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EXPLORING THE REALITIES OF THE URBAN POOR

an Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit report
EXPLORING THE REALITIES OF THE URBAN POOR: ANTHROPOLOGICAL FIELD METHODS FOR THE STUDY OF URBAN LIVELIHOODS IN AFGHANISTAN

Prepared for
The Livelihood Research Programme Office
AREU (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit)
Kabul, Afghanistan

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INTRODUCTION:

In preparation for the Urban Livelihoods Research Project of AREU, which will be funded by the European Union and carried out in three cities throughout Afghanistan, short-term anthropological fieldwork was conducted in Karte Nau (District 8) in the capital city of Kabul for a period of three weeks during June-July 2003. Based upon this intensive but limited exposure to the complex livelihoods of the Afghan urban poor, some generalizations concerning qualitative field methods can be made, and these form the subject of this in-house report.¹

A holistic anthropological perspective is especially suitable for the study of livelihoods which pertain to “the sum of ways and means by which individuals, households, and communities make and sustain a living over time, using a combination of social, economic, cultural, and environmental resources.” (Pain and Lautze 2002:1)

In brief, the planned Urban Livelihoods Research Project will carry out in-depth longitudinal research on the diverse livelihoods of the urban poor in three cities of Afghanistan for a period of 18 months. AREU research teams of males and females, in coordination with NGOs, will explore the livelihood strategies of poor urban households and how they change over time. Households of returned refugees, IDPs, and long-term residents will be included in the sample. Along with inter-household and intra-household relations, the impact of evolving programmes, institutions, and policies on household assets and strategies will be investigated. Lessons and recommendations for programming and policy formulation will be identified in order to improve the livelihoods of the Afghan urban poor. In preparation for this undertaking, the following general guidelines for field research are presented.

QUALITATIVE FIELD RESEARCH IN KARTE NAU:

The qualitative anthropological research reviewed here was greatly facilitated by working with a sub-sample of the households included in the quantitative survey conducted by AREU and four NGOs of participants in the winterization cash-for work project (N=100 households) in Winter/Spring 2003. One of the four NGOs, CARE International, is active in Karte Nau, an eastern section of the city in District 8 on the main road to Jalalabad, and the quantitative survey had been conducted in 23 households there. A skilled and experienced field supervisor of CARE² who had conducted the survey interviews was initially my major guide in the field. AREU staff members³ also shared preliminary survey findings with me, which provided a general introduction to each of the households in our small purposive sample prior to visiting them.

¹ An analytical discussion based upon this fieldwork appears in a separate report prepared for AREU, Some Notes on the Livelihoods of the Urban Poor in Kabul, Afghanistan, by Pamela Hunte, February 2004.
² Asifa Gharghasht, who is originally from Karte Nau herself, was well acquainted with both the neighborhoods of the section and the individual households.
³ Alexia Coke and Jo Grace
Before my arrival in Kabul in late June, the Livelihood Research Program Office of AREU had also recruited two young interviewers/translators, one female and one male, who proved to be excellent fieldworkers, in spite of no previous experience in anthropological techniques and livelihoods research.4

The CARE field supervisor first directed us to seven poor households in Karte Nau, most of which are located on the hillsides in the informal settlements, and introduced our team to the respective family members. Because the individuals knew and respected this fieldworker, their trust in us was fostered even before we began our subsequent visits and in-depth conversations. In one neighborhood of Karte Nau, Saraki-Sey (Street #3), the local namoyenda-i-sarak (street representative of the district government) also came along to one household with which he was acquainted.5

In consultation with AREU staff, it was decided that our focus during this brief time frame should be upon exploring qualitative field methodology in preparation for future AREU fieldwork and, for this purpose, it was necessary to focus upon only three households.6 Although our major focus was upon methods, general information on the livelihood strategies of the units was correspondingly gathered. Thus we have developed three in-depth case studies of households (two returned refugee and one IDP), which entailed three or more visits each at different times of the day. Four more general discussions were also conducted with households (two returned refugee, one IDP, and one long-term resident) based upon only one visit each. All of the seven descriptive field reports generated from this field research are included in Appendix A.

We had as our central goal to explore and understand as much as possible the realities of the livelihoods of the poor from their perspectives—men, women, and children—in the context of Karte Nau, a section of Kabul which experienced extensive damage during the civil war and is now the recipient of thousands of returned refugees and IDPs. Our research shows that it was possible, utilizing anthropological field methods over a short period of time, to develop basic rapport with poor households and to assemble valuable information concerning their diverse livelihood strategies.

**SPECIFIC FIELD METHODS:**

**Review of Literature and Supporting Documents:**

Prior to fieldwork, and also as fieldwork progresses, any relevant literature and supporting documents should be reviewed in detail. For example, the preliminary results of the winter survey conducted by AREU and CARE International in Karte Nau provided us with invaluable background/introductory data. If time permitted, we should have also

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4 Nasreen Sarwary and Bashir Ahmad Sherzai
5 The street representative was sitting in a nearby shop as we passed, and he knew the CARE fieldworker well. She asked him if he wanted to accompany us, and he did so for a short period of time. We explained our work to him in detail, and he was in full agreement with our undertaking.
6 A *household* is defined here as all individuals who share the same cooking pot.
reviewed CARE's general documentation on their work in District 8, along with searching out other UN, NGO, and government documents, in order to obtain a more historical perspective on Karte Nau and to place this section of Kabul in a wider macro-context. My review of more general reports on Kabul City and its residents compiled by the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing (2002; D'Hellencourt, et al. 2002), UN-Habitat (June 2002), and Save the Children (de Berry, et al. 2003) has provided additional urban insights of a more holistic nature. In the on-going process of literature review, relevant documents in Farsi/Pushtu and other languages should also be included when possible.

Sample Selection:

Karte Nau in District 8 was chosen by CARE International for their activities because it is a relatively poor section of Kabul. As noted above, the households in Karte Nau included in our research were subsequently chosen from a cohort of 23 poor units, all of which had participated in CARE's winter cash-for-work project. Thus the small sample of poor urban households included in our short-term research was very purposively chosen. This is not a random sample upon which statistical analysis can be accomplished. Rather, it reflects the specific household types in which we are primarily interested—the urban poor, including returned refugees, IDPs, and long-term residents. Similarly, for the future AREU Urban Livelihoods Research Project purposive samples will be chosen from urban contexts in which participating NGOs are working.

Our research focuses upon urban households, and care must be taken to choose those units which are clearly within the city and not in the peripheral peri-urban neighborhoods. On the first day of our fieldwork, our CARE counterpart also directed us to some poor households that were in an agricultural section bordering the eastern edge of Karte Nau. Clearly they were peri-urban in nature. Thus we did not choose them, but rather returned to the densely populated central neighborhoods of Karte Nau.

Our initial seven households include those of 4 returned refugees, 2 IDPs, and 1 long-term resident; the three households upon which we later concentrated most of our work include 2 returned refugees and 1 IDP. Out of these three, one returned refugee household was chosen because of its extreme poverty (Case Study #1); another returned refugee household was chosen because its head-of-household is a widow (Case Study #2); and an IDP household was chosen because it is extended/three generational in family composition and owns its home (Case Study #3). We felt that all of these characteristics were worthy of our close examination.

Concerning ethnicity, we do have some ethnic variation in our small sample, with 4 Pushtun units, 1 Tajik/Pushtun mix, and 2 Tajik units. A number of Hazara households also reside in Karte Nau and took part in the winter cash-for-work project, but none were

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7 For example, a number of key informants referred to a land distribution scheme in Karte Nau during the time of Najibullah in the late 1980s; this is the type of finding that needs much more documental research.
8 Livelihoods in peri-urban contexts also deserve special study in and of themselves (Allen and Davila 2002; Ashong and Smith 2001; Farrington, et al. 2002), but not in conjunction with this urban undertaking.
included in our sample. For the purposes of this short-term exercise in research methodology, ethnicity was not that crucial. However, this is a factor that must be considered more carefully in future sample selection for our long-term research.9

**Introductions/Gaining Rapport/Field Researcher Qualities:**

As mentioned above, an experienced field supervisor from CARE International was our primary link to the households in Karte Nau. Household members hold this woman in high respect and refer to her as “Doctor Sahib” and to her male counterpart in the winter survey as “Engineer Sahib.” Thus it was not difficult to begin our work in these units, each of which had, prior to our arrival, agreed with the CARE field supervisor to participate in our short-term study. The team was careful to very clearly set out the purpose of our work in our rather lengthy introduction, which was repeated upon our arrival (and referred to periodically during our multiple visits):

- “We come from an organization called AREU that works with the UN, NGOs, and the government. Our names are Pamela, Nasreen, and Bashir. We’re trying to learn how to best help the people who live in Afghanistan’s cities. In the next few weeks, if you agree, we’d like to spend some time with you and your family in order to better understand your lives. We’d like to learn how you’re managing things these days here in Kabul, along with how you managed things before when you lived in ___. There are many projects to help people these days, and we’d also like to know if you participate in any of them. If we can understand the good things and the bad things in the lives of families like yours, like your economic situation, health concerns, your ideas about education, etc., we will be able to inform the UN, NGOs, and the government about how to have better projects in the future. Mostly we just want to talk with you and see how you live. We’ll take some notes too. It’s very important for you to know that all the information will be confidential, and we will not use your name or the names of anyone in your family in our reports. We’ll be going to other houses in Karte Nau during the next few weeks too. Will you help us?”

This introduction was well-received and we were politely accepted, but most respondents had ongoing difficulty understanding just why we were interested in so many detailed aspects of their lives. This was not verbally expressed very often, but it was apparent in their curiosity about our purpose.10 Hope also continued to spring eternal in most respondents’ minds that their participation in our conversations would perhaps bring them special assistance of some sort in the future.

As we came to know each of the households better during repeated visits, and we were able to call various members by name, interaction quickly became more informal.

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9 Refer to the Urban Livelihoods Research Project proposal to the European Union for more details on the sample framework for this long-term undertaking.
10 Only in one case were we met with some degree of anger by a 30-year-old male head-of-household who is a disheartened but forthright returned refugee (see Discussion #4). “And why do people like you continue to come to speak with us? What is the good of these visits? No help ever reaches us.”
People were anxious to tell their stories, their complex adventures and tragedies during the past decades of war and civil turmoil, and we were ready to listen.

My team interviewers, Nasreen and Bashir, were initially able to observe Asifa of CARE in her initial discussions with family members; they watched and listened carefully and learned much from that brief interaction. Upon our subsequent visits, they also continued to observe my interaction style in the field, which my knowledge of Farsi and previous work among Afghans definitely facilitated. These young 12th grade graduates, who were relatively inexperienced, quickly gained confidence in their own interviewing/discussion techniques. Both Nasreen and Bashir speak and write basic English, which of course is valuable; more importantly, however, they are courteous and personable, and are able to talk with and listen to people—male/female, rich/poor.

Each morning we would meet prior to our field visits, review the main goals for the day, and divide up our specific tasks. Basics of anthropological research and the livelihoods approach were also discussed in these sessions. Both interviewers quickly caught on to what was expected of them, they wanted to do a good job, there was no competition between them, and they worked well together. Their desire to improve their English was another plus, which we worked on during our discussions and also in their field research write-ups (see below). In short, these were ideal field researchers for this short-term undertaking.

**Gender Issues:**

When anticipating this short-term work on urban livelihoods in Kabul, I thought that Nasreen and I would interact with the females of each household and Bashir would interact with the males, probably in separate settings, and that we would later compare notes. I was incorrect on this point, however. After visiting our first few households, we quickly realized that gender segregation is not a pressing issue in Karte Nau these days—at least among the seven households in our sample, most of which are Pushtun in ethnicity. Male and female respondents considered Bashir their “brother,” and he was welcomed into all homes, regardless of the presence or absence of male household members. One woman even nursed her baby in this gender-integrated setting. Granted, the Kabul sociocultural milieu has historically been considered liberal, but this widespread negation of parda (gender segregation) among poor Pushtun households, many of whom had come from refugee experiences in Pakistan, was not expected. In part this is related to the households’ poverty, but perhaps this also reflects a reaction to (and rejection of) the strict rules of the Taliban, along with a clear relaxation of security concerns these days. Households seemed to be silently making a political statement.

This lack of gender segregation will not apply to all households of Kabul, and/or other urban settings within Afghanistan. Indeed, the cultural milieu of Kandahar and other provincial cities is much more conservative. All field teams must be aware of the specific gender context of each research setting, and act accordingly.
Seasonality:

Our short-term research was conducted in June-July, which is a pleasant time of the year in Kabul and entails none of the stark difficulties of winter for our households. Obtaining fuel and establishing a warm living space; the need for warm clothing for all family members; muddy compounds and streets which make water retrieval difficult; colds and other illnesses—all of these and more problems are associated with winter. Undoubtedly if we had conducted our work in mid-winter we would have obtained somewhat different perspectives from our respondents. The long-term Urban Livelihoods Research Project will embrace all four seasons of the year, and thus will enable valuable comparisons of livelihoods to be made through the passage of time.

Timing of Visits:

We first visited each household in the morning hours between 9:00AM and 12:00 noon and took part in/observed some of their morning activities. Our second visit was timed to occur in the afternoon hours between 2:00PM and 5:00PM, which enabled us to be present for another series of daily events. In comparison to their busy mornings, women of the household are usually not so preoccupied with household tasks in the afternoons. Visits lasted 1½-2 hours in length. We purposely tried to avoid arriving around mealtimes which would compel most households, according to traditional Afghan hospitality, to prepare a meal for us. This proved to be the correct approach.

However, in order to not descend upon a family with no previous warning and then demand to take up their morning or afternoon in discussion, and also to assure that they would be at home, we also thought it was best to previously set up an appointment for our visit. There are pros and cons involved in this plan, however. For example, we arrived at the home of Yasmin (Case Study #2), who is a poor widow, and asked if she would be free around 10:30AM on Tuesday for a short second visit. She readily agreed, and we stressed that she should not prepare anything; we would agree to drink some tea, but that was all. On Tuesday we arrived and found she was at home, only to learn that she had prepared a huge plate of buloni (fried leek pancakes) for our visit—certainly not what we had wanted to occur. We were compelled to partake of this food, however, and similar food offerings in other poor households. (See To Eat or Not to Eat section below for more discussion on this topic.)

In short, it is best to previously arrange household visits whenever possible, although Afghan tradition does not demand such. After the initial novelty of visiting research team visits wears off, special food preparation will not occur.

Another important issue concerning timing of visits/discussions pertains to male respondents who work during the day. Male field workers should make separate arrangements to meet them before, during, or after their work. We learned our lesson when we initially scheduled a visit with a head-of-household and his wife (Discussion #4), which was the first unit on our list. The wife said that her husband would be at home for our morning visit the next day. When we arrived, however, he made it very clear that
he had purposely stayed home and lost one day's salary because of our impending visit. For a poor household this is a striking loss of valuable income, and should always be avoided.

**Mapping of the Community:**

On our first visit to the field, I attempted to sketch an initial map of the context of Karte Nau, locating the large east-west highway that runs between Kabul and Jalalabad and transects the area, along with the hillsides in the north bordering on Tepe Maranjan, etc. Our CARE colleague said that the seven households we visited all had general addresses of Street 1, Street 2, and Street 3, which are paved streets running from the highway northward up the hillsides and I tried, with difficulty, to add these three large roads to the sketch map. Every road looked the same. And, when we approached each compound, the kocha (lanes and alleys, only a few of which are numbered) narrowed quickly and it was impossible to continue mapping the complex neighborhoods at this early stage in our research.

Upon return to the AREU office, I went to the nearby AIMS office where I was provided with a large map of Kabul City, which enabled us to place the section of Karte Nau in the context of the capital in general and also in the context of District 8. This large district embraces the urban sections of Shah Shahid, Qala-i-Ismael Khan, Rahman Mina, etc., along with scores of peri-urban communities. However, the scale of this map was not suitable to enable us to sketch out the specific area of our fieldwork in sufficient detail.

I then requested from AIMS a satellite imagery map of the region of Karte Nau, and this proved to be just what we needed. Immediately the major north-south thoroughfares of Streets 1, 2, and 3 became clear and, with much additional work both in the field and office, we then located each of our seven households. Utilizing the map, it also became clear that five out of the seven units in our sample are clearly situated on the hillsides in unplanned or informal neighborhoods while two of the seven units are in the planned or formal neighborhoods (the noqsha or mapped/government-approved areas).

Concerning physical assets of the households, sketch maps for each compound were also developed, indicating location of house/rooms, cooking area, latrine, etc., along with additional maps for each major living room, showing location of doors and windows along with household items such as floor covering, trunk, etc. These were later expanded

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11 This hillside area was referred to as zorabad (an area "taken by force") by the namoyenda-i-sarak (street representative) from Street 3. It includes the region that was distributed/sold during the time of Najibullah, along with other territory higher on the hills which has been settled more recently by new arrivals of returning refugees and IDPs. Zorabad of all types exist throughout the city, and the legality of these areas is now being questioned by the Kabul Municipality. However, the Ministry of Urban Development seemingly has plans to regularize some of these informal settlements. This on-going negotiation between government institutions/organizations deserves special in-depth study.

12 The preparation of the Master Plan of Kabul presently being utilized was first begun under Daud Khan in 1976 and later received approval in 1978; however, by 2002 only 20% of the plan had been implemented (d'Hellencourt, et al. 2002).
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and updated with each subsequent visit. (See Researching Physical Assets of the Household below, along with Appendix B.)

In addition, as fieldwork progressed, we pinpointed on the large satellite imagery map of Karte Nau the locations of a number of important institutions/organizations, some (but not all) of which were referenced by our respondents during conversations. At the conclusion of our three-week fieldwork, our map contained the following:

- Seven households included in our research
- Major public water taps (nall) utilized by the seven households
- Maktab-i-Tutia (large primary/middle school for boys and girls)
- District Office for government literacy program
- A home-based literacy center
- A large WFP bakery
- A family-operated neighborhood bakery
- District Government Office (of the Rais-i-Naya/District Leader)
- Government Polyclinic
- A small clinic of DARMAN (local NGO)
- BRAC Sub-Office
- Mosque
- Hammam (public baths)
- Real Estate Office
- Neighborhood general-merchandise shops
- Large market/bazaar on Kabul-Jalalabad Highway

As we spent more time in the field, we slowly began to construct our perception of the local context of our Karte Nau households. We began to “know the territory,” especially after taking some long walks through the neighborhoods and also through the long market/bazaar stretching along the highway. These are sometimes called transect walks. Undoubtedly with more exposure and discussion, we would find many additional institutions/organizations to also include in the above list.

On some occasions, we arranged for members of the sample households to accompany us to selected institutions/organizations which they themselves had brought up as important in our conversations. For example, a widow and her brother (Case Study #1) accompanied us to a nearby home-based literacy center and also to the large WFP bakery, both of which the widow frequents. In another situation, two women (Discussion #3) went with us to a family-based bakery located very near their compound in which a woman is baking bread for others. This proved very helpful, not only in that their introductions at these institutions provided us with a special degree of “legitimacy” in the

13 In addition to a large vegetable/foodstuff bazaar, the highway was lined with shops of the following: tailor, cobbler, bicycle repair, carpenter, photographer, wedding dress/flower/video seller, beautician, barber, cassette/video seller, used clothing seller, ice cream seller, general merchandise shopkeeper, etc.
14 Out of this list, Maktab-i-Tutia (the large primary/middle school for boys and girls) was the only institution repeatedly noted by the respondents as being especially important to them.
eyes of others, but it also enabled us to see our respondents interact with others in more public contexts than their own households. For example, with careful observation, we learned that perhaps the widow from Case Study #1 is closer to her neighbors than she had related to us—indeed, she quickly exchanged her old work shoes on the street with the better shoes of a neighbor prior to leaving with us for the WFP bakery in order to “dress up” for the trip. The two women in Discussion #3 met other acquaintances at the local bakery we visited with them and exchanged small talk; they also were very casual about leaving their children at home alone for a few minutes, did not lock the compound door, and did not put on any extra veil for the short trip down the street.

Lacking in residential security (e.g. often unable to pay increasing rent or being evicted by landlords who want to rebuild their compounds), many of the poor households in Karte Nau are extremely mobile at present. None of the seven households in our small sample made any moves during our short period of fieldwork, although a number felt constantly threatened by landlords. In AREU’s long-term urban livelihoods research it will be crucial to keep track of any households which do move during the 18-month study, however, and detailed maps of the respective city and neighborhood(s) will come in very handy in this respect. For future reference, the new addresses of units which have moved are often left with nearby shopkeepers and neighbors.

See the section below entitled More Participatory Field Methods for additional discussion of participatory techniques of mapping communities, which are best undertaken after fieldworkers have completed their own basic mapping exercises and have a general familiarity with the geographical area.

Participant-Observation:

Participant-observation is a cornerstone of anthropological research and, as the term implies, it refers to a researcher participating as much as relevant and possible and also observing as much as relevant and possible in order to better understand a specific socio-cultural setting. Indeed, in this short-term research period, we could not participate to any great degree except as guests in our respective households (who empathized with their hosts’ respective tragedies) or as shoppers in the bazaars of Karte Nau, but we were prepared to do so. In the long-term urban livelihoods research, however, research teams will have time to become more accepted by the participating households and thus take more part in things (e.g. help with a basic household task, attend a family celebration, etc.).

However, we did have ample time to conduct systematic observation during our fieldwork, which is a powerful research tool. For example, we saw that the household in Case Study #3 possessed physical assets such as a tandur oven, wall clock, and wall mirror which were lacking in other units. We also observed that the adult brother and

15 Both male and female respondents of these units said that new dwellings are located by the following means: a.) asking shopkeepers about vacant compounds nearby; b.) asking traveling door-to-door peddlers; and/or c.) going door-to-door asking individual households. The local real estate brokers were not used by the poor.
sister in Case Study #1 expressed much sibling rivalry in their social interaction. Following fieldwork each day, our team would discuss its findings and reflect upon them. The results of these observations of physical surroundings and social behavior are included in the detailed descriptive data which appear in case studies and discussions in Appendix A, along with more focused listing of household physical assets in Appendix B.

Another extremely important opportunity for observation occurred at the meeting of all of the 22 wakils (local government representatives) of District 8 at the Government Office of the Rais-i-Naya (District Leader) in Karte Nau. Luckily we were invited to this event when we went to arrange a meeting with the Rais-i-Naya himself. The interaction of the wakils with each other, the Rais-i-Naya, and the visiting NGOs (Relief International and Mercy Corps) who were planning activities in the district was very revealing, and provided us crucial insights into the complexities of the local political context. (See also the section on Links With NGOs below.)

**Semi-Structured Conversations/Discussions:**

Central to this research has been a series of in-depth conversations or discussions with members of our sample of seven households to elucidate information from their perspective. The major areas of inquiry include the following broad topics:

- **Baseline information about the household:** ethnicity, family structure, gender/age of members, household assets, basic expenditures, its past history and future livelihood goals
- **Intra-household relations:** rights and obligations of male and female members, decision-making with respect to assets
- **Inter-household relations:** support systems and social networks of neighbors, relatives, and friends, including any links between urban and rural households
- **Household strategies:** strategies for asset accumulation; adaptive strategies for spreading risk; coping strategies to minimize the impact of stresses and shocks; survival strategies for preventing destitution, etc.
- **Impact at the household level of any new policy/programme initiative or meso-macro event**

On our first visit to each household we focused upon gathering baseline information about the unit, although in our semi-structured approach it was easy to also begin to learn about intra-household relations, household strategies, etc., at the same time. It is important to have an open approach towards the conversation and let it go in a natural direction, rather than adhering to a strict list of questions. However, general outlines/checklists of topics for discussion should be prepared prior to discussion, and inquiry should be focused but open-ended.

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16 These are also the major areas of enquiry for AREU’s long-term urban livelihoods research.
Sufficient information on various topics is never gathered during only one visit, and thus follow-up and clarification should be made in subsequent discussions. For example, on our second visit in Case Study #1 we concentrated on their exceedingly complex refugee history in both Iran and Pakistan. On our second visit in Case Study #2 we followed up on a lengthy but incomplete discussion of the basic expenditures of this comparatively large household of 11 members.

Descriptive summaries of our conversations with our seven household units are included in Appendix A, which illustrate a compendium of baseline data. Individuals with whom we spoke in the three focal households (Case Studies #1, #2, #3) have been termed key informants because they proved to be especially important sources of information about their respective livelihoods during the repeated visits we made to their households. In comparison, the individuals with whom we spoke only once in Discussions #1 through #4 have been termed respondents, which is a term also used generally for individuals with whom researchers interact.

At many conversations in the households, Nasreen, Bashir, and myself were all present and respondents included both males and females. Most discussions took place in Farsi. When necessary, Bashir spoke Pashto to clarify specific points (perhaps 15% of the time), and clarification/translation in English was required for me about 5% of the time.

In addition to conducting in-depth conversations with households, detailed discussions were held with members of various institutions/organizations in the community, especially after we had heard reference to them by respondents. These include the following:

- Government literacy programme district office director and teachers
- Home-based literacy center manager, wife, and students
- WFP bakery owner/manager and staff of 12 women
- Family-operated neighborhood bakery father/daughter team
- Government polyclinic staff (doctors, nurses, AFGA staff) (Pamela)
- DARMAN staff (local NGO)
- BRAC sub-office staff (Nasreen and Pamela)
- Mullah of the local mosque (Bashir)
- Hammam (public baths) worker (Bashir)
- Real Estate Broker (Bashir)
- Shopkeeper(s) (Bashir) 17

In order to explore more macro-level issues pertaining to urban livelihoods and community participation, our team also met with Lalith Lankatilleke, Chief Technical

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17 A market survey was conducted in the major bazaar of Karle Nau, in which the current price of some 23 types of foodstuffs (e.g. wheat/four, vegetables, fruits, milk products, meats, oil, etc.) and basic supplies (e.g. tea, salt, matches, soap, etc.) was recorded. This survey can easily be conducted periodically in order to note price changes, especially in such staples as wheat/four.
Advisor, UN-HABITAT. And, at the conclusion of fieldwork, I met with Mohammad Yousaf Pashtun, Minister of Urban Development and Housing, to inform him of AREU’s recent work in the area of urban livelihoods research.  

Focus Groups:

Focus group discussions are valuable ways to explore specific subjects with a gathering of 4-12 individuals. The group setting, in which like individuals (e.g. a specific focus group for men; another for women; widows; children, etc.) come together, sometimes yields information not obtained in key informant interviews or conversations with household members. The role of the group discussion facilitator is crucial, and thus it is best to conduct the sessions after one has gained basic understanding of the larger sociocultural context of the community. In Karte Nau it is possible for women in a neighborhood to meet, especially in the afternoons when they often have free time. The best time for men to assemble is in the early evenings. Private homes are suitable for women’s group discussions, although the more neutral the setting, the better. We did not conduct any planned focus groups during our research per se, although they could be easily arranged with some prior preparation.

Triangulation:

This is a process by which the same subject is examined by consulting more than one key informant/respondent in order to check if the findings are valid and reliable. For example, we checked with a number of individuals about our finding that land on the hillsides of Karte Nau had been distributed/sold to people during the time of Najibullah; some knew about this and others did not, but there were enough positive responses to provide the finding with some degree of validity. In addition, when we learned from one widow that her friend (another widow in our households) had told her that she had heard a rumor that an organization is being formed in Karte Nau that will hire women to make candy and weave carpets, we checked this out in our next conversation with her. Indeed, a neighbor girl had stopped by to tell her. We did not have time to follow this up in more detail and we still do not know if it is true. This is, however, another example of how to triangulate inquiry.

Taking Fieldnotes:

If conversations and observations are recorded in detail as they occur, research findings are not forgotten. This is always not easy to accomplish, however, and may not even be the best way to conduct fieldwork. For example, in a conversation it may be more crucial to keep it flowing easily and naturally, and to retain the interest of all of the participants. Lengthy recording at the time of what is being said and by whom is not

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18 A separate visit was also made to the Mercy Corps office to discuss their future project for Karte Nau (see NGO Links section below). We should have also visited the Kabul Municipality, but unfortunately did not have the opportunity to do so.

19 Very frequently we did hold group-based discussions, however; these include, for example, discussions at the literacy centers, bakeries, and in a number of households.
conducive to a productive exchange of ideas and opinions. Retaining eye contact with
the respondent is also very important during a conversation. Thus a simple system of
quick recording/shorthand should be developed by the fieldworker in which a word, short
phrase, or symbol can be recorded during discussion which can later be enlarged upon
and elaborated during later review sessions.20

On some of our visits with households, we experimented with not taking
fieldnotes at all during our conversations. This resulted in a different type of interaction
at the time of discussion, which was much freer and without structure, but later
necessitated more detailed discussion/review prior to write-up. Field researchers should
continually strive to improve their memory skills; this usually occurs as research
progresses and focal topics become more familiar.

Following every visit to the field, Bashir, Nasreen, and I met at length to review
the fieldnotes we had respectively assembled. Sometimes called a debriefing, this review
is crucial for correct interpretation of events and verbal exchange.

Fieldnote Write-up:

A written description of a lengthy conversation, of necessity, reduces the
complexity of the event. It becomes a simplified written record of a complex social
interaction. Following initial review, all three of the members of our team wrote up
individual fieldnotes from each discussion. Upon comparison, these separate recordings
often yielded different insights about the interaction, which were then also discussed in
detail. (For example, the exceedingly complex refugee history of Case Study #1 was
initially interpreted and recorded quite differently by all three of us. Upon discussion of
our different accounts, we ascertained specific areas of enquiry, reviewed them with the
household on our next visit, and finally arrived at a basically correct refugee history of
this unit.) These detailed but informal fieldnote write-ups formed the basis for the
resultant case studies and discussions included in Appendix A.

For each 1/2 day of fieldwork, at least 1/2 day of write-up is required, if not more.
This must be undertaken as soon as possible following work in the field, so that important
details are not forgotten and one household’s responses are not confused with another.

My field assistants, who had never undertaken anthropological work before, at
first prepared brief factual write-ups of our field activities with little detail or description.
After reading my drafts and obtaining some guidance, however, their reporting came to
include some of the desired “thick description” of valuable details necessary for
anthropological enquiry. Bashir and Nasreen wrote their reports by hand, while I used a
computer for my fieldnotes and also to prepare summary fieldnote write-ups.21

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20 The quick sketching of kinship diagrams during conversations about relatives works very well in this
regard, although it does take some practice. See section on Researching Social Assets of the Household.
21 Both Bashir and Nasreen were computer-literate, however, and thus if computers had been available they
could have also utilized them for their fieldnote write-up.
Record-Keeping/Organizing Data:

A basic diary should be kept in which brief daily entries are made listing basic field activities—e.g. various respondents met with that day, timing and location of discussions, general topics covered, etc.

A paper file (and computer file) for each household was prepared, and separate household identification numbers were assigned. Color-coordination of paper files helps, with all returned refugees, all IDPs, etc., assigned specific colors. The household file becomes an ever-increasing collection of all conversations, kinship chart (see below), map of community indicating location of household, map of compound and room(s), etc. It can also contain reminders to the researchers of important topics to follow up on and clarify with respondents on future visits, along with new areas of inquiry for future discussions. Each file should be reviewed in detail prior to the next visit to the household in order to refresh one's memory.

Other separate but similar files should be developed for each relevant institution/organization in the community and the wider macro-context.

Photography, Videos, and Tape Recording:

The use of photography in the field is an excellent means by which to illustrate a report and/or to use for training purposes. The clear permission of all concerned—both male and female household members—must be obtained prior to taking any photos especially inside a compound, however. Participants should also be told in detail for what purposes the pictures will be used. Copies of resulting photos often make excellent gifts for those respondents appearing in the pictures, and photos of children are especially appreciated. The conservative nature of many households/regions of Afghanistan may prohibits the use of cameras, however, and in these cases no attempt to photograph should be made.

Video cameras are a bit more problematical. In spite of their popularity at weddings of the middle class and wealthy, their use in field studies concerning the urban poor is limited, largely because of the possible misinterpretation on the part of participants as to what the films will be used for. If video cameras are used, excellent rapport with the household must be first developed.

The tape recording of conversations is quite problematical too, with many opportunities for misinterpretation of usage. In addition, the subsequent transcribing of the completed tape is extremely time-consuming. A fieldworker may also become lazy during the discussion and pay less attention to the important nuances of social exchange, letting the tape recorder do all of the work.

Researching Physical Assets of the Household:

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22 For example, Jo Grace took a series of photos in some of the households included in our sample and, when developed, we distributed copies to the family members. They were very much appreciated.
Visiting a household allows for careful observation of a variety of physical assets, which should be recorded in detail. Appendix B includes comprehensive lists of the basic physical assets found to be present in the households of Case Studies #1, #2, and #3. In more long-term research undertakings, these lists can be periodically updated and compared for possible accumulation or depletion of assets over time.

All of the households in our sample are poor, but information contained in the lists for the three separate units shows that the household in Case Study #3 is somewhat better off vis-à-vis physical assets. Not only are there "luxury items" such as a wall clock and wall mirror present. The unit also possesses a tandur oven in which they bake their own bread, which necessitates the purchase of fuel and flour. Indeed, this is the only unit out of the three which owns its property/compound, and the tandur oven is also a symbol of permanence and security.

It is comparatively easy to take note of such household trappings, although a number of visits are usually required to gather sufficient baseline data. Not only observation but also conversation is necessary to understand the sources of specific assets, and text should accompany the listing where necessary. For example, the beds present in Case Study #1 had been given to the household by their neighbor in Pakistan, and the knotted rug present in Case Study #2 had been given to the widowed head-of-household by her neighbor/cousin. In contrast, the mat/gilam in Case Study #3 had been purchased by the head-of-household with cash he had obtained by working with CARE last winter, and its presence in the household had greatly increased the self-esteem of both husband and wife.

Another example of how conversation is necessary to correctly interpret the presence of physical assets concerns the sewing machine on the list of Case Study #3. When I noticed the table-sewing machine in the corner of the room, I asked if any of the women in the household sewed. The answer was negative. Seemingly it was not really a working sewing machine, but was "just a table" that someone had given to them for safe keeping, although the machine was clearly visible beneath the table. Covered with a large white cloth, they used it as a storage area for medicine and prescriptions. We have no reason to doubt them, but this could also be a case of disguising a household asset and source of income generation. If we had conducted fieldwork for a longer period of time, trust in us would have increased, and a clearer picture of the sewing machine—and the household economy—would emerge.

On the basis of our repeated conversations concerning household members’ economic activities, it was also possible to calculate a general figure for the approximate monthly cash income obtained by each household, all of which are extremely vulnerable.-Case Study #1 (7 members): 1500 afghanis; Case Study #2 (4 members): 1480 afghanis; Case Study #3 (11 members): 4200 afghanis. Refer to the detailed case studies in Appendix A for more information about the various types of employment some household members in these units have managed to obtain, all of which are in the informal sector.
Researching Social Assets of the Household:

The sketching of a simple *kinship chart* or diagram is an important first step in understanding the composition and structure of a specific household (i.e. individuals who share the same cooking pot). This can be initially accomplished during conversation with respondents and then refined later. Appendix C contains illustration of a kinship chart for the sample household in Case Study #3, which is a large family of 11 members. The household is enclosed in a box, with triangles standing for males and circles for females. Each line of triangles and circles includes members of one generation. This family contains three generations, with the patriarch colored in with ink as a reference point (often referred to as *ego*). The symbol of $=$ stands for marriage, and a slash through a triangle or circle shows that the individual is deceased. Siblings are linked by a connecting line drawn above the symbol. Offspring are linked with their parents by a vertical line.

Thus the patriarch or head-of-household, Yar Mohammad, is married to Gul Jon, and they have three sons and one daughter. Two sons are married (the oldest has been missing for the past four years which is indicated by an arrow leading out of the box), and two daughters-in-law also live in the household. They have four grandchildren—two grandsons and two granddaughters.

Based on in-depth conversation about extended family support networks, this particular kinship chart also indicates that the household has received important financial assistance from extended relatives, which is illustrated by dark arrows. The arrow on the left shows that the head-of-household’s relatives in Logar have provided assistance—more specifically, a loan of 7,000 afghanis was obtained from them four years ago which was used for foodstuffs, along with another loan of 100 sen of wheat from another relative. These loans are still outstanding. A second arrow leading into the household on the right side of the chart shows that additional assistance has been obtained from the maternal uncle (mother’s brother) of the household matriarch, Gul Jon. This individual, who lives in Kabul, provides all funds associated with the education of the children in the household—the purchase of school supplies, fees for a private English course and a calligraphy course, etc.

In all of our discussions, however, we did not find one case of a household being provided with remittances by relatives from abroad. Extended family members were often residing in Pakistan, but they were either not on good relations or, more infrequently, the unit in Pakistan was also experiencing economic difficulties and could not help even if it was so inclined.

Through on-going discussion, we explored each household’s social networks—with neighbors, along with friends and relatives living in Kabul, other regions of Afghanistan, and in other countries. Many respondents first stated that they “didn’t have
anyone they could rely upon, probably in an attempt to prove to our research team (whom they initially thought may provide them with assistance) that they were in immediate need of help. With time and more probing (i.e. questioning in different ways), however, they were more forthcoming with additional information about their social relations, which we have only begun to understand. Repeated visits, along with observation, helped considerably. For example, in Case Study #2, the widowed head-of-household, Yasmin, initially told us that she did not really know her immediate neighbors very well. On later occasions, however, we found her attending one neighbor’s wedding, chatting at length over the wall with another, and obtaining multiple containers of water from another neighbor’s water source on a daily basis. Initial responses to questioning may be incomplete and misleading, and in-depth discussion/observation is also required.

Not having relevant research results from either urban or rural areas of Afghanistan with which to compare, it is premature to state definitively that there are low levels of social cohesion exhibited by our small sample of urban households in Kabul. But, similar to the situation in Kosovo “in the urban areas due to the high rates of immigration and displacement,” (Westley and Mikhalev 2002:31), it was difficult for our respondents to talk generally about their wider neighborhood/community. Other than immediate neighbors, they did not know a large number of people in Karte Nan, which is very diverse in its complex composition of many returned refugees and IDPs. Social networks with relatives living near and/or far also appear fragmented, as many respondents stated that their poor economic situation precluded exchange (i.e. extensive visiting, entertaining, and provision of financial assistance). Another common concern voiced by all households was the lack of wasita (social connections; access to power) which made them feel insecure and vulnerable. More detailed analysis of social networks and other findings gleaned during this short period of fieldwork is included in a separate report.

One other point concerning the importance of open-ended discussion in order to obtain a respondent’s perspective concerns the widowed head-of-household in Case Study #2 and her social networks. Having endured an extremely difficult life—being widowed twice, being beaten by her brother-in-law, having her daughters “sold” by her in-laws, now enduring poverty, etc.—Yasmin feels powerless to explain her bad luck. While we were discussing health issues and not social relations per se, the role of mullahs came up, and my assistant noted that there was a famous mullah who even performs various treatments against jadu (black magic). She made plans to visit this specialist in the near future, because jadu is not only believed to be involved in illness causation but also to be the cause of extremely negative social relations such as she has faced over the years. We did not have additional opportunity to explore her perceptions in this area in any more detail, but, as this case illustrates, conversations are often multi-faceted in nature, and important information concerning one subject may be learned during discussions of another.

Developing Household Livelihood Profiles:

Information concerning the complex livelihoods of our small sample of households in Karte Nau that was assembled during this short period of fieldwork is skeletal in nature, but provides interesting insights as to how these poor units have utilized their diverse assets in the past, and how they are combining their limited assets at present in order to survive in the uncertain but exciting context of the burgeoning capital.

From a careful review of all of the fieldnotes assembled of conversations and observations undertaken with a specific unit, it is possible to begin to develop a household livelihood profile. Illustration is included here with focus upon the IDP household in Case Study #3. Appendix D contains a *Summary of Household Assets* (human, social, financial, physical, and natural) for this unit, with both positive and negative aspects included for each category; this pertains largely to the household's situation at present. In contrast, Appendix E presents a temporal perspective in a summary of the household's *General Livelihood Strategies Over Time*, and shows how various types of strategies (e.g. accumulation, adaptive, and coping) may be combined, as is the case at present.

In short, at this point we have assembled baseline data on three households—Case Studies #1, #2, and #3. More long-term research would enable us to further define each household livelihood profile and, most importantly, examine in detail *changes in their livelihood strategies over time*. What will be the outcomes of these planned activities—will their asset bases be strengthened or depleted? What will be the effects of the upcoming winter upon their livelihoods? How will the context of Karte Nau and Kabul City change? All of these are important questions we cannot answer at present but we have learned that it is clearly possible to begin to understand complex urban livelihoods utilizing basic anthropological methods in a short period of time.

**Researching the Impact of Assistance Programmes:**

Households were all very keen to impress upon us that they had received little or no assistance, and that they are presently in dire economic straits—which indeed they are. Returned refugees remembered the cash, wheat, tarp, etc., they had received upon their return in the now distant past. Some units, especially those containing widows, had WFP cards enabling them to obtain five loaves of bread daily at the cost of 1 afghani each; bread was consumed or, in cases of small families, the widows often sold a few loaves on the streets. All households had members who had participated in the CARE cash-for-work project last winter/spring, and this was consistently remembered as being a great help. Especially widows are desperate for the assistance of the NGO to begin again. Interestingly, a trio of the widows (i.e. women in Case Study #1, Case Study #2, and Discussion #1) who participated in the CARE project have formed lasting social relations and now visit each other periodically, providing each other with empathetic friendship and information exchange.

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25 AREU has conducted a detailed quantitative survey concerning the impact of this project.
However, in addition to these, we found no active programme or project in which the households included in our small sample are presently involved. Thus we did not have the opportunity to explore in detail the impact of assistance programmes upon their livelihoods at present. Marginalized and disheartened, males and females in most units are uncertain about their future and extremely insecure. Indeed, similar to the findings of Turton and Marsden (2002), most returned refugees with whom we spoke are questioning why they ever returned to Afghanistan and feel “taken for a ride”—although they are unclear as to by whom.

**NGO Links:**

As noted above, we were fortunate to be able to attend a crowded meeting of all of the 22 wakils (local government representatives) of District 8 held one morning at the District Government Office of the Rais-i-Naya (District Leader) in Karte Nau, which was our introduction to the complex context of local politics. At this meeting, Afghan representatives from two NGOs (Relief International and Mercy Corps) presented brief summaries of their future interventions for the district. Relief International has plans for additional classes in female literacy, while Mercy Corps plans to repair 700 war-damaged houses in District 8, in which owners will finance 60% of the cost and the NGO will provide the remainder.

My team later went to the Main Office of Mercy Corps in Taimani to further discuss this innovative project with the NGO representative who had been present at the government meeting.26 This dedicated Project Coordinator discussed the project, “Short-Term Integration Through Community Empowerment,” and said that they planned to organize the communities—both males and females—prior to house repair. Subsequently each home would have two earthquake-proof rooms and a hallway constructed. No compounds had been chosen yet, and this would be a self-selection process following advertisements on television and radio. Poor households would also be included wherever possible.

How about the wakils' negative responses to their work? The Project Coordinator said that they had had received similar responses from government representatives in District 5, where they are also beginning the project. In short, the NGO’s approach is one of attempting to circumvent the existing wakil power structure, which in many cases may be corrupt, and engendering open participation by the community.

This is an example (of which there are many) of an NGO undertaking which would be an excellent link for our long-term Urban Livelihoods Research Project, allowing for both action and analysis. When we described in more detail the purpose of our livelihoods fieldwork in Karte Nau and future AREU research, the Project Coordinator was clearly interested and stressed that they were similarly planning to study what the effects of the project would be upon the respective households. It is NGO undertakings such as this which will provide a relevant project setting for our long-term work, enabling not only in-depth study of urban livelihoods but also providing a

26 Dr. Nematullah Bizhan, Project Coordinator, Mercy Corps, Kabul
fascinating context in which to study the dynamics of local government, leadership, and community participation.

**More Participatory Field Methods:**

Many other additional field methods exist which are more participatory in nature and usually involve small groups of people. Some of these include the following:

**Wealth Ranking** - Participants identify different wealth groups in the community/neighborhood and rank all households accordingly—e.g. as poor, middle-class, and rich—utilizing their own definitions and characteristics of each group. Where people are literate, cards upon which names of heads-of-household are written may be utilized. Otherwise, stones or beans may be sorted into piles while household names are recorded. **NOTE:** We did not have much success with this methodology. Respondents did not know many other households in their neighborhoods very well, and were sometimes reluctant to discuss other units’ socioeconomic standing. This does not mean, however, that in other research settings it could not yield important information.

**Mapping** - Participants draw a large map of their community/neighborhood, discussing what to include, such as key institutions/organizations, and why. Group discussions during and after the exercise should be carefully recorded. **NOTE:** This method was also not very successful in our recent fieldwork, with respondents more content to discuss verbally the location and importance of various institutions/organizations in Karte Nau rather than record them on paper. Again, the method itself holds merit; the context in which it was utilized was not suitable and, in spite of our encouragement, participants were embarrassed to draw on large pieces of paper.

Because livelihoods research is basically a people-centered approach, such participatory methods hold much promise. Perhaps methods such as the two listed above would have better results in the context of a specific intervention, such as an NGO project or programme in which community participation was being actively fostered, and a specific goal was in mind. This was not the case for our short-term fieldwork, but it would be in the future long-term Urban Livelihoods Research Project.

**ETHICS INVOLVED IN FIELDWORK:**

**Consent of Those Participating in Research:**

Clear consent from all respondents/participants in the research undertaking must be first obtained. So that they can make their decision as to participate or not, they should be first given a complete introduction to the research in language they can clearly understand. This should includes the name of the organization conducting the work, the central purpose of the research, examples of what will be asked of them, and what will be required of them in terms of their time. Any questions they have should be answered
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honestly and in detail. These topics should also be reviewed with the participating individuals periodically as work progresses, and any qualms should be clarified.

**Anonymity of Key Informants/Respondents:**

As mentioned in our general introduction to this short-term research presented above, we stress that no one's name or the names of family members will be utilized in the reports generated from this undertaking. Correspondingly, all of the names of the key informants/respondents in the Case Studies/Discussions have been changed. Their street addresses are also quite anonymous, as they pertain to a very general location such as Street 1 or Street 2 in Karte Nau.

However, in the context of present-day Karte Nau it appears that a number of desperate individuals are not very concerned with their anonymity, as many Kabulis have been in earlier times. For example, almost every day that we conducted fieldwork poor women would come up to our parked van and beg us to please record their names, which implied for them that they would be future recipients of some type of assistance. Other women came into the compounds of some of our key informants (e.g. Case Study #1) and interrupted our discussions in the hope of having their name recorded by our visiting team for future assistance—they did not discriminate about what type of aid it would be—anything, anywhere, anyhow. We repeatedly told them that our work did not directly pertain to aid distribution, but few believed us.

In spite of these occurrences, anonymity of all respondents must be preserved. In addition, interviewers must not informally share any information gathered during their research with others.

**Sensitive Conversation Topics:**

Although respondents are usually eager to relate the stories of their refugee experiences and other events during the past years of conflict and displacement, these in-depth discussions frequently call up painful memories. Often individuals—both female and male—weep during our conversations dealing with family members who had been killed or lost, homes that had been destroyed, etc., and we had to take a break before proceeding. In some cases we did not continue to probe too deeply due to the emotional state of the respondent, and rather waited until another visit to glean more information. Similar to the research situation in post-war Kosovo (Westley and Mikhalev 2002), the sharing of these stories is deeply personal, and may require extra time spent in discussion. In some cases field workers themselves have also undergone trauma, and may require some emotional support themselves.

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27 While working on a national demographic study based in the Ministry of Planning in Kabul in the 1970s, I found that respondents were very fearful of having their names and the names of their families recorded and we were especially careful to provide complete anonymity. This was also the case later during the time of Najibullah.
The crucial and often interrelated topics of *politics*, *ethnic relations* and, in some cases, *religion* are central to understanding present-day Afghanistan and, correspondingly, the macro-, meso-, and micro-contexts of our sample of households. Often, however, these are also extremely sensitive issues. Conducting our short-term fieldwork in a non-threatening mode, we did not directly introduce these topics for discussion, and respondents themselves also did not bring them up except occasionally. Our conversations indirectly touched upon these subjects constantly, however (e.g. the repeated mention of households' lack of *wasita*, or social connections/access to power; the relating of family tragedies in their respective political context, etc.). More intensive long-term research in which additional trust is established would lead to increased understanding in these critical areas. In short, it is best to take plenty of time to get to know respondents and allow them to trust the researcher before discussing such volatile subjects in great detail.

**Security Issues:**

Security never presented itself as a concern during our recent fieldwork in Karte Nau, but it could easily become one. Neighborhoods and urban settings vary in this regard. In general, office colleagues should be aware of the field team's plans each day—where they are going and when they plan to return. We carried out all of our research during the day, with the use of a private van which greatly facilitated our work. If conversations are held after dark, which may be necessary to reach working males who are absent from the household until evening, additional care must be taken. It is also best to work in a team rather than alone and, if both individuals are involved in discussions in different locations at the same time, they should periodically check on one another.

**Gender:**

Each sociocultural context must be explored and gender norms for the specific urban center, neighborhood, and household must be clearly ascertained very early in the fieldwork process. Norms must be carefully respected by fieldworkers in both the public and private spheres.

Some topics (e.g. many health-related issues, family decision-making, etc.) are best discussed one-on-one or among only females or only males, and in these cases gender-segregated visits/sessions should be arranged.

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28 I had anticipated that these topics would come up in conversation more directly than they did. It seemed that people were tired of intense political discussion/debate and simply wanted to get on with their lives. Perhaps there was also an element of fear involved here. The presence of a foreigner is always rather unusual, and this undoubtedly altered the type of social exchange in our fieldwork undertakings too.


30 Early in our fieldwork, I mentioned to my team and others that it would be interesting to visit some of our households in Karte Nau in the evenings, but this was met with negativity—not only due to security issues but also because it was felt that visits at that time (especially by a foreigner) could be interpreted as espionage.
To Eat or Not to Eat:

Hospitality is a key aspect of Afghan culture, regardless of a household’s economic standing, and is linked with concepts of cementing positive social relations and also gift-giving. However, poor units are often struggling to provide food for their own members, much less guests. The presence of an interviewing team at mealtime may compel a family to feel that they must provide food for them too. Thus the best tactic is to not be present in a household at mealtime, and to refuse to eat. This is easier said than done. Tea and candy may be served at any time, and to refuse this offering would be extremely impolite. When the timing of visits is pre-established (and even if the team has stressed that they will only drink a cup of tea—nothing else), a household may still prepare food. In those cases, it would also be impolite to refuse their fare and small amounts should be consumed. To eat with them is to honor them.

On the positive side, much can also be learned about diet, family dynamics, etc., by partaking of a meal with a family. For example, during a meal we were compelled to eat with Case Study #3, the son washed our hands with a pitcher of water and a bowl, as the daughter-in-law spread the distarkhawn (food cloth) on the floor in front of us with a smile and served us the food; she is head cook and is firmly in control. We were then told a long story by the head-of-household about the religious importance of guests, to which the whole family (especially the young children and grandchildren) carefully listened and agreed with.

Gifts for Respondents:

The provision of small gifts to sample households by fieldworkers is, in some ways, the flip-side of the presentation of food or tea for a visiting team. It is not necessary, but this action is valuable in that it serves to further cement positive social relations. As our research progressed and the households had spent considerable time with us in our discussions, we decided to purchase some small items (i.e. soap, pencils, biscuits, or candy) for them on our way to Karte Nau. At the close of each of our second and third conversations with Case Studies #1, #2, and #3, we quietly gave a small sack containing two of the above items to one of the adults in the household as we left the compounds. Judging by our reception at subsequent visits, this was very well-received, although in the traditional Afghan manner the bags were taken with no outward emotion, they were never opened in our presence, and no mention of the gifts was ever made.

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31 For example, when we pre-arranged times for our visits in three households, we were served okra cooked with tomatoes and onions, along with bread, and later salted corn, tea, and hard candy (Case Study #1); buloni (fried leek pancakes), tea, and hard candy (Case Study #2); and potatoes in a sauce of tomatoes and onions with reconstituted dried yogurt, home-made tandur bread, and raw onions/greens, followed by tea and hard candy (Case Study #3).
Field teams must decide when and if to undertake such token gift-giving. If so, continuity should be maintained between sample households, who may compare notes at a later date.

**Serious Illness in a Household:**

A case may occur during fieldwork in which, for example, an infant or other family member in a sample household one visits is dangerously ill. In serious life-or-death cases of any household member, ethical considerations compel the fieldworker to help the family immediately find medical care.

**Information Feedback:**

Whenever possible, the information gathered from households and summarized in subsequent reports should be checked with/shared with the sources of information: the key informants and respondents.

**CONCLUSION:**

Conducted in Karte Nau, a dynamic section of Kabul which is the recent recipient of thousands of returned refugees and IDPs, this short-term anthropological research has tested a variety of qualitative field methods. In the process, basic information about the complex livelihoods of a small sample of poor households has been assembled. Both male and female respondents were eager to relate to us their diverse livelihood strategies, both past and present. Now struggling to survive in the highly competitive cash economy of the capital city, lack of employment, insecure living arrangements, and lack of basic amenities (water and electricity) are the primary problems they face. In spite of many serious difficulties and a dearth of viable interventions, however, children from all sample households are attending school, and the families continue look to the future with some hope.

The upcoming Urban Livelihoods Research Project of AREU can build upon the various methods outlined here, which can be refined and tailored to the specific urban field sites to be selected throughout Afghanistan. Long-term research will enable more trust to be established with respondents, and various changes in the livelihood strategies and outcomes of participating households will be able to be carefully monitored and analyzed over time. Research carried out in coordination with an on-going NGO project will facilitate the utilization of more participatory field methods, and additional attention can be paid to the study of specific links between micro-, meso-, and macro-contexts. The potential also exists to combine quantitative survey data of the NGO with qualitative data on livelihoods gathered by the project—an iterative process utilizing a variety of methodological approaches by which we can come to better understand the realities of the urban poor, and correspondingly act more effectively to improve their livelihoods.
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