



Provide social protection systems to ease heavy reliance on social networks and reduce vulnerability

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Contents

Social networks: An indispensable asset for urban dwellers 1

Community-level collective action: holding authorities accountable for service delivery 2

The limitations of social assets 3

RECOMMENDATIONS 4

About the Authors

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Overview

Social assets represent the most important fallback for poor and vulnerable urban families who lack material resources, particularly in developing countries where the state is either unable or unwilling to provide social protection for its citizens.¹ In the Afghan urban context, the question is whether social relations and informal support networks are enough to provide a "cushion" for families facing crisis and emergencies, especially in a post-conflict setting where there is assumed to be a breakdown in broader social cohesion.

Longitudinal research conducted by the **Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU)** in three cities shows that social safety nets are in wide existence across Afghanistan and are indispensable in maintaining livelihoods.² However, despite the many benefits provided by these social networks, they rarely extend beyond the poor communities themselves and overuse may lead to their failure.

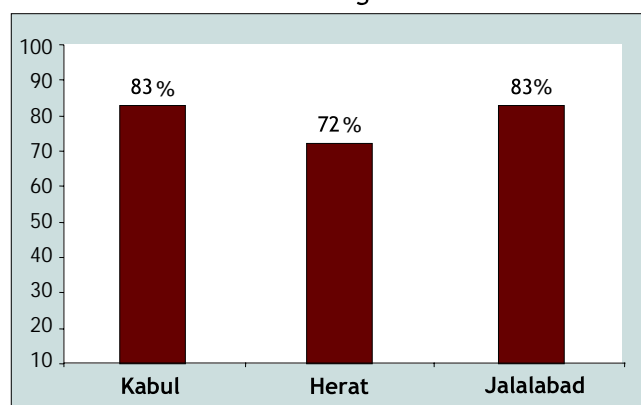
This Policy Note discusses how much urban families tend to lean on social relations, and how such networks are not sufficient to lift them out of poverty. It presents policy recommendations (see page 4) addressing this issue, including putting in place institutionalised social protection systems.

Social networks: An indispensable asset for urban dwellers

The lives of poor urban dwellers in Afghanistan are characterised by: the need to engage in insecure, unprotected, highly seasonal and low-income work opportunities in the informal economy; residence in informal settlements exposed to high tenure insecurity; and the need to access informal sources of credit to afford the most basic household expenditures. In the

absence of any state-provided social protection mechanisms, security is almost exclusively provided by the neighbourhood community, extended family or wider kin. In urban Afghanistan, family and neighbourhood connections overlap quite significantly. For instance, the majority of study households in each city lived in proximity with relatives, who, more often than not,

Figure 1. *Share of households (HH) with a relative in the neighbourhood*



¹ For example, H.G. Bohle: Neue Ansätze der Geographischen Risikoforschung. Ein Analyserahmen zur Bestimmung nachhaltiger Lebenssicherung von Armutsgruppen. Die Erde 2001 (132): 119-140.

² Long-term research followed 40 households each in the cities of Herat, Kabul and Jalalabad, which was complemented by short-term reconnaissance studies in Mazar-i-Sharif and Pul-i-Khumri. For more information on the methodology and objective of this research, see Beall, J. and Schüte, S., 2006, Urban Livelihoods in Afghanistan, Kabul: AREU.

acted as an important source of assistance (see Figures 1 and 2). This “spatial strategy” of settling within a family or community network represents the most reliable security mechanism in place for poor urban households susceptible to multiple risks and hardships.

The benefits of these social networks are numerous. As illustrated in Figure 3, they include: relatives offering childcare and enabling women to access paid work, neighbours providing food and credit during times of extended income loss, and information about work opportunities being channelled through the community. Likewise, for a few households who are closely embedded in a network of family relations, having such strong social assets has been decisive in enabling children to go to school, as it has freed them from relying on child workers to contribute to the household income.

These benefits extend to the most vulnerable as well. There were examples in the study sample where households, headed by persons with disability, were bound into dense social networks or supported by co-residential relatives living in the same compound. Such strong relations often helped them access work, cope with health problems or receive other forms of support and assistance. This was especially apparent in Jalalabad, where households headed by disabled persons realised the highest incomes across the three long-term study sites. They also had a smaller income deficit relative to households with able-bodied members because of their ability to access opportunities through their membership in social networks (see Figure 4).

Poor urban Afghans in the study sites also benefit from other widespread community-based systems of self-help and reciprocity. For instance, when a family suffers the death of a member, many communities pool money to help defray funeral costs. An indigenous practice called *ashar* – in which neighbours gather together to complete

activities such as construction or cooking for festivals and weddings – is another common example of mutual obligatory support and reciprocal sharing of work. In the study areas, this practice was most commonly applied in house construction or maintenance. *Ashar* played an important role in the development of newly emerging settlements, while building up and affirming neighbourhood ties and cohesion. Thus, it is not surprising that poor and vulnerable people invest seemingly disproportionate amounts of time and energy in developing and protecting their social assets: visiting distant relatives, attending festivals together with kin and community, investing time and resources in supporting people through life cycle events, such as weddings and funerals, confident that their concern and assistance will be reciprocated.

Community-level collective action: holding authorities accountable for service delivery

Another form of social asset is community-level collective action or representation to the authorities, exercised by or on behalf of community members subject to instances of social injustice. Kabul and Jalalabad each provided examples of communities mobilising their social networks to ward off eviction and, in some cases, secure tenure.

Collective activities can help inject a feeling of unity and solidarity among community members, even if they originate from different provinces. However, there were instances to indicate that when there is more diversity in a community, reciprocity tends to be more limited than in homogeneous settlements. In a number of contexts, self-help systems were delimited by tribal or ethnic boundaries. In a Pul-i-Khumri settlement, for example, mutuality was confined solely among Ismailis in the community; none of the Hazara households were enlisted. Similarly in some Mazar-i-Sharif settlements, ethnic groups that comprise the majority formed exclusive networks, excluding the minority.

Figure 2. Median number of relatives within the neighbourhood

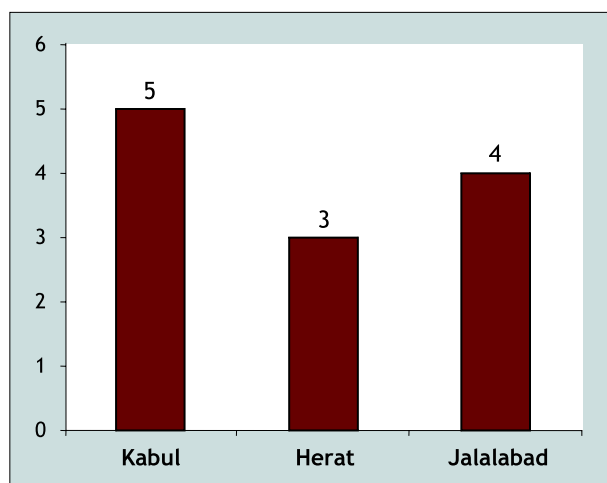
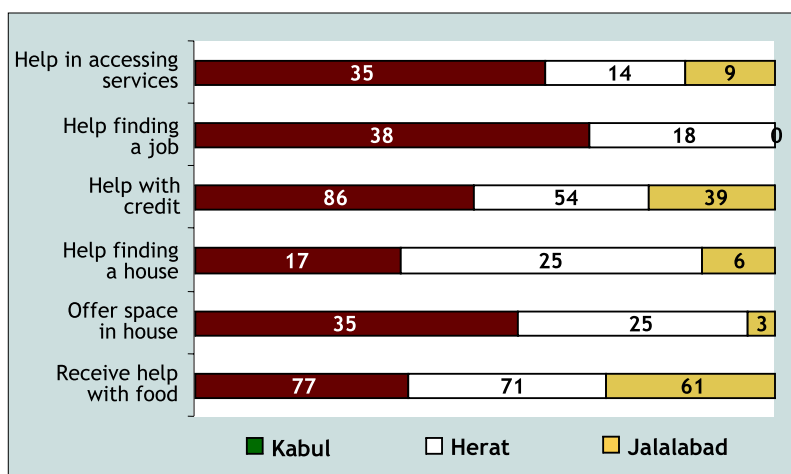


Figure 3. Instances of assistance received through social relations

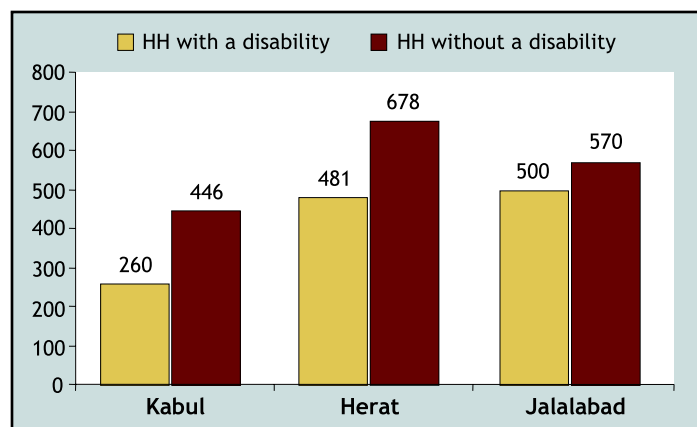


The limitations of social assets

Despite all the benefits derived from social assets in preventing or managing vulnerability, the informal social networks of the urban poor very rarely reach beyond their own neighbourhood or kin. There was very little evidence of poor families being able to cultivate social relations with wealthier individuals in the study sites. This poses a particular problem: while the majority of the urban poor respondents appear to be tightly linked with strong social networks, such support systems basically work on a survivalist level and the resources acquired through them rarely allow people to rise above poverty. This is also the reason why these social networks remain highly vulnerable to overuse: without basic material resources in place, mutual assistance is difficult to sustain and the need for continuous support and assistance is likely to erode existing networks. Informal social protection systems could quickly reach their limits, especially among households required to pursue the most precarious and vulnerable livelihood strategies. This group, with a tendency to heavily rely on social networks without the ability to reciprocate, is most at risk of being excluded from kin-based relations. As such, the issue of informal safety nets is double-edged. Their critical importance for urban livelihood security can hardly be overemphasised, yet under conditions of poverty the maintenance of social networks can become a laborious and sometimes even impossible task. This highlights the role of the state in providing social protection for the most vulnerable and facilitating improved access to opportunities that can provide more secure livelihoods for those better able to act independently.

In some contexts relationships that extend beyond the household and family are seen as an indicator of what is referred to as “bridging social capital” (i.e. building social networks across the socio-economic spectrum³) or the ability of organised groups or individual households to link into decision-making and political processes. When the bonds of mutuality and reciprocity can be transformed into civic engagement and representation of collective community interests in decision-making arenas, social assets could be transformed into political assets. There is, however, only little evidence of this having occurred in the communities studied. In fact, the Afghan Disabled Union – a group of self-mobilised disabled veterans in Jalalabad – represented the single example where a disadvantaged social group became organised, entered the political arena, linked up with formal governance institutions and articulated its demands. Moreover, some of its individual members were able to establish vertical social relations transcending their own social boundaries, which allowed them to access opportunities for improving their wellbeing.

Figure 4. Median per capita monthly income (Afs) in households (HH) headed by persons with or without a disability



Extending bounded networks of social support to those that can reach policymakers, planners and intermediaries is clearly difficult in urban Afghanistan. In places where vulnerable communities have suffered displacement, were subjected to insecure tenure and alienated from government, feeling powerless in the face of authority, there is little evidence of poor households being involved or represented in local-level decision-making processes. In the absence of connections to those in power, people sometimes try to achieve influence by way of bribery, as was attempted by a community of returned refugees squatting in tents on private land in Kabul. The community pooled a significant amount of money and approached government officials to pursue a process of land allocation in their native area. The money was accepted, but land distribution never occurred.

While social assets can lead fairly directly to community-level collective action, they translate less easily into representation. In the first place, social asymmetries at the community level mean that not all members are similarly represented, with the interests of more powerful groups usually prevailing. Local community councils (*shuras*) have a long tradition in Afghanistan, but these formally exclude half of the population (women) and are often not representative of the poor or marginalised groups. In addition, successful representation requires a responsive government. This is not always forthcoming in the urban context, whether due to constraints in resources or lack of political will. In the current context, there is a highly politicised environment, characterised by overlap and competition between national and local government agencies operating in cities. This leads to a confusing institutional context where urban development becomes everyone's and no one's responsibility. Thus, in exploring the impact of collective action, representation and local governance on urban livelihoods, it is imperative that the power dynamics at work are recognised and taken into account.

³ Woolcock, M. “The Place of Social Capital in Understanding Social and Economic Outcomes”, *Canadian Journal of Policy Research*, spring 2001, 2(1):11-17.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That poor Afghans eking out a living in cities are resilient and resourceful is undeniable; these qualities were quite apparent in the study sites. However, this does not absolve the government and international donor community of their responsibility to invest in institutionalised social protection systems, employment programmes and physical and social infrastructure. It is precisely because the state has failed to provide such services that the urban poor are forced to rely heavily on informal social networks in order to survive. To reduce the burden on social networks and promote bridging relations between poor families and those in power, the following policy actions are recommended:

1. Develop risk mitigating social protection programmes, supporting a shift away from reliance on the coping capacity and resourcefulness of the urban poor themselves. The asset portfolios of the urban poor are not sufficiently diversified to protect households against economic trends and shocks, or to lift them out of poverty in a lasting way. It is the state's responsibility to protect the most vulnerable and to promote asset diversification to reduce livelihood risks. Requirements to achieve this include:

- Building the political will and capacity of national actors (both government and non-government) to improve their abilities to address social protection issues at the required scale in the urban sector.
- Designing national social protection programmes that address the needs of the most vulnerable (families without able-bodied male workers, families dependent on disabled members for income, etc.), and obtaining the resources required to deliver such programmes.
- Developing and funding urban poverty reduction programmes that go beyond physical upgrading and technical service provision to address social and economic insecurities.

2. Foster and encourage grassroots level community action:

- Look into best practices on inclusive community action approaches. Assess the models that are most relevant and applicable to the Afghan context.
- Pilot innovative projects adapted from other contexts that facilitate community organisation in such areas as provision of infrastructure services, funeral cooperative societies, and self-help groups. This could help widen social protection coverage in urban Afghanistan, while decreasing the burden on the

limited social networks of poor urban dwellers and supporting them in their efforts to manage their livelihoods.

3. Provide greater platforms for poor urban households to become involved in community decision-making processes, thus leveraging their social assets and giving them access to people in positions of power.

Promote broad-ranging representation in *shuras* and similar community governance groups (like the NSP) to include women, younger people and marginalised groups in a settlement.

- Increase understanding among civil servants of the significance of public participation and inclusive processes. Establish incentive structures for municipal and other government officials to encourage the implementation of more inclusive approaches in addressing the needs of poor urban communities.

4. Create improved means for poor urban households to access relevant financial services, including savings, credit and insurance products. The weakness of the national economy renders the urban poor vulnerable in terms of highly limited access to employment and income, making them dependent on borrowing from their social networks.

- Improve access to financial services among poor urban households to allow them to open or expand businesses, increase their income and, in the medium term, reduce dependence on borrowing for daily needs and in emergencies.
- Review existing models of community-based insurance provision. Such schemes could help offset unexpected shocks or expenditures. Analyse which of these models can be transferred to the Afghan context.