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

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Nahro Zakarya was born in Lattakia, Syria, and emigrated to Canada, where he obtained a BA with Honours in Anthropology from Concordia University, Montreal. He worked in several Canadian NGOs dealing with integration in multicultural societies. He obtained an MA in Political Alternative Development Strategies, from the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, Netherlands and worked as planner and coordinator for a rural development project in the central region of Syria. He obtained a DEA in cultural anthropology from ST Joseph University, Beirut, Lebanon. This PhD thesis from the University of Amsterdam is based on field-research in an unauthorized urban neighbourhood in Damascus, Syria.

The study analyses the livelihood strategies of a Christian community located in an unauthorised area on the outskirts of Damascus, Syria. Utilizing the analytical framework of livelihood strategies as approach, it addresses several questions on how the inhabitants of the local community build up different capitals (human, social, physical, financial, and cultural) in reducing vulnerabilities and increasing their well-being.

Each chapter takes up a certain capital and deals with it at different scale levels: national, city, and at the level of the local community (based on detailed data from the field). Several issues emerging from the livelihood strategies approach are included; assets and capabilities, income/expenditure patterns, and ways to reduce vulnerability.

The innovation of the study also lies in the comparison it makes between the strategies of two generations; the first generation consisting of parents who migrated in the early seventies from rural areas, and the second generation who has grown up in Damascus. The first generation migrated from several rural regions in Syria and built up their housing around courtyards (dakhles) on a farming land without authorization or planning from the state. Their religious ties and social and cultural capital allowed them to mobilize collectively. Linking social capital made it relatively easy from them to gain access to many state services such as the public sector employment, health, and education for their children. The lenient attitude of the state to unauthorized settlements allowed them to provide incrementally major infrastructure such as running water, sewerage systems, roads, and electricity. In short, the state and the church played a major role in supporting the building of different capitals for well-being and reducing vulnerability.

The second generation uses other strategies in order to achieve their livelihoods in urban style. With access to a higher education, women’s employment rates became much higher and both men and women showed a preference for employment in the private sector. However, there is great concern among the second generation about factors such as the high rate of inflation, high rate of unemployment, housing density, and tensions in the public arena.

The conclusions show that livelihood strategies differ within the same community over time, dealing with different insertion in local contexts, and in connection with the different aspects of social and cultural capital.