Building urban livelihoods: two generations in an unauthorized settlement in Damascus
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Citation for published version (APA):

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4. Structure of the study

In Syria, the notion of research into social issues is not commonly accepted. The notion of research into low-income neighbourhoods or unauthorized settlements is regarded as even more unusual. People in Syria are reluctant to provide formal answers to personal or general questions on social issues. Even a simple question can provoke a suspicious reaction, with people being anxious to know who is asking, why he or she is asking the question and who is going to handle this information. These limitations presented special challenges when conducting this research and in realizing the objectives of this study.

In this chapter I explain what the objectives of the study are, why I selected Duelha for field research, the geography of the neighbourhood and what qualitative and quantitative methods I used to obtain the data. I also deal with the sample structure and the basic social units of the study, such as the Dakhleh, the courtyard, the urban household, families and individuals. I also discuss a number of variables considered in this study.

4.1. Defining the field

In the beginning of the year 2000, I visited a friend’s house for nuns who care for poor families and have committed themselves to social and spiritual activities. Their house was located in a very densely populated and poor area, characterized by narrow streets, primitively shaped and unpainted houses with doors very close to each other, and where a lot of people were sitting outside, drinking tea and smoking water pipes. The area was called Duelha and was located close to the eastern part of old Damascus, near the Bab Sharqi or Eastern Gate of Damascus. On my way back, a young man in his twenties whom I had met a few years earlier stopped me and invited me to have coffee in his house. He was one of the young men I accompanied during a spiritual retreat in the city of Homs, 200 km north of Damascus, where I lived in a Jesuit community. This young man, who lives with his family in Duelha, would later become my key and most trusted respondent.

A few months later, I was discussing the possibility of conducting a PhD study with my then supervisor at Saint Joseph University in Beirut, Libanon. The first place that came to my mind as the location where the fieldwork could be carried out was Duelha where the need to address urban poverty and developmental issues was obvious. At the same time, I had good links, through the friends I mentioned above, with the Roman Catholic Church and the parish of which Duelha was a part.

Thus, the neighbourhood of Duelha became the main focus of my study. I selected Duelha as a poor urban unauthorized settlement area which was initiated illegally on land.
zoned for farming and which was populated mainly by rural migrants. The population of Duelha had come from different parts of the country and had the shared characteristics of a relatively low income and common religious beliefs. Duelha is a neighbourhood populated mainly by Christians, in contrast to the rest of Syria (including Damascus).¹⁹ This concentration of Christians in Duelha can be seen as a major asset in the form of cultural and social capital, from which people can benefit a great deal in building their livelihood strategies. At the same time, being part of an almost exclusively Christian community can also be regarded as a type of social exclusion from the rest of society with negative impacts on the local community. These issues of cultural and social capital and social exclusion are addressed in subsequent chapters.

I considered this area to be very suitable for a case study on urban livelihoods and collective action²⁰ and started making preparations to move in. To delimit the study area, I used some of the criteria from a classic study carried out in 1962 by Chicago scholar Robert Redfield, *The Little Community*. Redfield drew in-depth insights from a holistic study of people in a little community. Although his study referred to a rural area, the criteria he used to delimit his small study area can also be used in urban areas. Redfield’s study indicated four crucial dimensions that helped to define the Duelha case as ‘a little community’:

1. The geographical border is clear and distinct from other places.
2. The area and population numbers are small.
3. The community is homogenous and social changes take place slowly.
4. The community is self-reliant.

On the basis of these criteria, it was easy to delimit the area of Duelha geographically and spatially. Its location on the outskirts of Damascus city, the Syrian capital, and the surrounding area give Duelha clear boundaries (see Map 3.1): Bab Shrqi to the east and the north, Tabaleh to the south and the Al Ghouta area to the west. The area covers about 2 square km and is inhabited by a population of 25,000.

The community is socially fairly homogenous. Most people have low incomes and belong mainly to the Christian faith. However, there are several Christian groups, among which the Greek orthodox, the Armenian, the Maronite, the Syrian, the Roman Catholic and the Kaldanian Church. The largest community is the Greek orthodox community, followed by the Roman Catholic community that makes up 40% of the Duelha population. The latter is the most important population for my case study, since I have access to this community and can rely on the parish documents and archives.

I did not take the criterion of self-reliance into account because it was specifically developed for rural communities, which Duelha is not. On the basis of the criteria and dimensions mentioned above, Duelha is recognizable as a community in both geographical and basic sociological sense.

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¹⁹ Of the total Syrian population (estimated around 17 million in 1991) Christians form less than 10%.

²⁰ As stated in Chapter 1, research on urban communities is not new. It started with the Chicago School, many scholars of which did their research in slums and squatters, like Oscar Lewis in his book *The Study of Slum Culture* (1968) and Gerald D. Sutle in *The Social Order of the Slum* (1968).
Utilizing the “little community” concept also limits the extent to which the study’s conclusions can be extrapolated.

Map 4-1: Map of Damascus

Source: Commercial map
4.2. Objectives of the study and main research questions

The objective of this study is to find out, by focusing on an unauthorized settlement in Damascus, how migrants to urban areas improve their livelihoods. The main issues relevant to this community are related to rural-urban and urban-urban migration, settling in an illegal area, and developing livelihood strategies. The livelihoods framework approach developed by Carney is used as a starting point (Carney, 1999).

More specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do migrants use their capitals to develop a livelihood strategy and how do the sets of capitals change during this process?
2. How does the context of an unauthorized settlement affect the way residents there build up their livelihood strategies?
3. How have livelihood strategies changed over time between the first and the second generations in Duelha?
4.3. Methodology

In this study I used two main ways of collecting information. First, I gathered qualitative data, in which the most important method used was participant observation. This data focused mainly on the objective of obtaining information on livelihood profiling and of understanding changes in livelihood strategies over time. Secondly, I collected 1) quantitative data on 106 households living in the study area by means of a survey; 2) basic quantitative survey data on enterprises in the market area; and 3) qualitative data through more in-depth interviews of households in two Dakhles. Secondary materials were consulted in order to acquire an overall view of the characteristics of the population and the area’s infrastructure.

Acting openly as a researcher was not a feasible option because of the general social distrust towards ‘people asking questions’, who are suspected of being associated with the government. Therefore, I worked as a social worker affiliated to the Roman Catholic Church, carrying out social activities and welfare work for a period of 18 months, during...
the years 2001 to 2003. According to many well-known anthropologists and social scientists, participant observation is crucial to understanding individuals and shared concerns in a community. Johnson (1978: 38) clarifies this as follows:

‘One of the main lessons of participant observation is that people are rarely ignorant about their self-interest, and are usually capable of discussing at great length and with great understanding how they meet their basic needs. Through unstructured interviews, open conversation and indirect questions I was able to successfully collect rich first-hand data.’

Singerman also (1995) stressed the importance of participant observation methods, which helped her to conduct a study in a low-income neighbourhood in Egypt. She emphasizes:

“I adopted a methodology of participant observation and lived with a family in a densely populated neighbourhood in central Cairo that dated back to medieval times. Without this foundation in everyday life of the community, it would have impossible to recognize and understand their political activity. Methodologically, one has to invest time in understanding individual problems before one can identify shared concerns and community dilemmas. Publicly and privately recounted stories, experiences, struggle, fights, and debates gradually sensitize an observer to the politics of the community.” (Singerman 1995: 17).

These statements show the need and the validity of the methodology chosen – all the more so since I was unable to act openly as a researcher and depended on participant observation to collect much of the information I needed. However, such choice of method limits the conclusions mainly to this community, as there was no comparable access to the Orthodox Greek and Moslem communities in the case of Duelha. It also introduces a certain bias because I, as a researcher worked within the Church, an institution having a large degree of social control in the community.

For the sake of wider validity, I not only relied on qualitative data collection, but also collected quantitative data on the majority of Catholic families and other statistical demographic data. By working for part of my time as a volunteer in the community and local church I was able to gain access to documented statistical information collected by the church such as the dates of marriages, dates and places of birth and numbers of children. The survey carried out under auspices of the church, did cover the geographical area of Duelha fairly completely. The records of the church indicated where member households lived, and in each Dahkle, selected households were interviewed. However, the final selection depended on the availability of the respondents found.

This study was carried out in two phases. The first phase comprised an anthropological holistic approach based on ethnographical mapping and on observing large and broad sections of the local community in their everyday life (first-hand data collection). Teaching English as second language provided me with a considerable amount of information on the local community and its inhabitants. Moreover, meeting with young people at the church “group prayer” was essential to obtain insights into the ideas of the younger generation. Many of these young men and women invited me to their courtyards and introduced me to their family members. The hospitality of Syrian families, especially
rural inhabitants, enabled me to become accepted into the community within a very short time. I attended several marriages, one of them in a village located in the rural area of Homs, 80 km towards the centre of the Syrian desert called Saded (see Map 4.1). Another marriage took place in a village called Khabab, in the south of the country in the surroundings of the city called Sweda. I spent a few days in these villages, observing and asking questions regarding the notions of livelihood and migration. Moreover, I attended several marriages in Duelha itself. I will describe these marriages ceremonies in detail later, since they serve as indicators for many characteristics of social and cultural capitals.

In the second phase I integrated contemporary concepts such as livelihood strategies in unauthorized settlements. The notion of “capitals” came to the fore during the study and a survey was carried out among 106 households21, which aimed to measure these capitals. These capitals constitute the theoretical framework of the livelihood strategy approach utilized in this study.

4.4. Sampling

In building up a network of respondents, I employed (snow–balling) methods. By doing so I copied the example of Singermann (1995) who described how she identified her sample in an Egyptian neighbourhood. Starting with nine people, she was able to get in touch and get to know 197 men, 135 women and a number of children, comprising a sample of 350 respondents in total. She managed to deal with this network inside the community, without the respondents necessarily knowing each other. The researcher made sure that she visited them in their houses and that she became ‘immersed’ in the community. She lived in one of the families in the community and used that as a basis from which to build and maintain relationships and strong friendships. The family she used to live with introduced her to 92 persons.

In my case, I was able to build a network through relationships with many families and individuals. The social and cultural events I participated in generated a wide range of respondents who I visited in their houses, with whom I participated in social events, attending their parties and with whom I discussed private and personal issues.

Together, these social networks represent the local Christian community of Duelha. This community includes heads of households, men and woman, students, mothers, fathers, employed and unemployed individuals. The respondents from the formal sector were employed in government offices and in the health care sector, as teachers, doctors, priests and nuns. In addition, many people (also) worked in the informal sector. I was able to contact a variety of people in their societal networks who did not live in Duelha. These social networks include members of all the Christian Churches: Roman Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, and Maronite Churches.

Qualitative data was obtained from informal interviews with different groups of families and individuals from all church groups. Interviews were held with:

21 The 106 households selected for the survey were part of the Roman Catholic Church and part of a broader Church project.
✓ 35 individual boys and girls from a prayer group named University (Al Jameiine) who gather every Saturday in the church centre, led by a priest and a nun, who facilitate the dynamics of the group. In this group we discussed life issues and dealt with many of their everyday life concerns. I was invited to most of their houses and we spoke about many subjects. I consider these talks to be informal interviews and life histories. Both the priest and the nun kept direct contact with the girls’ parents, in particular with a view to having their permission for their daughters’ participation in these meetings, since many of the parents do not like the idea of their daughters meeting with boys, even in the church centre (see Chapter four where cultural capitals are discussed in more detail).

✓ Three groups of young girls and boys and one group of adults, each group consisting of 4-5 students, who received English lessons from me three times a week. The adult group consisted of highly educated individuals: a doctor of medicine, a lady psychologist, a lady pharmacist and an agricultural engineer. I encouraged the groups to converse about issues related to the concerns of my study. Indeed I acquired a great deal of data from them. Without their trust it would have been hard for me to understand the local community.

✓ Twenty students that had come to study in Damascus from different cities. They rented rooms in many different courtyards. One of them became a respondent and studied an entire Dakhle (alley or pass way between the houses-see vocabulary)

✓ Twenty families from different backgrounds who I visited regularly in their courtyard.

✓ Five very poor families, to whom the nun introduced me and who I helped in several ways, notably in teaching their children.

✓ A survey was carried among 106 Roman Catholic families spread out over Duelha under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Church of Duelha. The survey was limited to some factors included in the livelihoods framework and no correlation between capitals was possible given the limitations of the dataset. Therefore, the data is presented in simple additive tables.

All the types of data collecting activities described above targeted not only members of Roman Catholic Church but all Christians in Duelha. Only the data collected from the survey was limited to Roman Catholic households; the other activities were open to all. It is also good to acknowledge the fact that other churches were present in Duelha22, and therefore other activities as well.

22 There is in general one church per denomination in the Duelha area.
4.5. Data collection

4.5.1. Qualitative data collection

The main method employed in this study to gather empirical information was participant observation. I collected data about social and cultural experiences from two perspectives:

- Behaviour that can be observed, such as movements and interaction.
- The meaning of actions and the perception of it. The actors add non-observable details to their experiences and express themselves by speaking out on the subjects.

Cohen (1974: 286) indicates several main points the observer should pay attention to:

- Extensive observation of acts;
- Extensive observation of individuals;
- Extensive observation of items and things that are important to the local community;
- Extensive observation of places.

During my stay in the field, I observed streets, the doctors’ clinic, the church and religious activities, courtyards, marriages, funerals, casual visits, meetings and the distribution of aid to very poor families and I spoke with many different individuals about their lifestyle, work and world views.

In comparison with other sociological methods, the participant observation research method lacks strict definitions and rules. The data should, however, be handled in a way which ensures that the method meets the standards by which it can assessed.

Methods of participant observation:

During my fieldwork I stayed and lived in Duelha. In total, I stayed there for a period of more than 18 months – the time that was needed to get to know some respondents and key persons, to become familiar with the local community and its environment and to be able to gather general information. In such a context, the fieldwork period should be long enough to build friendships and put together a group of people willing to deal with and support the research. I was able to disclose details of my research to a few trusted respondents. This required a high degree of confidence between the researcher and a particular group in the community.

The fieldwork period also needed to be long enough to disclose most patterns of the local community to enable the researcher to view most of the social interrelations and to be able to observe them. This includes different actions, periodical and seasonal activities and repeated phenomena and acts intended to facilitate the discovery of rhythms, which determined these actions, events and other activities. Clarity needed to be obtained on all these events and activities, such as seasons and feasts, and this means that the minimum period in the field should be at least one year.

Furthermore, the researcher should stay long enough in the field to experience such cultural events as marriages and weddings that occur occasionally and unpredictably but
which clarify an important side of neighbourhood culture. The researcher should observe most of the social interactions such as a wedding, a casual visit, a trip with a group, phenomena and repeated actions, and be able to describe such events as feasts, activities and rituals. All these important factors and crucial events in people's lives help the researcher to become aware of the cultural environment in which the local community lives.

In his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* of 1993, Geertz argued how important and difficult it is to discover the meaning of the actions observed by the researcher. Geertz introduced the concept of 'thick description', which refers to the large amount of ethnographical data needed to understand one aspect of a certain phenomenon. This kind of research requires a lot of attention and careful explanation of the data. Sometimes, in the beginning, seemingly unimportant issues can lead the researcher to a fundamental and very important point.

I opted for covert observation. In this case, the researcher announces his presence as an actor in the field and plays a role as one of community members, covering his or her presence as a researcher. This method of observation means the members of the local community will communicate with him or her in a way that relates to his/her position in the community and will regard the researcher as one of them rather than an outsider. This method of participant observation guarantees high quality data:

- It may reduce suspicion in people's minds and lets them feel at ease because they do not need to bother about the presence, objectives and intentions of the researcher as in the case of open observation. Covert observation ensures high quality scientific valuable information because the observation is extensive and the observer is able to listen, see and look, without anyone asking any questions;

- It offers more possibilities for questions – the researcher can ask questions in a very spontaneous, respectful and easy manner;

- It ensures stable and normal behaviour by local people;

This observation method also has its limitations, such as a lack of ability to make notes when observation is taking a place. Furthermore, an observer cannot use any electronic device at the time of observation (such as taping, videoing, etc.) The researcher therefore has to rely on his/her own memory and his/her ability concentrate on the issues and elements that have been observed. Also, activities that are perceived as being contrary to the ideal held by people in his/her position in the community are less likely to be discussed. Examples are sex issues or birth control, and gender-sensitive issues.

My role in the community was that of a very low-paid English teacher (50 SP = US $1 per hour). In addition, I adopted the role of Church social worker, and became one of the community members by participating in several prayer groups and by acting as assistant to the priest in his social programmes. I also participated in meetings and worked in social intervention programmes with several religious orders of nuns. I will return to this in more detail later.
Speech observation:

In addition to participant observation, I also made use of three types of speech observation, *i.e.* free conversation, commentary and life history.

*Free conversation:* In ethnographical data collection, free conversation represents the information and the meaning given to the speech. The actors may say something that relates to a general subject of interest to the researcher. At the same time the researcher may direct the conversation by asking specific question relating to the study area.

*The commentary* is a technique with the following characteristics:
- The commentary is a conversation between two or more people, in which the researcher does not necessarily take part;
- It is unpredictable and, unlike free speech, cannot be prepared and directed in advance.
- A commentary is a speech that occurs in a natural conversation, while free speech occurs in a way dominated and directed by the researcher.

During my interaction with local actors, I paid a great deal of attention to the way conversations develop, in order to understand the local knowledge, local norms and many other aspects, such as the relations inside the family (e.g. between sons and mothers, brothers and sisters).

*LIFE histories* are very informative and I conducted two of them with people from different backgrounds who agreed that the information would be used for my research. These two people were among the few who knew that I was a researcher. In addition, I acquired a lot of other life histories from people who were interviewed without being aware that I was a researcher. The limits were a lack of direct recording and the fact that I had to rely on free speech because I could not act openly as a researcher. In this way, I was able to ask only two informants for their life history in a direct way.

Modern social theories perceive the life history as one of the best tools for providing a clear picture of the local society because it summarizes the experience of an individual over time which individual social theorists regard as being representative of his or her society. In his very famous study 'Street corner society' on primarily Italian squatters in Boston city in the USA, William Foote Whyte (1955), one of the pioneering American researchers from the Chicago school, used the life history of a young man as a method to understand gang life in the slums. Rajia Warkentin (1994) used a life history in her research 'Our strength is in our field' to derive a complete dataset on two different periods of rural-urban migration.

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23 Benedicty, personal communication.
Themes and tools used for livelihood assessment:

The theme of livelihoods is broad and I had to make certain selections. The following table provides an overview of factors included and tools used to gather data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Livelihood component</th>
<th>Themes for discussion and analysis</th>
<th>Main tool</th>
<th>Tools for triangulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Livelihood context</td>
<td>Presence and importance of community level institutions, interaction of population with external organization, control of resources by organization, formal versus informal institutions and organizations, e.g., gangs, slum lords</td>
<td>Venn diagram</td>
<td>Key informant interviews household; secondary data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Location of community with respect to topography. Flood prone areas; slopes and hillsides; environmental issues: contaminated area s, dump sites; access to green space, traffic and safety.</td>
<td>Neighbourhood mapping</td>
<td>Secondary Data; key informant; interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural environment</td>
<td>Availability of education, health, social services, water and sanitation infrastructure, roads and transport, market, electricity, access of population and households to infrastructure.</td>
<td>Neighbourhood mapping</td>
<td>Secondary Data; key informant; interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural environment</td>
<td>Ethnicity; religion and gender; urbanisation patterns—did villages move en masse to a specific neighbourhood, are there ethnic ghettos? are there indigenous people (villages swallowed up by city)?</td>
<td>Historical profile</td>
<td>Secondary Data; key informant; interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political environment Economic environment</td>
<td>Political parties; access to voting, feeling of insecurity/uncertainty at household and community level; informal controls through gangs/mafias etc.; police harassment; other harassment by state or informal structures. Impact of rules, regulations and policies on households and communities; access to identification documents; taxation (formal and informal); tenancy laws; regulations on hawking; influence of zoning</td>
<td>key informant interviews</td>
<td>Household interviews; Venn diagram; historical profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic environment</td>
<td>Macro-economic trends; urban economic base and activity mix, employment and cost of living (inflation) trends; policies and attitudes towards informal sector activity, micro finance regulations, frameworks and practices.</td>
<td>Secondary data; key informant interviews group discussion</td>
<td>Household interviews; economic activities matrix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household assets (their nature and how they are used affects households ability to recover from stresses and shocks)</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td>Skills; entrepreneurial ability; education level; ability to work; security of employment; income earner-dependency ratio</td>
<td>Household interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Exchange of goods and services; assistance to or from extended family network in rural areas, other urban areas or overseas; membership in community groups; nature of integrations with other households; level of social isolation</td>
<td>Household interviews</td>
<td>Secondary data; key informant interviews; livelihood profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic (includes physical and financial)</td>
<td>Land, home, ownership; transport; equipment; shops; market stall; household water and sanitation facilities; saving salary; money from income generating activities; remittances; access to credit</td>
<td>Household interviews</td>
<td>Livelihood profile; key informant interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livelihood strategies, production, processing, exchange and income generating activities)</td>
<td>Type of activities undertaken by each household member, level of contribution to household economy; access to employment; income generating activities; access to credit; diversification vs. dependence on single earner; flows of money, people and goods from rural areas.</td>
<td>Household interviews</td>
<td>Livelihood profile; secondary data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of shocks and stresses and responses</td>
<td>Area level</td>
<td>Occurrence, intensity and duration of flooding, such as earthquake, war, riots, strike, gangs, police harassment, increased levels of crime, power cuts. Nature and origin of neighbourhood associations; activities, external assistance and relief activities.</td>
<td>Household interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household level</td>
<td>Nature of impact of external shocks on household; loss of assets due to shock; unemployment; illness; imprisonment; personal security Coping mechanisms such as diversification of livelihood strategies; sale of assets; migration, etc.</td>
<td>Household interviews</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I used several instruments, included in the table as themes for discussion and analysis:

1- In Duelha, there is only one NGO. There are no neighborhood-based associations. Different types of associations were officially disbanded in the 1980s (community-based organizations, sport clubs). There are several churches and a mosque. The main formal organization included in the fieldwork was the Roman Catholic Church, which mobilizes the community vitally in many dimensions. I immersed myself in church-sponsored activities as a means of collecting the necessary data on individuals and their families. At city level, there are governmental organizations to which people belong (such as teachers, Youth and Women associations).

2- In the natural environment section, I tackled traffic and safety, the key people and analysed the traffic empirically and assessed the level of safety. I was able to gain a good impression of the situation simply by being present.

3- At the level of infrastructure, according to the table above, the availability of education, health, social services, water and sanitation infrastructure, roads and transport, market, electricity, access of population and households to infrastructure were addressed and discussed in detail throughout the book. Moreover, the tools for both levels in principle and for triangulating the data were assessed through the key people; long irregular visits to households and informal interviews, as well as mapping relevant areas.

4- The cultural environment theme played a crucial role in understanding the local community structure, since the ethnic and religious patterns played the major role in encouraging Christians to migrate to this particular area.

5- I avoided the political environment since the political situation is linked to the state security system and this is a sensitive issue in Syrian society. Most of my governmental data was obtained via the Internet and I did not provoke any political discussion with any individuals and households.

6- Human, social, and economical nature were examined in detail separately and I divided the data collected according to its nature into capitals addressed in specific chapters.

7- Vulnerability (shocks and stresses) and changes in vulnerability will be addressed in the specific chapters and in the conclusion.
8. The livelihoods outcomes on both levels (area and households) were examined in the concluding chapter with the notion of generation changes over time being the main indicator.

4.5.2. Quantitative data collection

I participated in a survey during the summer of July - August 2003 which was initiated by the local priest to collect information on the real population numbers of the parish. I collected data on 106 Roman Catholic families, which represented one of the largest segments of the local community. The questionnaire included items such as the name and origin of the family, the number of the children, age, education and type of work of each member of the family and their link to the church and social activities.

I was accompanied by two girls from the church group and intervened from time to time by asking additional questions although this was not easy due to a lack of time and a lack of understanding on the part of the girls (who did not know I was a researcher). The people regarded us in a very positive way and appreciated the initiative, many of them saying that "the church must have a larger role in social life". Some others complained that the priest never visited them, not even during Easter time when they used to bless the house before the Resurrection by dispersing sacred water around the house. During the survey I observed people's housing situation and asked questions about the relations with their neighbours. The church group continued the survey after I had left the field.

I mapped two Dakhles. The first Dakhle constituted the first populated geographical area, just beyond the Roman Catholic church. Between the first Dakhle and the church there were the state schools and the first part of the market (see map). I documented the data on this Dakhle with the help of my key person who was born in that particular Dakhle and knew most of the people's history, their origins, household members and their work and educational achievements. This Dakhle had been home to 67 households since the beginning of the Seventies. My key person was able to invite me to several courtyards where he has some relatives and friends. The second Dakhle mapped was the one close to the mosque. It was smaller in comparison to other Dakhles (only 15 households). To the south of the Mosque there are fewer Christian households.

Market survey: My key person and I spent nearly two months collecting the necessary data on 204 shops and business. I had to collect data on the origin of the owners, their religious affiliation, their tenure statues, their statues as owners or renters, and the value of the business where possible.
4.5.3. Libraries, documents and internet research

Very few studies have been done on urban issues in Syria by either Syrians or foreign scholars. Although it is very important to have several perspectives on the field of research, it was very hard for me to find recent literature in Syria and in Lebanon. Moreover, I did not come across any Syrian case study that had been carried out in a local community, unauthorized settlement or the like. I carried out an additional literature search in Canada during a visit to Toronto University (Jan 2004) and in Amsterdam. I also used Arabic and Syrian literature which was available and related to urban studies and rural-urban migration and integrated it into this study. In this respect, I found studies on Syrian rural-urban migration and the housing crisis in Damascus. The studies I found on slums and unauthorized settlements related mainly to Egypt and Morocco.

4.6. Data processing

In order to ensure the quality of the work and to organize the large amount of fieldwork data on households, families and individuals in the local community collected through participant observation, I used the following tools to guarantee the coherence of the research and to ensure consistency:

✓ A list of households with data on names and nicknames, the number of household members, location, their place of origin, type of work, educational level of the household members, religion and income and the date and place of my visit to them.

✓ A list of courtyards, and the families and individuals occupying them, the age of the building, number of rooms and facilities, and presence of items and assets.

✓ A list which grouped the people according to their regional origin. A record of the speech, i.e. a list containing terms, words that were repeated on a number of occasions, the usage of words in relation to a specific subject. Reports on special ethnographical events such as marriages and long visits, the date and place of these events, the person's nicknames and a brief explanation of the interaction, conversation and atmosphere.

This was a dynamic way of gathering data on particular units of study. Sometimes I managed to get to know the person well enough to be invited to his or her home. However, it took a long time before I was able to pose the many questions I had in mind. The data collected during the surveys was processed into a simple cumulative table, according to generations.
After few months of staying in Duelha, my main aim was to gain the confidence of the local community and to try and integrate into their daily life. I built up several strong relationships, which helped me obtain personal information without raising any suspicion of my questions and myself. Concerning the moral and the ethics of the study, I will never release any information from the field to any body and will only use the data for the purpose of this study. The Syrian atmosphere and the hard local and regional political sensitive situation of gathering information is a social phobia and people would over-exaggerate their fear and concerns. In any case, all the names of individuals and families are made up and the information on their origins is very general. A great deal of effort was made and strategies used to protect people’s privacy and the data is therefore subject to a number of limitations. For instance, politics, gender, sexuality issues are emphatically ignored for my own personal safety and that of the people who supported me.

I started teaching English as a second language to three groups of students of four to five people each. The first was a beginners group consisting of four girls and two boys. The second group was made up of four girls and two boys at medium level and the third group of three girls and two boys engaged in conversation sessions. I met each group twice a week, spoke with them about particular issues from time to time and gathered a lot of information without disclosing my identity of researcher.

I also went to a catechism centre three times a week where I organized an educational program for children from very poor families. These children were chosen by one order of nuns. The families in question were suffering severe social and economical crises. One example concerned an unemployed father who behaved very aggressively towards his wife, beating her in front of the children. There were five family members living in one single room. This catechism centre is located in the southern part of the Duelha. Its Dakhle, the alley or the passageway between the houses form the boundary with another slum called Kashkul. In front of this Dakhle, an Islamic mosque is located. Geographically, the mosque is the boundary and the borderline between the northern part of Duelha, where the majority of the inhabitants are Christians, and the southern part where the Muslim majority resides. Being active in the centre close to the mosque, I was able to observe the relationships between Christian and Muslims. I met a person who assisted at the catechism centre. He was a young man in his late twenties. He worked in a dental laboratory at his home where he and the rest of his family live. He has a diploma in dental techniques and works without legal permission. He does not pay tax, has not been verified by the Ministry of Health and lacks any kind of legality. This illustrates the fact that Duelha is a place prone to many illegal economic activities and jobs.

Later, I was asked to implement a development project in the Duelha area. It concerned a socio-economic project initiated by the Roman Catholic Church, including several programmes and activities such as the distribution of sewing machines to make clothes and textile products and a centre for computer training offered at low, affordable fees to encourage the participation of low-income groups. This centre had to close because of a lack of management expertise and the priest invited me to become the centre’s manager. Taking this responsibility had its pros and cons. First, it would provide me with a good position to meet a large number of people in the local community and to deal with many social and economic affairs. Second, it could have repercussions, since I would come up against a lot of problems, conflicts and responsibilities which would take up most of my time and energy. I decided not to accept the offer although it would have offered many good opportunities for my research project.

There are several orders of nuns and religious activists in the social and spiritual spheres inside Duelha. I had good relations with some of them and these grew stronger and stronger over time. They introduced me to several families who I started visiting at home to chat with them and their neighbours. I once intervened in a family problem between a man and his wife, and helped their children with their schoolwork.

I also came into contact with a key person in Duelha, namely a priest who does not live in Duelha anymore. He used to live in the community for eight years and moved to another village which is a one hour car journey from Damascus. He has a very interesting personality and is respected by many people in the community. I went to his village to interview him about his life in Duelha. He still maintains strong relationships with a lot of families and individuals. He introduced me to many key people and their relatives. He also offered me the possibility to use the community data documented in several books in his Roman Catholic parish, including information on all marriages, baptisms, newborns and families in need.

Source: author