbourhoods in Kabul identified by ACF.[30]

In Jalalabad, agricultural wage labour plays a significant role in supporting urban livelihoods. In most discussions it was reported that people work for comparatively high incomes in the many poppy fields of Nangarhar District. Leasing land for subsistence production near the city is also an option, though availability is scarce and access difficult. The proximity to Pakistan allows for work abroad, but finding employment there seems to be rather difficult. In most discussions, participants reported that only a few family members who tried to find an income source in Pakistan succeeded in doing so. However, the closeness to Pakistan offers different, very risky, and potentially life-threatening

[30] ACF, 2004, op cit.

choices belonging to the black market economy. Smuggling heroin is an option taken out of necessity by many. Margins might possibly be high, but risks are as well. For instance, a seven-year-old boy from Jalalabad reported that his brother was shot dead by police forces in Pakistan while being caught smuggling heroin.

In contrast to Jalalabad, the livelihoods of many urban poor and vulnerable in Herat significantly rely on remittances sent from household members working in Iran. Employment opportunities for most people going to Iran are restricted to casual and manual labour, but the possibility to earn cash has led to distinct migration patterns and the emergence of transnational networks. In contrast to the other two cities, women in Herat sometimes find access to home-based and low-paid work opportunities, like removing the shells from pistachios, taking out hair from animal skins before tanning or weaving carpets.

Who is susceptible to loss of income and indebtedness?

People with less competitive power, such as the elderly, people with disabilities and other health problems, and women in general are particularly susceptible to loss of income and indebtedness. Elderly and disabled men cannot compete with the young and healthy for casual labour, and their households may face regular income crises. Female-headed households are especially vulnerable to loss of income, but their capacity to cope is widely determined by the respective household situation and not primarily by their belonging to a certain social group. For instance, it makes a huge difference for a female-headed household if a functioning social support network in the nuclear and extended family can be maintained or, in contrast, if a widow is facing deteriorating household relations. In the first example, sons may regularly send remittances from abroad, and the family may find some support from the husband's brother. In contrast, in the second case, relatives of the deceased husband may try to take hold of belongings and the widow may have to face the abuses and sometimes beatings of drug-addicted sons. Both extremes have been reported (see Box 2), which throws light on the existence of sometimes huge differences within the same social group. Similar variations can be observed in families headed by the elderly or people with disabilities.

Box 2. Jobless in Herat

Jalil, 38 years old, is living in a squatter settlement on the outskirts of Herat City. He is unemployed; his last regular job was as a construction worker about two years ago. His three sons, aged 7, 11 and 14, are currently keeping the household running, with the youngest working for a local blacksmith, the 11-year-old selling potato chips in the streets and the oldest driving a wheelbarrow, vending fruits and vegetables, sometimes in changing shifts with his father. The eldest son is the only one in the whole family who infrequently managed to go to school and received basic education. There are two daughters as well, 9 and 16. The older daughter weaves carpets and the younger assists her mother in doing household chores and with her little home-based income. The mother peels pistachios for a local trader, at a rate of 10 Afghanis (US$0.20) for four kilos. They all live in a single room, but somehow they manage the situation, as they were able to make a deal with their generous landlord, who agreed to reduce the monthly rent until Jalil finds a new job. Above that, the landlord provided a low-interest loan to his tenants, which was mainly used to pay expenses for treatment and medicine for the eldest daughter, who has recently developed a health problem. She has been weaving carpets daily now for more than one and a half years, and has nervousness from the exhausting and demanding work. Her eyes are flickering, she has constant headaches, but her income from carpets is still needed. Jalil tries very hard; sometimes he finds employment for a week or so, but that does not help much. He went to Iran in search for work, but was treated badly there and does not want to go back. His good relations with friends do not help either, as all of them face similar situations. Jalil decided to marry off his elder daughter as soon as possible, so that there will be a mouth less to feed, a considerable sum of money from the bride price, and a solution to her health problems. However, now that she is sick, he worries he will not get a good price for her. Jalil is ashamed of letting his sons do the work, but there is not much he can do. He will try to find a job, but the overall situation appears rather hopeless to him.

These facts indicate that the respective asset base of each household and its composition, and not the social group per se, widely determine the success or failure of coping strategies and adjacent levels of vulnerability. Generally, human capital assets — health and education — are significant determinants for a household's vulnerability to income failure.

4.2.2 The risk of food insecurity and "hidden hunger"

> *"Food is our biggest problem everyday. We never have fruit and meat, only bread. My husband and my children work so hard, but often they have to go to bed hungry."* (30-year-old woman recently returned from Pakistan, Kabul)

The question of food security is not inseparable from loss of income, because in urban areas sufficient nourishment depends on whether a household can afford to buy enough food. In the absence of subsistence production, levels of cash income, in combination with fluctuating food prices, are the most important factors influencing household supplies. However, the ample evidence of existing malnutrition and "hidden hunger" encountered during fieldwork, i.e., a diet based on food that is cheap and filling but deficient in essential vitamins and micronutrients, puts forth the vital question of how to secure adequate nutritional intake for those vulnerable to food insecurity.

The architecture of urban food systems in the three cities varied to a certain extent, but it can be safely stated that there seems to be no overall food shortage in these locations. Exposure to food insecurity is not so much a matter of supply, but of not having the means to obtain enough and diversified food. It is perhaps helpful at this point to have a brief look at Armatya Sen's classical treatise and account of why food insecurity occurs in spite of sufficient supply.[31] Central to his argument is the process of transforming endowments into entitlements, also referred to as "e-mapping." Put simply, households or individuals have to translate the assets over which they are able to exercise command into entitlements, which in turn enable them to improve their "capabilities" and to satisfy basic needs and enhance their well-being. Entitlements have been originally defined as "alternative bundles of commodities," i.e., goods and services that can be obtained with a given set of endowments using the "totality of rights and opportunities" available in a specific context. Thus, entitlements more broadly refer to institutional settings and mechanisms in the shape of legal frameworks and specific forms of state action to protect entitlements. Apart from that, there exist also what has been termed "extended entitlements," i.e., socially determined (indigenous security institutions) and non-legal entitlements (black economy, theft, riots) and non-entitlement transfers (charity).[32]

What is important in the context of urban food security is the ability of an individual or household to render its endowments into effective command over food, be it via direct access or exchange relations, through mobilising resources out of social networks, through state support or through humanitarian assistance. This has become increasingly difficult in urban Afghanistan. Entitlements for many people have declined as a result of income loss, high pressure on network relations, the almost non-existence of state-derived entitlements and inevitably limited access to assistance programmes. The urban poor and vulnerable are not capable of making sufficient use of their asset base to obtain command over food, leading to the observed problems of malnutrition and hidden hunger. In the words of Drèze and Sen:

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[31] Sen, A. *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1981.
[32] Watts, M. J. "Development at the Millennium: Malthus, Marx and the politics of alternatives." *Geographische Zeitschrift* 2000. 88(2): 67-93.

> "*The life of a person can be seen as a sequence of things the person does, or states of being he or she achieves … 'Capability' refers to the alternative combinations of functionings from which a person can choose. Thus, the notion of capability is essentially one of freedom — the range of options a person has in deciding what kind of a life to lead … poverty is, thus, ultimately a matter of capability deprivation.*"[33]

Capability defines the wellness of a person's or household's state of being as being related to possible choices — and deprivation of these choices ultimately leads to certain states of vulnerability. Put simply, from the entitlements point of view, the situation of being vulnerable or secure can thus be expressed in terms of the range of options an individual or household has.

Hidden hunger results from a diet comprised of cheap rice and bread and a subsequent insufficient intake of micronutrients and vitamins. This can lead to a general sensitivity to health problems, which eventually results in the death of children.

> "*We are so weak - my children are looking unhealthy, they are always sick. My one son died of illness because I did not have the money to pay for his medicine, and now my second son is also very ill. I only have this garbage-picking work at the moment, and the income is not sufficient to pay for my rent and for food and for medicine. It is so sad, we are living like animals, perched together in our little room, and we are never happy in our family, never.*" (30-year-old man, enrolled in cash for work by Medair)

Coping with food insecurity and "hidden hunger"

Coping strategies dealing with food insecurity parallel the ones applied to tackle loss of income. Employment of child labour, finding access to loans, begging and mobilising social resources are the most common strategies utilised in all three cities. Begging takes different forms. It is generally perceived as a humiliating practice, and often women and children rely upon begging as a last resort. They beg in the streets for money, at graveyards and mosques for charity food, and at restaurants and hotels for leftovers.

However, it is social resources that gain critical importance in the context of food security. In many cases, families in short supply of food try to cut down the number of people eating at the table. For instance, children are sent to join meals with relatives and daughters are given away in marriage at an early age with the hopes of receiving a high bride price. Another common coping strategy is the tendency to skip one meal a day in general. Women and daughters often are the ones who eat last, and eat what has been left by the male household members.

> "*There is never enough to eat there for me and in the nights I am dreaming of food.*" (13-year-old girl, Herat)

Again, women are very active in establishing friendly relations with shopkeepers and receiving support from them. Sometimes shopkeepers will give away otherwise unsaleable foodstuff, like half-rotten fruits or vegetables. It appears that in spite of mobility restrictions, women are important managers of social relations, on which they can rely for support infrequently in case of need. These relations include not only shopkeepers, but also neighbours, extended family or friends. The latter are especially important not even in terms of getting material benefit, but for providing moral support.

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[33] Drèze, J. and Sen, A. *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press. 1995.

> "*A poor [person] cannot help another poor [person] by giving him money which he does not have, but by behaving in a good manner and by helping in other ways, like listening to him and sharing whatever there is to be shared.*" (40-year-old woman enrolled in cash for work by CARE, Kabul)

However, many women do not have much chance to make friends other than their direct neighbours, and in that respect, participation in NGO programmes proves to be quite helpful. Apart from providing much needed income or food assistance, they unintentionally help to establish new social ties among women (and men) not known to each other.

Apart from strategies of eating less and consuming cheaper staple foods, exposure to food insecurity can lead to a widespread depletion of assets, further exacerbating the situation, sometimes giving way to sarcasm.

> "*I have sold my kitchen pots — there is anyway no use for them.*" (40-year-old widow, Jalalabad)

Spatial Differences

Exposure to food insecurity exists in all three cities, but coping may vary locally to a certain extent. In Kabul, begging for food appears to occur on a larger scale than in the other two locations. There are not many attempts being made among participants of group discussions in Kabul to maintain kitchen gardens for supporting food supply, though there might be potential to do so.[34] However, time does not allow that, since most household members are continuously seeking cash money, there is no money for inputs, and most do not have the space anyway.

In Jalalabad, on the other hand, people actively try to find even a small piece of land outside town, on which they cultivate food crops for subsistence production. Access is fairly limited, however, and possible only with connections to landowners, which most of the vulnerable populations are lacking. Some interviewees reported to have been able to plant a little garden, and the lease for the land plus the cultivation work required were still less than what is needed to purchase similar amounts of food in the market. Households who succeed in planting food gardens significantly decrease their risk of food insecurity, though in absence of proper draining systems, watering the field poses constant problems.

Herat does not offer these possibilities, and, like Kabul, people exposed to food insecurity are usually unable to produce their own food, either due to lack of space, time or resources. Thus, kitchen gardens are not present on a great scale, and there appear to be no significant differences to those coping strategies found in all locations.

Who is susceptible to food insecurity and hidden hunger?

Vulnerability to food insecurity occurs when a household does not easily find the means, legal or otherwise, to translate its assets into access to food. Some reasons for this have been identified already — the specific characteristics of urban labour markets, widespread depletion of assets, and an overall decline in entitlements. Again, these factors do not apply to a single group, but rather need to be explored on the household level, which is probably the only meaningful unit of analysis in assessing food security and vulnerability in general. Indicators for food insecurity are household size, household composition, dependency rate, diversification of income sources and the constitution of the

[34] See ACF, 2004, op cit.

Box 3. Entitlement failure
Shirin, a 25-year-old widow with three children, lives in one room on a hillside in Kabul. Her husband died one year ago in a car accident, leaving her without any constant income. They accumulated little savings, which have been used up during her first year of widowhood. Her eldest son, seven years old, now roams the streets all day in search of money — he sometimes polishes shoes, but mostly he begs. He goes without breakfast and has to take care of lunch on his own, usually he obtains some leftovers from a few restaurant waiters who know him. The other kids, twin daughters aged four years, are already doing household work and are often alone, as Shirin tries to find money. She has no regular income; she is begging and trying to access NGO programmes, but so far without success. Water is far from her home, so she needs considerable time and effort to get it, reducing possibilities to realise income. Her younger brother sometimes passes by with small amounts of money or food, but his situation is also difficult and he is not able to mobilise much help for her. Similarly, some neighbours assist the young family in their efforts to survive. What is needed is regular employment, but in the one year of her widowhood, she has not had any opportunities. "We are used to being hungry, but I am confident that our situation will get better," she says with a smile of hope. And it this hope that carries her forward in spite of all difficulties.

breadwinner. Bigger households may face difficulties in securing sufficient food intake for all, especially when there is a limited number of productively working household members and thus a high dependency rate. Household composition in terms of gender and health also influence income opportunities and thus levels of food security. Diverse income sources may decrease food insecurity, but high reliance on child work as an asset has negative effects on levels of human capital and poses the risk of perpetuating vulnerability into the next generation. Households headed by women, people with disabilities or elderly persons seem to be explicitly exposed to the risk of food insecurity. However, looking inside the household reveals rather specific vulnerabilities. When there is a shortage of food, girls and women generally eat last or not at all, which is even tolerated, because "we do not work, but our brothers do," as one 20-year-old woman in Jalalabad noted. This problem of eating less is true for other members also considered "unproductive," like children with disabilities and the elderly. Generally, functioning social networks have the potential capacity to act as critical safety nets and to help reduce food insecurity.

4.2.3 The risk of deteriorating health

> "*Health? I am not healthy, my children are not healthy, how can you be healthy the way we have to live? We have no house, no clean water, we have no oven, we do not have enough to eat, we have no money for medicine. We can only pray to god that our situation will get better, what else is there we can do?*" (50-year-old man with physical disability who gets bicycle training from AABRAR, Kabul)

The risks noted so far have a clear health dimension — loss of income and food insecurity both have negative consequences on physical and mental well-being. Moreover, these risks may compound one another. A lack of income prevents investing in health care, which in turn may lead to illness. Poor health of the main breadwinner of a household may result in further income loss and may put livelihoods of all members of a household at risk. Temporary ill health or chronic disease thus decisively influence livelihood strategies and levels of vulnerability, especially when household members constantly need care and medical treatment. The human capital of health thus turns out to be a major determinant of household vulnerability.

Facilities for health care are present in all three cities studied, though, as the ACF survey states, overall quality of public health services in Kabul is very poor and ineffective.[35] Apart from that, access is limited, as costs of treatment either usually surpass the financial capacities of the poor and vulnerable, or facilities are located far away from the vulnerable neighbourhoods.[36] Alternative, good quality health care in private clinics are inaccessible to the poor, as consultation fees may already exceed the daily income realised through casual labour.[37] Without basic resources in place, many households do not attempt to seek professional medical treatment. It is more likely that people approach pharmacies directly and seek advice to their problems in order to to avoid expensive prescription fees of clinics or doctors.

Coping with deteriorating health

The urban vulnerable have a number of means to cope with health risks, similar to those coping strategies noted before. Obtaining loans for treatment, reducing the labour force to provide constant care for household members in need and trying to mobilise social relations for support are certainly the most important coping strategies. However, unfavourable living and working conditions make coping with health risks a difficult and in many cases unsuccessful task. Experience of death of often still young family members is abundant. Reports of not having had the means to cope with sickness and disease often point to economical constraints.

> "*There was no money for treatment, and nobody I knew could help me. I could not stand the pain to see how my son was slowly dying, and there was nothing I could do.*"

If a sufficient amount could be raised, it was often too late.

> "*My friend loaned me money, but I spent it all on medicine and my son is still very sick.*"[38]

These constraints were experienced by members of focus groups in all three cities, and there appear to be no significant spatial differences in that respect. The exposure to an impoverished environment in all locations poses risks that are a general matter of capability deprivation: "Being poor is hazardous to health."[39]

Who is susceptible to deteriorating health?

Susceptibility to health risks is accelerated by hazards such as poor housing, lack of sanitary facilities, defective water supply or inadequate waste and sewage disposal. People living in poor housing facilities without heating systems suffer from cold and problems posed by burning intoxicant materials indoors, like plastic and garbage. Unclean and limited water supply ("We have to drink water with mosquito larva," notes one woman in Herat) and latent risks to food insecurity do not help to improve the situation. Persons living in areas without close access to basic needs and services are in particular vulnerable to health risks, as also has been affirmed by ACF for Kabul.[40]

Young children and adolescents can be critically affected by insufficient nutritional intake, and combined with hard work and little recreational time, are vulnerable to deteriorating

[35] See also Waldman, R. and Hanif, H. *The Public Health System in Afghanistan*. Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. 2002.
[36] ACF, 2004, op cit.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Reports from two men enrolled in cash for work by Medair and Care respectively.
[39] Wagner, 1998 cited in van Dillen, op cit.
[40] ACF, 2004, op cit.

health. Especially girls who work at carpet looms from an early age face problems of nervousness, certain "tics" and problems with eyesight because of the constant high concentration required for that filigree work.

War victims, the disabled and women in general have a certain disposition to experience mental health problems, caused by overall worrying about household situations, problems of physical health or humiliating experiences in the past. In focus group discussions, mental health problems and depression were reported frequently, especially by people who suffer from physical disabilities caused by accidents, mines or who had polio in childhood. It has been stated that for those dealing with rampant uprooting, war and destruction, "the majority of mental health needs could probably be met by a return to normal life."[41] However, this is not easily possible for people having to endure poverty as well as disabilities. It became obvious during much discussion with disabled men and women that a huge number of affected people experience depression and thoughts of suicide. In fact, almost everybody knows someone who has attempted suicide, and the reasons for this are not seen in the nature of disability itself, but rather in the public and intra-family attitudes towards people with disabilities.

> "*We are not treated like a full person, but as inferior beings. Nobody understands our situation; there is no support of any kind.*" (30-year-old mine victim, Kabul)

Box 4. Taking care of the dependent

Shima is the mother of seven children. Together with her husband and three unmarried sisters, they share a single and windowless room in Kabul, arranged through relations from their native village in Bamyan District. She is participating in a cash for work programme and three of her five daughters are weaving carpets. Two sons are doing daily wage labour and are currently employed in construction work. They do not have much at their disposal, but somehow it is enough for the 2000 Af (US$40) rent for their room and to feed the family. But future problems already show their first signs. Shima's husband has for many years required nursing assistance, as he is permanently suffering from a two-year imprisonment during the *mujaheddin* era, when he was seriously beaten. Apart from lasting physical problems, he also has mental disorders. One of Shima's daughters now faces health problems because of the demanding work — she cannot concentrate anymore, she has become very nervous, and has since stopped work. Her income is missing now, and apart from that, she needs care and medical treatment, putting further time and pressure on the household. Fortunately, Shima has good relations in their neighbourhood, and friends are now there often, helping to take care of the father and the daughter.

In public realms, there is just no infrastructure addressing the specific needs of people with disabilities, and transport especially is a major problem. Apart from that, dissatisfaction and even anger about the lack of respect towards them is prevalent. People feel that their problems are just not taken seriously and they react angrily or withdraw from the world. This withdrawal is heightened because many lack the intra-household support needed to face their situation.

> "*I am a burden for my family, and often I think I should rather be dead than make life for them more difficult.*" (19-year-old woman suffering from polio, Kabul)

Alarming statements of this kind are not unusual and point to the depressing situation disabled women in particular face. They almost never leave the house, have little to no contact with the outside world, and with other problems prevalent in the household, often lack the attention needed for tackling their mental difficulties.

[41] Waldman and Hanif, op cit., 12.

The inferiority felt by the disabled was akin to the situations many women find themselves in. Exciting discussions occurred with women in Jalalabad — generally considered one of the more conservative areas in Afghanistan — with regard to women's rights and freedom of movement. Some of their statements pointed to the more general difficulties and sources of mental problems many women have to face in Afghan society.

> "*We do not pass time, but time passes us. We do not have any rights; men decide everything for us. We are not even allowed to breathe without a piece of cotton between us and the world.*" (25-year-old woman with polio, Jalalabad)

Powerlessness and boredom are a fertile source for mental problems. Young girls who are not allowed to attend school, who may leave the house only occasionally, and who do not even have television are definitely at risk to experience depression. These heavy restrictions are accompanied by oppressive sexualised aspects of male dominance.

> "*We do not go out often, but when we are in the streets, men look at us as if we are kebab. They want to eat us; they see us only as wives, never as a mother or a daughter*." (35-year-old woman, mother of a disabled girl, Jalalabad)

4.2.4 The risk of social disintegration

> "*We avoid the world out there. We have our own world, which is in our dreams and our imagination.*" (20-year-old woman suffering from polio, Jalalabad)

The potentials of social networking for livelihood security have been so far referred to only sporadically. Yet in the absence of formal employment, difficulties in feeding the family, abundant health risks and the manifold problems of capability deprivation, resources acquired through social relations are of critical importance. In fact, for many these may represent the last alternatives available, and a probable breakdown of existing social relations poses a very serious risk.

The importance of intangible resources like household relations and wider patterns of social interaction for sustaining livelihood security have been widely acknowledged. Usually condensed by using the term "social capital," these relations and interactions are seen as crucial for enabling and sustaining mutual support, not only, but especially in times of, crisis. Social assets thereby are commonly referred to as the capability of individuals or households to secure resources such as time, information, money and in-kind gifts, by virtue of membership in social networks or larger social structures.[42] Though the concept of social capital is rather controversial in terms of its potential virtues and the conditions enabling its formation,[43] there is little doubt about the important function social relations have for mitigating effects of exposure to adverse conditions. For the poor and vulnerable who do not have much else to rely upon, their social relations are certainly one of the most important assets and social capital can literally become the "resource of last resort."[44] Mechanisms that endanger the quality of social relations among the poor and vulnerable in Afghan cities may thus have highly critical effects.

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[42] Landolt, P. "Eine Abwägung der Grenzen Sozialen Kapitals: Lehren aus den transnationalen Gemeinde-Initiativen El Salvadors." In Kessl, F. and Otto, H.U. (Hg.) *Soziale Arbeit und Soziales Kapital*. Zur Kritik lokaler Gemeinschaftlichkeit, Opladen 2004. Forthcoming.

[43] Schütte, S. "Soziale Netzwerke als räumliche Orientierungssysteme. Konstruktionen von Raum und Lokalität der Wäscher von Banaras." *Studies in Development Geography, Vol. 23*. Saarbrücken: Verlag für Entwicklungspolitik. 2003.

[44] Department for International Development. *Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets*. Available at: www.livelihoods.org/info/info_guidancesheets.html. 1999. Accessed 7 March 2004.

Social capital is inherent in the relationships one has with others. These relationships may well function as a means of minimising risks to livelihood security, as has been documented for different contexts,[45] but to do so requires constant care and efforts to foster their maintenance. Networking as a strategy of self-help to mitigate existing inequalities or to compensate for a lack of human or material assets does not develop easily and is certainly difficult to "inject" from outside — rather, its perpetuation is time-consuming, highly contextual and comes with strings attached. To keep up social networks requires investments of time and effort that people struggling in survival situations and with poverty may not be able to commit to.

The basic social network in urban Afghanistan is certainly the household and the extended family. These institutions have an important role to play in securing livelihoods and potentially act as short-term shock absorbers long before outside assistance may be retrieved. In urban Afghanistan, as a consequence of widespread uprooting and poverty, inter- and intra-household relations are put under high pressure and potentially endanger their function as basic safety nets. This is a finding confirmed by Hunte in her notes on the livelihoods of the urban poor in Kabul as well, where some respondents and especially widows stated that they were helpless victims of domestic violence and intra-household conflicts.[46]

Participants of all of the focus groups reported serious social problems arising out of their living situations. The constant pressure to secure sufficient income and the difficulties to meet basic needs often have negative impacts on intra-household relations.

> "*When I had a job, everything was fine; we had good relations in our house. But it was only temporary, and now I am at home and everything gets on my nerves. I am not able to feed my family, and I am angry about that and then I am beating my wife, because she is complaining about that. What can I do? Give me a job, then everything will be good again.*" (35-year-old man living in a squatter settlement, Jalalabad)

Accounts like these are frequent, and especially women report increasing domestic violence against them and children. Aggression is often accompanied by drug abuse of husbands and elder sons, culminating in a serious addiction that further breaks down household relations, while leaving the burden of household survival to women and children.

> "*My husband takes heroin now. He is of no use for us anymore and we have to see how we can manage without him and the money he spends for his drug*s." (35-year-old woman living in a squatter settlement, Jalalabad)

As such, there are signs of a trend towards eroding intra-family relations when members are often not strong enough to cope with the multiple pressures posed by capability deprivation. Heightened reliance on the extended family is a possible way to deal with intra-household disturbances, though the capacity to do so is often limited. "We are all the same; there is not much that our family can do for us," one participant noted. This is perceived as a general problem, also in terms of social relations beyond the family. People strive to belong — there is what may be called a "struggle for affiliation," — but this struggle is restricted to bonded segments of the urban society, to the networks of

[45] Ibid.
[46] Hunte, P. *Some notes on the livelihoods of the urban poor in Kabul, Afghanistan*. Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. 2004.

survivors trying to make their living in the urban coping economy. Bridging and linking social relations are almost non-existent.

> "*We do not know the powerful and that is why we do not find employment.*" (25-year-old man enrolled in vocational training by ARCS, Kabul)

One can thus argue that without sound material footing, network relations of the poor and vulnerable are hardly able to lift them out of their situation. Constant struggles and efforts to realise incomes are hindering people to take care of their relations; there is often just not enough time for it. This general observation has been asserted for a variety of contexts in different so-called developing countries.

> "*Without basic resources and security in place it is difficult if not impossible for poor families to sustain self-help and mutual assistance.*"[47]

While the urban networks of survival may not have the capacity to improve life chances significantly, they do keep people alive and may also enable moderate access to opportunities. A functioning family with good relations to their extended kin is likely to be more successful in dealing with ill health and old age. In case of emergencies, some measures of self-help can be enforced easier, like sending children to relatives on a more permanent basis, or raising small amounts of money from various kinship sources.

Establishing loose relations beyond the household may help to find employment, diversify income and strengthen social integration. Existing levels of social capital are likely to increase when being employed and taken care of. This is obligatory — if these social assets are not constantly cultivated, they will decay.

Coping with social disintegration

How do people try to resist the trends that weaken their social footing in the urban society of Afghanistan? While many of the household level coping strategies were uniform across the three cities, there are spatial differences with respect to the work of community-based organisations (see below).

Rather alarming coping strategies were reported as well. Some participants mentioned non-legal entitlements are being used, i.e., getting involved in black market activities and finding access to smuggler networks. Others referred to the seemingly always present possibility to join terror networks[48] and profit from destructive activities.

> "*If somebody will give me money to put a bomb somewhere, I will do it. That is how it is. My situation is so, that I will do everything that gives me money, and why not join Al Qaeda? At least they will provide me some benefit.*" (35-year-old man, disabled mine victim, Kabul)

In the absence of formal social security systems and the quite common perception of malfunctioning assistance and government work — which in the eyes of the affected people have not been able to improve the situation of the majority of Afghans — these radical alternatives seem to be an option. They reveal overall dissatisfaction and actively link the current state of affairs in the country to global developments. There is a catchphrase making its round through the country, a phrase which has been repeated

[47] Beall, J. "Valuing Social Resources or Capitalising on Them? Limits to Pro-Poor Urban Governance in Nine Cities of the South." *International Planning Studies*. 2001. 6(4): 357-375. Available at: http://www.bradford.ac.uk/acad/dppc/GTP/beall.pdf. Accessed 12 January 2002.

[48] These networks are also characterised by a high level of (negative) social capital, which gives evidence to the highly contextual quality of the term.

frequently among male groups in all three cities visited: "Al Qaeda, Al Fayda" — the terror network as a source of benefit for the people. Explanations for its prominence among many have been given as well.

> "*Only because of our manifold problems, Al Qaeda has so many people working for them. But these people are not terrorists, they are doing it out of despair. If there will be jobs and sufficient income and adequate housing, there will be no more terrorism in Afghanistan.*" (45-year-old man with a disability, Jalalabad)

In this way, the flowering of terrorism is seen as directly related to unemployment, poverty and deprivation.

However, there are also more promising examples of how people in Afghan cities try to cope with adversity, and they refer to the production of social capital by establishing community-based organisations, as evidenced in the next section.

Spatial differences

A social network of the disabled in Kabul

As has been discussed above, people with disabilities are at comparatively high risk to experience social disintegration in public spheres as well as in their own families. Only very recently, a network of the disabled has been formed in Kabul to counter these effects.[49] A delegation of people with disabilities met with Afghan president Hamid Karzai to complain about the Ministry of Martyrs and the Disabled, who in their view was not doing enough to serve their needs. The president offered his support and arranged a house for the disabled, which now serves as a community centre, located in the neighbourhood of Shah Shahid. This social network of people with disabilities is self-organised. It developed out of self-motivation and it tries to establish measures of mutual social support. However, this turned out to be quite difficult, and demonstrates how social capital does not automatically allow access to further resources. Members of the network do not have enough tangible resources to potentially redistribute among each other, e.g., in the form of rotating money-saving schemes. Instead, the association is grounded on forms of "bounded solidarity," and it is not able to provide more than mutual moral support for people entrapped in similar situations. This role, however, is appreciated and an important source of much needed self-respect. People are proud that they are able to run an organisation. With an inability to compete in the urban labour market, many disabled persons have sufficient time at their disposal, so the people gather together daily at their new centre, where they discuss their situations, problems, and possible ways to solve these. "We want to fight for our rights and for equality" is a kind of *leitmotif* for them, but how they will actually be able to do that remains questionable. Although there is now a place to meet — where they are able to organise collective activities, like sports, games and protests — people feel that is not enough. There remains a certain feeling of helplessness, of not having the means to lift themselves out of their unfavourable situation, in spite of all efforts.

More generally, this example of a still young network shows that social capital is not just an idle resource, which emerges automatically when people get together. It needs steady input and above that either a certain material base or the existence of vertical, "linking" relations to formal institutions or the "powerful" in order to be able to mobilise access to tangible resources. Though the community centre has a lot of input and a supposedly huge

[49] The National Association of the National Union for the Support of the Disabled and the Dependents of Afghan Martyrs, established in 2003.

membership,[50] there are no bridging relations to other segments of society and to formal institutions already established.

Nevertheless, the example shows that there is a need for community structures and facilities that enable collective activities. An own place may already be helpful for many, and although that does not immediately improve situations, it will help to address the important matters of self-respect and dignity. These needs have also been expressed by various participants in women groups, both disabled and healthy.

> "*We want a place which is our own, where we can be together and where we can learn.*" (20-year-old woman with polio)

Community-based organisations established for and maintained by women are not existent on a great scale in urban Afghanistan and are not easy to build given present cultural constraints. Most women participating in the discussions felt unable to do anything, but expressed the need to have such structures. In particular, women with disabilities were demanding a "place of their own" where they would have access to membership in a group, where they would have something to belong to, and be able to empower themselves to express their needs. The lack of social belonging is a crucial mechanism facilitating deprivation, and this is especially true for the "hidden" or "invisible" individuals, who are rather locked up in their homes.

Box 5. A case of social exclusion
Nilufar, 19 years old, suffers from polio, and is currently enrolled in a vocational training programme by AABRAR in Kabul. She grew up without getting to know much about the world outside her house. She hardly went out at all, she did not go to school and there is no television. Her father and brothers did not care too much about her; only her mother and elder sister looked after her well-being. Now that she is able to visit a course and that she is together with other women facing similar problems she has a whole new perspective on life. She feels that she is actually able to do something useful, if there is only the opportunity to do so. "AABRAR is closer to me than my father and my brothers" she says. In AABRAR's training course she gets respect and is treated as a full person for the first time in her life. For her a community centre, a place where she can go whenever she wants and where she can meet new friends, would be a great improvement. But it has to be close to her house, she says, as her mobility is restricted physically and socially.

The Shuras of Jalalabad

Whereas the network of people with disabilities came into existence through their own efforts, the recent revitalisation of the traditional *shura* system (local city councils) in Jalalabad was implemented out of an initiative by the Abdul Haq Foundation, a Jalalabad-based NGO. This system is an attempt to create social responsibility and to counter the evolution of a "donor mentality" among the Afghan population and at the same time to involve local communities in decision-making processes. As a result, a variety of different councils have been initiated, consisting of elected members who represent either a specific area, like five districts of Jalalabad city or 22 in Nangarhar District, or a specific community, i.e., the youth, women, IDPs, religious minorities (Hindus, Sikhs), nomads or businessmen. These newly developed *shuras* meet frequently and try to establish measures of self-help, jurisdiction, and problem solving, as well as try to promote collective activities in their locality or their community. The latter efforts have included cleaning and maintenance of neighbourhoods or public awareness campaigns for the upcoming elections in Afghanistan. In facilitating these activities, the *shuras* are supposed to work

[50] The network is said to have 24,000 members in Kabul, with branches in each district of the Afghan capital.

closely together with the municipality and government, enabling constant interaction and exchange of ideas and plans.

However, the main problems of these new networks mirror those of the disability organisation. This became clear during two meetings with members from the Jalalabad city council and with the IDP camp *shura* located on the city outskirts.[51] These discussions revealed a lack of material resources and economic capacity to, for instance, improve the infrastructure of the IDP camp or to establish a school building there. People make an effort; they meet every week and discuss their situation and how it may be improved, but they do not have the financial means to make their ideas a reality. Further, these councils have to face mistrust from the poorer sections of society. "*Shuras* do nothing for us" is a tenor heard in every discussion, and though in Jalalabad these councils are definitely not exclusively made up of local elites, the attitude remains. One member of the IDP council explained why, and raised the prevalent matter of limited material resources.

> "*I am responsible for 300 families in our camp. Last month, one NGO gave us rice to distribute, and I started to do so. But it turned out that there was sufficient rice only for 30 families, and of course, the others were angry about me and started complaining. But what can I do? I cannot make food out of dust.*"

Apart from these constraints, the *shura* members certainly appreciate the idea of being involved in decision-making, and a number of NGOs actually approach these councils for identification of their beneficiaries. This, however, seems to be rather exceptional, as the Jalalabad city council ascertained. There is a wide dissatisfaction about the way foreign assistance is delivered, and members complain about not being thoroughly involved in programme implementation and accomplishment.

The community councils are functioning well beyond external impetus. Despite their material constraints, the councils try to make the most of the potentials offered by self-reliance to overcome the current difficulties. In that, they are future-oriented and may slowly develop into rather autonomous entities closely linked to government institutions. However, it will be important to raise opportunities beyond pure communication, and to ensure that the functioning of local decision-making processes is not undermined by prevalent and potentially malevolent power structures of warlordism. There remains the problem of how to facilitate participation of the poor and vulnerable in local decision-making processes and consequently win their trust in the capacity of self-dependent community councils.

Who is susceptible to social disintegration?

Social disintegration appears on two levels — as the general phenomenon of social exclusion from human development processes and the subsequent process of social and economic marginalisation, ultimately leading to polarisation. This can be observed globally as well as in local contexts and is accelerated by poverty, when everyday life is largely absorbed by finding cash and food, and time for recreation and build-up and maintenance of social relations is limited. Vulnerable to these broader processes of social exclusion are households headed by jobless persons, those who have to rely on child labour, and those living in remote neighbourhoods far from basic services. On the intra-household level, women and especially those women with disabilities are vulnerable to social disintegration. These may have no relations at all beyond their family, and enabling access for these largely "invisible" persons to job opportunities, to education, and to public life

[51] The term IDP camp is somehow misleading, as many people have lived there for more than 10 years. It is thus a new neighbourhood of Jalalabad rather than a temporary settlement. However, there is no officially established tenure security for its inhabitants.

in general must be a top priority. Targeting of the hidden vulnerable is difficult though, and points to the fact that a more explicit focus on the household level is needed to be able to actually identify those excluded from human development in broader terms as well as on the intra-household level.

5. Key Findings and Conclusions

5.1 The "asset vulnerability" of the urban poor

As illustrated in the previous section, risks to livelihood security come in bundles, and the strategies of dealing with them simultaneously address different elements of potential risks. Coping strategies basically rely on the assets people are able to mobilise and transform into entitlements. However, it is also clear that the capabilities of people affected by multiple risks are somewhat restricted — their set of possible functionings does not always allow them to cope successfully with livelihood risks and thus makes them vulnerable. Vulnerability here reflects a state of being characterised by a certain degree of probability — the probability not to be able to cope adequately and to become poor in the future. The inclusion of a time factor is an important aspect distinguishing vulnerability from the closely related concept of poverty, and whereas the poor are usually amongst the most vulnerable, not all who are vulnerable are poor. This point is often made in the literature[52] and takes into account the possibility that individuals or households do not have the capacity to continuously cope with adversity, even if they may live above a defined poverty line. The distinction very much fits into what is perceived "on the ground" — many people who were identified as vulnerable and thus entitled to benefit from NGO programmes do see themselves as being better off at the moment due to their status as a beneficiary. Still, they all feel that danger is lingering and that their present temporary employment will not have lasting effects, as a matter of the weak endowment base they have at their command. "I do not remember the day I got new clothes, or the last time I ate meat — those who have nothing and may never ever get something, those people are poor," they say. Or "poverty is not having good hopes for the future," or "poverty is when you have to be afraid of your children's development." All statements refer to rather pessimistic future expectations.

Indicators for vulnerability to poverty may be found in the household's endowments, either their assets or the activities they pursue to cope with adversity. The following attempt to map the "asset vulnerability" of the urban poor and vulnerable in Afghanistan generally points to the mechanisms that facilitate deprivation in the present and may be harmful for future prospects. This mapping can be read as a summary of the focus group discussions in Kabul, Herat and Jalalabad, focusing on assets and coping and less on conditions. As it turns out, the specific asset vulnerabilities faced by a majority of participants in focus group discussions are neither group-specific nor confined to spatial parameters. They refer, rather, to the nature of urban coping economies in Afghanistan and the similar risks and stresses persons across the three cities are exposed to.

Vulnerability of human assets
Health and education are important determinants for vulnerability to income failure. The urban coping economies, however, are characterised by often hazardous living and working conditions and widespread illiteracy. Poor health standards are accelerated by exposure to food insecurity and the phenomenon of "hidden hunger." Low levels or absence of formal education mitigates future job opportunities and is likely to perpetuate vulnerability. Access to health and education is limited, either spatially (distance factor), or because time does not allow people to use services.

Vulnerability of social assets
Social assets often are the last available resource and can be crucial. In some cases, they may compensate for a lack of human and material assets. Involvement in the urban coping economy puts high pressure on social relations. There is not much time to maintain or to

[52] See, for example, Moser, op cit. or van Dillen, op cit.

build up new social networks. Poverty and risky coping strategies lead to domestic violence and deteriorating intra-household relations. Social disintegration, especially for women and people with disabilities, is abundant. Existing connections represent "networks of survival" that lack the ability to bridge relations to powerful actors and formal institutions and are hardly able to lift people out of poverty. The study did not find any indication of existing traditional systems of sharing and redistribution in the extended family, as has been confirmed for rural areas,[53] thus giving further evidence to a widespread fragmentation of household relations in urban Afghan settings.

Vulnerability of natural assets
Natural assets may be important in terms of urban-rural linkages. However, access to plots of land close to the city for subsistence production is highly limited and not an option for the bulk of the actors living in urban coping economies. In terms of insufficient shelter to cope with environmental hazards and harsh winters, natural conditions pose potential risks rather than serve as a source of urban livelihoods.

Vulnerability of financial assets
Financial assets are a bare necessity, as means of subsistence in urban coping economies are almost completely dependent on cash incomes, which have to be generated either directly through wage labour or indirectly through the production and sale of goods and services. This almost complete immersion in the urban cash economy, paired with the unreliable and erratic nature of urban labour markets, exposes actors to the steady risk of income failure. Survival often depends on loans and the employment of child work, exposing households to indebtedness and children to loss of their childhood and educational opportunities.

Vulnerability of physical assets
Physical assets, especially housing, are most important for securing urban livelihoods. In the urban coping economies of Afghanistan, however, ownership of houses and secure tenure rights are scarce. Rents for housing are eating up incomes, especially in Kabul, and on lands with illegally built shelters, investment rarely takes place. Destroyed and inadequate housing exposes people to health risks in winters, accelerates residential movements, and prevents housing from being a productive asset, i.e., in the form of home-based work activities. Other basic infrastructures like electricity, water supply, waste disposal, sanitation and transport facilities, especially for people with physical disabilities, are only weakly developed and pose serious problems, especially for residents of "vulnerable neighbourhoods."

Table 2 summarises the factors leading to "asset vulnerability," the reported outcomes, and the coping strategies adopted to counter the effects. These strategies are made up of a range of activities, whose changing magnitudes and intervals influence levels of urban livelihoods and vulnerability, as indicated by the +/-symbol.

5.2 Coping economies and the vulnerable poor in urban Afghanistan

Who are the vulnerable poor in Afghan cities? This vital question is not easy to answer, and this paper can provide no definitive answer. Vulnerability is a highly complex and dynamic phenomenon, whose magnitude is likely to fluctuate over time. A qualitative study such as this one can only given an indication of its current impact on the lives of different households and individuals. Thus, the first major conclusion that can be drawn from this sample is that more in-depth study needs to occur at the household level. Certainly, members of all the participating groups face some or all of the manifold risks of the urban

[53] Pain and Goodhand, op cit.

Table 2. "Asset vulnerability" in urban Afghanistan

Type of "asset vulnerability"	*Outcome*	*Coping Strategies*
Human Assets	(-) education (-) water supply (-) health care (-) food security (-) job opportunities (-) mental health	(+/-) support from social relations (+/-) negotiating work and education (+/-) access to NGO programmes (+/-) fetching water from far away
Financial Assets	(-) access to loans (-) repayment capacities of loans (-) sufficient income (-) reasonable rents for housing	(+/-) sharing shelter (+/-) "black market" work (+/-) stealing (+/-) begging (+/-) mobilising work from children (+/-) selling physical assets
Social Assets	(-) intra- and inter-household relations (-) social support mechanisms (-) care for children and elderly (-) mobility for women (-) relations to the "powerful" (-) trust in each other and in government (-) domestic peacefulness	(+/-) building community organisations (+/-) local potentials for self help (+/-) finding support beyond the extended family
Physical Assets	(-) ownership of land and houses (-) housing as a productive asset (-) water supply (-) transport infrastructure	(+/-) finding cheaper shelter in places far away from basic services and infrastructure
Environmental Assets	(-) fuel for heating (-) protection against environmental hazards	(+/-) burning garbage (+/-) building provisional shelter with plastic from the streets (+/-) searching the streets and garbage dumps for inflammables and plastic

Source: adapted from Moser, 1998

coping economy. Yet their degree of exposure definitely varies depending on the actual composition and management of livelihood portfolios. In order to assess these varying levels of vulnerability, the household rather than the broad category social group has to be the critical unit of analysis. Ways to cope and pursue livelihood strategies are diverse and cut across social groups and space, and an assessment of these needs to take into consideration seasonal adjustments and differences. Consequently, a longitudinal approach focusing on household activities and endowments seems to be the most promising method to appraise varying levels and forms of vulnerability and livelihood security, and how they are changing over time. This would also enable an investigation of the functioning and role of urban households as short-term "shock absorbers." The knowledge about this so far largely remains vague for urban areas in Afghanistan.

The second major conclusion to be drawn from the study refers to the rather encompassing nature of urban coping economies. Conditions in urban coping economies of Afghanistan are largely a-spatial and affect different social groups in different cities in a similar way. However, *inside* certain groupings, differences also exist, and it is not the

social group per se that is vulnerable, but certain households and individuals belonging to these groups. Still, regional diversities remain, and coping strategies attempt to make use of local potentials, e.g., the dense urban-rural linkages in Jalalabad or the proximity of Herat to Iran.

A third general conclusion is thus the observation that the extent to which vulnerability actually manifests itself in the lives of different households is mainly a function of respective asset bases, the composition and quality of these assets, and the actual activities pursued in making and managing livelihoods.

While this study may not be able to explore coping strategies and the processes of transforming endowments into entitlements in-depth, it is nevertheless possible to indicate certain trends and to draw attention to some general characteristics of urban coping economies in Afghanistan and the causes of vulnerability they pose to the actors involved. These sources of vulnerability can be summarised as the following:

- Immersion in the urban cash economy (commoditisation of life worlds);
- The unreliable and erratic nature of urban labour markets (widespread unemployment, loss of income);
- Insufficient economic security;
- Hazardous living environments (inadequate housing situation, water supply, sanitation, waste disposal, energy supply);
- Lack of land tenure rights;
- Inadequate access to health care;
- Reliance on child work;
- Latent food insecurity and “hidden hunger;”
- Illiteracy and limited access to formal education;
- Pressure on intra-household relations;
- Lack of social networks; and
- Feelings of powerlessness.

These are the causes for current or future vulnerability, and actors are not exposed to isolated sources, but are susceptible to a complex set of risks and contingencies, which combine in different ways and additionally are subject to constant variations. Hence, the magnitude of vulnerability may permanently fluctuate. Quite naturally, not all actors involved are facing all these potential difficulties at the same time, though many definitely do. The risk to experience one or many of them is nevertheless a constant probability. Generally, the multiple sources and forms of vulnerability make it very difficult to identify the most vulnerable households. It may be conjectured that households who are exposed to many of the identified causes of vulnerability are also the most vulnerable. However, in absence of detailed household data from the different social groups studied, which explore the actual management of specific livelihood portfolios, an arguable ranking of vulnerability is beyond the scope of the present study. It is nevertheless possible to point out the different forms vulnerability may take as a consequence of exposure to a risky environment and limited capacities to cope. Table 3 summarises the main forms, sources and determinants of urban vulnerability in Afghanistan.

Coping with risks that come with these vulnerabilities is highly complex. Bundles of intertwined strategies address multiple and correlated risks. Thereby non-legal entitlements in the form of risky and dangerous black market work and what has been termed non-entitlement transfers, i.e., access to forms of charity and humanitarian assistance, are gaining importance. Yet it has become increasingly difficult to keep up

social relationships both on intra- and inter-household levels. Nevertheless, mobilising resources from social relations certainly plays the most important role in the face of a widespread depletion of material and human assets. If there is a functioning and diversified network of relations in place, access to jobs, food, water and fuel in winter is certainly easier, showing the overall critical significance of social assets. However, as has been indicated already, social affiliation is mostly restricted to "networks of survival," which do not have the capacity to lift people out of poverty. Overall capacities to cope are limited. Capability failure is widespread, resulting in a large number of people being deprived of basic human needs in urban Afghanistan.

Table 3. Forms, sources and determinants of urban vulnerability

Form of vulnerability	*Vulnerability to income failure*	*Vulnerability to food insecurity*	*Vulnerability to bad health*	*Vulnerability to social exclusion and disempowerment*
Source of vulnerability	Exposure to an unreliable and erratic labour market	Capability deprivation Decline of entitlements	Poor living and working conditions	Powerlessness and marginalisation
Determinants of vulnerability	Quality of health Levels of education Household composition Diversification of income sources	Vagaries of market forces Income levels	Quality of housing Income levels Access to healthcare Access to clean water and sanitation	Quality of intra- and inter-household relations Time and resources available to keep up social relations Social affiliation Membership in social networks

It has to be taken into account, however, that social vulnerability is not a purely local or regional phenomenon, but is connected to global developments in manifold ways. Lock rightly pronounces that the "social roots of terrorism have to be acknowledged" and that "current forms of globalisation bypass the interests of a majority of global populations."[54] It is good at this point to keep some statements made during group discussions in mind, which voiced participation in terrorist activities as being a possible livelihood strategy, and which expressed huge dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in Afghanistan. The living conditions for a large number of urban dwellers to a great extent are still shaped by high risk exposure, disenfranchisement, and growing polarisation, resulting in very limited life chances for a majority. This surely prepares a very fertile ground for conflict and violence. The latent violent dangers that come with chronic states of vulnerability pose a huge challenge to the work of government and international assistance in Afghanistan. Finding possible ways to secure satisfaction of basic needs and to enhance the life chances of vulnerable populations thus have to be prioritised.

[54] Lock, P. "Die sozialen Wurzeln des Terrors erkennen," *Entwicklung und Zusammenarbeit*. 2001. 10: 289.

5.3 Vulnerable groups or vulnerable assets? Issues and recommendations

There is no doubt that the groups under study face varying risks of experiencing different forms of vulnerability. The range of opportunities one may find access to certainly correlate with membership in a social group, and with whether one is young and healthy or disabled, or a man or a woman. Nevertheless, it would be difficult or even misleading to map out social groups per se in relation to different forms of vulnerability, for two reasons. First, the category of social group is a quite heterogeneous one and as such not really a good indicator for vulnerability. Table 4 gives broad approximations as to how different groups and individuals may be prone to experience vulnerabilities, but it would be misleading to say that *all* members of these groups are affected to the same extent. Second, the mentioned forms of vulnerability are intrinsically intertwined — it is difficult to draw sharp lines between them. For example, households or individuals vulnerable to loss of income because of a disability might also face the risks of experiencing food insecurity or bad health. This again is not an automatically enforced process but rather a likely probability and largely a matter of how and to what extent assets can be mobilised to counter the attended effects.

Table 4 attempts to assemble the evidence found during field research in relation to what groups or individuals are especially susceptible to certain forms of vulnerability.

Table 4. Groups and households susceptible to different forms of vulnerability

Form of vulnerability	*Vulnerability to income failure*	*Vulnerability to food insecurity*	*Vulnerability to poor physical and mental health*	*Vulnerability to social exclusion and disempowerment*
Who is susceptible?	People with disabilities Elderly Widows, female-headed households	Households with a high dependency rate Households with less diversified income sources Women with disabilities Daughters	Working children People living in poor housing facilities People with disabilities, esp. women with disabilities Women War victims	*Macro level of exclusion from human development*: Those who belong to "networks of survival" with no bridging and linking relations to broader social structures *Micro level of intra-household exclusion*: the "invisible," i.e., people with disabilities, esp. women; the chronically sick

However, the findings from the sample suggest that "vulnerable group" is not a very precise category and as such, this category does not even exist, because there are certainly differences within all groups studied (see Box 6). But what would be a better way forward in dealing with vulnerability? In attempting to move beyond a group-focused approach, Moser's asset vulnerability framework gives a more differentiated and realistic view on the matter, and its adaptation to the urban and possibly rural situations in Afghanistan might prove to be an effective and reliable way to address vulnerability.

Box 6. Two female-headed households in Kabul
Fatemah is a 42-year-old war widow. She now lives in Chehel Setun, Kabul, in a tiny room without windows, rented out for 1500 Afghani (US$30) per month. Her husband died 13 years ago during inter-factional fighting in Kabul, and shortly after that she sought refuge with her four children in Pakistan, leaving the house she used to live in with her family and most of its interiors to her husband's brother. She never returned back to it. She lived more than four years in Pakistan during a couple of stays, somehow managing to bring her family through, but without getting help from her relatives, of whom she lost sight in between. She returned to Kabul one and a half months ago to initially live with her elder brother, but since then changed accommodation five times. Her brother did not have the living space and the intention to lodge her small family constantly and she moved from place to place. Today, she is not satisfied with her housing condition, but at least there is a roof for the winter, she says. Fatemah has only one son, and he is drug addicted and of no help to the family. He steals, is very abusive and often beats his mother and younger sisters. The atmosphere is tense, and Fatemah faces great difficulties in managing household survival. She often relies on begging, but sometimes also does the laundry for one or two families. Her brother does not give her any support; the relatives from her husband's side did not bother to take care of her. Now she wants to marry off her eldest daughter, who is also the only family member with some basic education. It is a thorny life without much help, and Fatemah is sad when she says, "In difficult times, even your closest relations do not help you." ("*dar vaqt-e mushkil zir-e chashm ham kar namidehad*")

Another example is Sunita. She is also a widow, 35 years old, and lived as a refugee in both Iran and for a shorter time in Pakistan. In contrast to Fatemah, however, she always could rely on a functioning family network and in spite of her widowhood and difficulties, made a sufficient income. She did not complain about her life. "We had a good and safe time in Iran," she says. Her children were educated there and two of her three sons actually decided not to return to Afghanistan, since both found jobs in Iran. Their remittances are a basic foundation of Sunita's current life, in which she lives with one son and two daughters in a rented room also in Chehel Setun, organised by her husband's brother, with whom she keeps a friendly relation and who helps where he can. He is a bicycle mechanic and organised employment for Sunita's youngest son in another bicycle shop. In addition, the two young daughters are going to school in Kabul, since with three sons working and a functioning informal safety net in place, they are not required to do work beside helping with household chores. Sunita herself is jobless, but she uses her time to run the household and keep up social relations in the neighbourhood and the family.

How may this work out practically? Table 4 on the previous page shows the general situation as it has been expressed by the participants in focus group discussions in the three cities studied. It might be of use to take over the categorisation made there and further develop it to a prospective vulnerability "tool" for practitioners, to allow for a closer examination of respective situations as well as a better and case-specific understanding of vulnerability. That in turn might help to improve the impact of programming efforts.

The asset vulnerability matrix illustrated in Table 2 already provides a kind of checklist that may be used for examining the situation in urban and probably also rural areas of Afghanistan. Altogether, it points to the idea that different ways of coping can themselves already serve as possible indicators for vulnerability. Using a matrix like the one suggested might allow, for example, the identification of potential areas of assistance (i.e., support of already existing local potentials, detection of greatest problem fields of a household and a community), as well as for supporting the identification of project beneficiaries. It could thus be used to crosscheck current identification processes, which are often channelled by employing a *wakil-e gozar* (literally: "the advocate of a neighbourhood"), or to set project priorities according to the situation found, for instance, in a specific neighbourhood or with respect to a specific community. The task then would be first to identify areas where a lack of capability to cope is prevalent, which might be expressed

through a heavy reliance of certain households on asset eroding strategies (i.e., begging or heavy dependence of working children), and accordingly try to address these areas specifically. It has to be taken into account, however, that the assets people possess are deeply intertwined and can only be separated analytically — for instance, efforts to improve the stock of human assets may positively influence the stock of social assets, which in turn might have effects on financial assets. The aim would then be to counter the negative outcomes of asset vulnerability, i.e., through establishing measures that might help to change the "minus" signs in Table 2 to "plus" signs, and thereby to facilitate and support the employment of coping strategies that are not potentially asset eroding.

The suggested concentration on analysing the vulnerability of assets could be a way forward in achieving better understanding about the different shapes urban vulnerability might take across social groups and space. While many causes of vulnerability are externally induced in broader social structures and processes and as such beyond the immediate influence spheres of the assistance community, the asset vulnerability as an internal cause can be addressed.

5.4 How to tackle vulnerability?

Multiple approaches are required to address the complex issues of asset vulnerability and to guarantee the satisfaction of basic needs for the urban populations of Afghanistan and consequently tackle states of poverty and vulnerability. Risks to livelihood security come in bundles, and assistance in coping with these risks by helping to reduce asset vulnerability and strengthen resilience must address many fronts at the same time. This might be no great news, but seeing it substantially, the results of the study reconfirm existing knowledge and show that since the fall of the Taliban, no great improvements in advancing the situation of the poor and vulnerable in Afghanistan have been made. The following recommendations thus initially draw on the solutions to priority problems proposed by participants of the group discussions, with some of them already made in similar contexts elsewhere.[55]

Generate longer-term income opportunities

Current income-generating projects in the form of cash for work are mostly confined to the undoubtedly difficult periods of winter. However, people who are vulnerable to the specific risks of winter (like exposure to cold temperatures paired with inadequate shelter) are also vulnerable to risks throughout the year.[56] What is needed then are longer-term project cycles enabling people to earn cash throughout the year, thus enabling them to build up stocks to cope better in the future. Given the tenor of group discussions, paid vocational training programmes are certainly more adequate in tackling vulnerability than are non-qualifying projects addressing short-term needs by focusing on, for example, collecting garbage. Participation in paid vocational training enables participants to increase the stock of human assets while acquiring income at the same time; capacities to cope are supported, and the probability increases that beneficiaries will find a steady source of income.

Only through the provision of stable income sources will the present heavy reliance on child labour in many communities in urban Afghanistan be negated. Such a move may also lead to increases in overall levels of access to education.

[55] See, for example, Grace, op cit.
[56] Ibid.

Support housing reconstruction efforts and establish some form of tenure rights for squatter settlements

The housing situation is perceived as the single biggest problem in Kabul, and in Jalalabad and Herat as the second biggest after unemployment. Affordable housing in Kabul is almost impossible to find, leading to very tight living conditions characterised by a large number of persons living in a single room, insufficient protection from environmental hazards and high residential mobility. Support in reconstruction efforts consequently has to be accelerated, probably in the form of subsidised grants for owners. Policymakers and programmers should consider how to deliver necessary equipment to protect dwellers in destroyed houses from natural hazards. Further pressing problems connected with housing are lack of water supply, sanitation, and waste disposal. These pose huge challenges to urban planners, who should take into account the critical situations of the vulnerable populations and increasingly redirect however limited funding to directly assist those in need. This means accepting and legalising the existing squatter settlements — which in the view of current urban growth rates are likely to increase in number and size — as being officially part of the cities and to grant some form of tenure security to their inhabitants. This might stimulate self-motivated investment in housing and subsequently may improve living conditions. However, a general improvement of urban services will be required still.

Increase balanced food assistance options and nutrition awareness

Access to healthy and diverse foodstuffs is limited not because of insufficient supply, but due to widespread income and entitlement failure, giving rise to the phenomenon of "hidden hunger." Emergency and balanced food assistance for the very desperate will thus be further required and should be accompanied by awareness campaigns that pronounce the importance of a balanced diet for leading a healthy life. Encouragement to cultivate kitchen gardens and facilitating access to subsistence plots near towns, especially in Jalalabad, should be fostered.

However, food security largely remains a matter of sufficient means to obtain food, and is closely connected to successful income-generating schemes. Extension of cash for work initiatives therefore should be seriously considered. The development of urban-rural linkages in the form of rural production and linked home-based urban processing (e.g., of milk products, fruits) might be an option, especially for Herat and Jalalabad, to promote home-based enterprises and generate further income opportunities. Likewise, the promotion of a ration card system for subsidised food access should be considered.

Develop credit cycle schemes

Indebtedness is a consequence of income failure and for many is the only possible way to cope with risks to livelihood security. However, not being able to return loans puts additional pressure on already heavily used social relations. Safe access to credits with low or interest-free rates should therefore be increasingly provided also in urban areas. Ideally, communities would raise amounts and redistribute them out of their own initiative. It might be helpful in that respect to learn from such experiences as those in urban India, where in the northern city of Varanasi the community of washer men keeps up an indigenous way of mobilising huge cash amounts for members of their caste by means of collectively organised credit cycle schemes.[57] However, the capacity to do so still needs to be developed in Afghanistan, as the necessary levels of trust, reciprocity, solidarity and responsibility currently might be too weak.

Build on local potentials of self-help and establish access to social participation

The fragmented nature of social networks in urban areas leads to limited social backing in supporting efforts of managing livelihoods. States of vulnerability put further pressure on

[57] See Schütte, op cit.

existing network structures and especially on intra-household relations. However, there are also live network structures, which so far work only on a rather embryonic level. Support of these young networks (e.g., the network of people with disabilities, the *shuras* of Jalalabad) by means of their consequent integration into project initiatives should be considered. That would mean involving communities in the design of project activities, to demand their active contribution, and to seek advice from community-based organisations. This would help to build up dignity and self-respect and encourage further and broader participation in grassroots activities, possibly leading to strengthened social networks. These existing local potentials need to be consequently promoted and aided, and their example may possibly inform the initiation of similar networks. Strong linkages between community-based organisations, government agencies and urban planners need to be developed in order to achieve integration of communities into decision-making processes and to improve their capacities. Further, possible ways to integrate the most poor and vulnerable into these processes need to be thought over.

Though it is definitely very difficult to impose social capital from above, it is nevertheless important to reach the "invisible," the hidden vulnerable, and to provide access to forms of social interaction for them, e.g., in the form of community and training centres for women and those with disabilities.

More encompassing, the establishment of neighbourhood centres could be a possible way to achieve broader involvement of the vulnerable sections of society into matters of their concern. There, meetings could take place where local issues could be discussed and information exchanged, e.g., about job opportunities. Such centres could contribute to the building of social cohesion and an overall evolvement of mutual trust and responsibility. Additionally, small basic health posts for easier and closer access to health care in the neighbourhood could be included.

Conduct further vulnerability research

Social vulnerability is a complex phenomenon, and the need to attain a more nuanced understanding of connected mechanisms and processes is crucial to find credible ways of targeting assistance delivery. This paper might be seen as a modest attempt to unveil the complexity of vulnerability, but even more, these initial explorations into the multiple forms of vulnerability in Afghan cities emphasise the need for further research.

- Generally, more qualitative social research is needed to fully understand perceptions and attitudes of people towards their situation. The positive experiences with focus group discussions show that the involvement of people in exploring their concerns is highly appreciated. This is an important observation, given the existence of a widespread "survey fatigue" among many Afghans repeatedly harassed to answer questionnaires. Ethically grounded qualitative research as a specific form of social interaction perceives informants as equal partners and is able to not only extract, namely information, but also to give, namely respect. Continuing interaction with a limited number of households over a longer period attempting to understand the vagaries of everyday life in Afghan cities will be increasingly important to complement one-time surveys covering a large number of respondents.

- Following this line of thinking, in-depth explorations on the household level need to be carried out in order to comprehensively assess varying levels of urban vulnerability and livelihood security and to establish reliable indicators for its measurement.

- In order to build on local potentials of self-help, support, and cooperation, existing network structures need to be discovered and explored. Not much is known yet about the roles urban households play as basic safety nets, how processes of social fragmentation in cities endanger these roles, and to what extent reliable network structures may exist beyond the household. Given the crucial role a functioning net of social relations may have, especially for people vulnerable to poverty, possible ways of assisting their maintenance and integrating them into broader social structures need to be investigated.

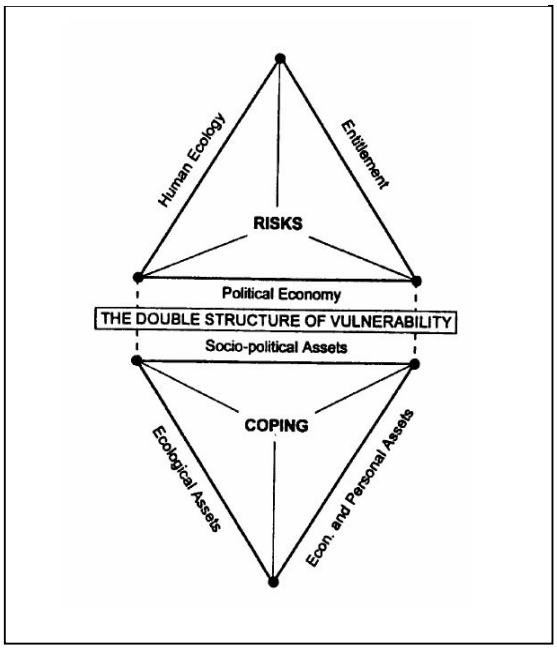
Appendix A. Vulnerability as an Analytical Framework

Generally assessed in terms of risk and coping, the concept of vulnerability can be conceived as a window through which both researchers and practitioners may find a deeper and more holistic understanding of the complex structures and dynamics of poverty and livelihood security. The initial development of the concept was enforced by widespread discomfort about dominant analytical approaches that tried to define livelihood security, marginality and poverty in economic terms *alone*. This lopsided view has been considerably broadened, mainly building on the work of Armatya Sen,[58] who stresses that what counts is not what poor people have, but what their possessions enable them to do. The early proponents of the vulnerability approach adopted this line of thinking and argued for a careful examination of the structure of poverty beyond purely economic criteria.[59] The "disaggregation" of poverty takes into account the capacities, capabilities and perceptions of people as well as biophysical and psychological dimensions of vulnerability to poverty.[60] Especially the latter aspects have been left widely unrecognised in many approaches, but they assume particular significance in the urban Afghan context, where many people suffer as a result of disabilities and depression.

However, three common components inform all frameworks of vulnerability, namely the exposure to risks, people's ability to deal with those risks, and the outcomes that arise. These components are usually referred to as representing the external and the internal side of vulnerability, as it has been initially proposed by Chambers (1989). Yet quite often vulnerability is treated as the mere context shaping people's lives, thus not considering the internal side of coping with risk. The approach followed in this paper takes into account the "double structure of vulnerability" (Figure 1), an approach that aims to integrate macro and micro perspectives into a single analytical framework to better analyse the complexity and interdependency of factors causing vulnerability.

The external perspective, in that sense, refers to the structural dimensions of vulnerability and risk. A main question to be answered from that point of view is how vulnerabilities are rooted in broader socio-economic contexts. As indicated in the upper half of Figure 1, one should examine the risks arising out of the relationship between people and their social and natural environment (human ecology), and to institutions, organisations, policies, and legislations that impinge on people's livelihoods in a given context (entitlements, political economy).[61] The risks people face thus can be ecological, economic, political, social and personal and the respective nexus of these external conditions determines the space of vulnerability in which people have to build their livelihood strategies. Vulnerability is thus based on conditions

Figure 1. Double Structure of Vulnerability



[58] Sen, A. *Commodities and capabilities*. North-Holland: Amsterdam. 1985.
[59] See Chambers, op cit. or Swift, J. "Why are Rural People Vulnerable to Famine?" *IDS Bulletin 20*. 1989. (2): 49-57.
[60] Krüger, F. "Handlungsorientierte Entwicklungsforschung: Trends, Perspektiven, Defizite." *Petermanns Geographische Mitteilungen*. 2003. 147: 5-15.
[61] For a comprehensive examination see Watts and Bohle, op cit.

that put people in disadvantaged and risky positions (exposure), on the risk of inadequate capacities to cope with crises, stress and shocks (capacity), and on the risk of severe consequences of being exposed to adverse conditions and not having sufficient means to cope (potentiality).[62] Out of this definition, vulnerable individuals, groups or regions are those most exposed to risks, with the most limited ability to cope and to recover from crisis.

The internal side of vulnerability focuses on coping and action to overcome or at least mitigate the exposure to unfavourable and adverse conditions. It takes into account the fact that the poor and vulnerable are not generally helpless victims of constrained environments, but capable social actors, whose actions decisively influence livelihood risks.

As pointed out in the lower part in Figure 1, the complex and dynamic process of coping with acute crisis, but also with seasonal and everyday risks, is perceived as a function of the interplay of various assets over which people are able to exercise command. The ownership, composition and mobilisation of these socio-political, ecological, economical and personal assets are the basic means that strongly determine levels of resilience and responsiveness of individuals or households in face of adversity. They can be briefly summarised as follows:[63]

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

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

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

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

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[62] See also Prowse, op cit.
[63] See Department for International Development. *Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets*. Available at: www.livelihoods.org/info/info_guidancesheets.html. 1999. Accessed 7 March 2004 or see also Köberlein, M. "Living from Waste. A Case Study on the Livelihoods of the Actors Involved in Delhi's Informal Waste Recycling Economy." *Studies in Development Geography, Vol. 24*. Saarbrücken: Verlag für Entwicklungspolitik. 2003.

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

By emphasising assets and coping, the actual "management" of livelihood portfolios can be examined, a term which refers to *all activities* pursued in the process of managing capital assets to turn them into income, food, or other basic necessities, according to priorities.

The internal side complements the macro view on external conditions framing people's lives by concentrating on "….what the poor have, rather than what they do not have…"[64] With reference to various "sustainable livelihoods frameworks,"[65] people may be affected differently by similar conditions or the same extreme event, and the perspective on assets and coping generally seeks to explain social differentiations of vulnerability in a local context.

As such, vulnerability and livelihood security are not conceived as being something separate, but rather as representing two sides of a continuum — vulnerability is the "other side" of livelihood security.[66]

[64] See Moser, op cit., 1.
[65] See, for example, DFID, op cit. and Moser, op cit.
[66] See van Dillen, 2002 and 2004, op cit.

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