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When Assets are Vulnerabilities: An Assessment of Informal Recyclers' Livelihood Strategies in Buenos Aires, Argentina

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Summary. — In situations of protracted social inequality and poverty, many of the assets that low-income urbanites rely upon are precarious, and therefore may involve risks and vulnerabilities that undermine the sustainability of their livelihoods. This study investigates how the assets that informal recyclers (*cartoneros*) in Buenos Aires, Argentina rely upon may contribute to their vulnerability context, can require that they make trade-offs in other assets, and may be impacted by broader social and economic dimensions of vulnerability. The study finds that livelihood assessments could be enhanced through a conceptual recognition of the interplay between assets and vulnerabilities.

Key words — livelihoods, assets, vulnerabilities, informal recycling, Latin America, Argentina

1. INTRODUCTION

The economic crisis of 2001–02 had many repercussions for Buenos Aires' labor market, including a drastic increase in the number of informal recyclers who took to the streets to recover recyclable materials from the waste stream. In 2007–09 when this study was conducted, the municipal government estimated that there were approximately 5,000 *cartoneros* (as these workers are locally known) in Buenos Aires (Gutman, 2008).

This paper addresses the ways that *cartoneros* rally the diverse resources that they have at their disposal in order to mitigate some of the risks associated with their work (including health issues, threats of violence, the precariousness of their work, stigma, low-incomes, and poor living and working conditions). In this analysis, I apply Moser's Asset Vulnerability framework as a rubric for understanding *cartoneros*' coping strategies, and I discuss the precarious nature of many of the assets that these low-income workers regularly mobilize. I argue that there are risks embedded in certain assets, particularly those that are most readily available to low-income urbanites in the Global South. In other words, the assets/vulnerabilities dyad does not adequately account for the unstable nature of many of the resources that poor urbanites must rely upon. Not all assets are created equal: precarious assets can introduce vulnerabilities into a person's life, and thereby erode the sustainability of their livelihood. Understanding these interactions is important for the theorization and application of livelihoods approaches to poverty alleviation.

The research for this paper was conducted during 2007–09, and is based in a survey of 397 *cartoneros* who were approached while working in the city streets. The survey was conducted in ten sites throughout the city of Buenos Aires regularly frequented by *cartoneros*. In each site, researchers walked a randomized route of 100 city blocks in length and approached each *cartonero* encountered on the route. The refusal rate for the survey was 17%. The survey addressed topics of working conditions and practices, living conditions, health, social capital, access to social services, home and community life, and demographic information. Follow-up interviews were conducted with 30 *cartoneros* selected to represent the geographic and socio-demographic diversity of the survey sample. The interviews explored the themes of the survey in greater qualitative depth. Respondents to both the survey and interviews were offered a $10 peso (approximately $3.33 USD) stipend in recognition of the time taken away from their work. Four local research assistants (all of whom had experience working with *cartoneros*) assisted with the surveys and the interviews. The author participated in about 1/3 of the surveys and all of the interviews, and has provided all of the translations of the interview data in this paper. Statistical analyses were conducted on the survey results: all results presented below are significant at the $p \leqslant 0.05$ level, and details on the statistical analyses used (i.e., chi-squared analysis, correlation, ANOVA, and t-test analysis) are provided in the notes.

2. LIVELIHOODS AND THE ASSET VULNERABILITY FRAMEWORK

Chambers and Conway (1991) seminally describe sustainable livelihoods as follows: "A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living: a livelihood is sustainable which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long-term." The livelihoods approach to poverty alleviation provides perspective on the complexity of factors that influence the lives of low-income persons in the Global South. This approach

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recognizes the agency and ingenuity of the poor, and offers strategies for assessing and addressing the issues that impact their quality of life. The livelihoods approach to understanding poverty recognizes that people actively draw on and transform various social and material assets in order to meet their needs (Chambers & Conway, 1991; Steel & Zoomers, 2009), while also dealing with multiple vulnerabilities that can take the form of either acute stressors (such as economic crises) or chronic stressors (such as declining resource stocks; Marschke & Berkes, 2006). Implicit to the livelihoods approach is an understanding of the flexibility of assets, and the capacity for individuals to make trade-offs between different assets in order to meet their needs and mediate vulnerabilities (De Haan, 2012; Morse & McNamara, 2013).

Developed in response to the extensive focus of livelihoods research on rural communities, Moser's (1998) asset vulnerability framework represents a livelihoods approach to systematically analyzing the relationships between the assets and vulnerabilities relevant to the urban poor in the Global South. This work is situated in an agenda of structural poverty reduction, and focuses on how to "strengthen people's own inventive solutions, rather than substitute for, block or undermine them" (p. 1). Moser focuses on five assets: labor, human capital (including health status, skills, and education), productive assets such as housing, household relations (primarily as a mechanism for pooling resources and sharing consumption), and social capital. Her concept of vulnerability recognizes that people can move in and out of poverty; vulnerability is therefore a state of predisposition to ecological, economic, social, and political risks that may threaten one's assets, rather than a measure of material poverty. Moser describes coping as a dynamic process of managing complex asset portfolios in light of multiple vulnerabilities, and cautions that the complexities of the coping process need to be appreciated in order to avoid overly simplistic policy interventions.

The livelihoods paradigm has made important contributions to the theory and practice of poverty alleviation, and has had widespread uptake among development agencies, including the World Bank, a number of international NGOs, and state-based international development programs. Because of its strengths as an assessment and diagnostic tool, the livelihoods framework has leant itself to the design and implementation of asset-related interventions. In particular, "asset accumulation" has become a common poverty alleviation strategy pursued by development institutions. This strategy involves "creating opportunities for the poor to accumulate and consolidate their assets in a sustainable way" (Moser, 2006, p. 11). This paradigm purports that proper support and protection of assets will allow households to engage in "virtuous asset accumulation strategies, rather than asset eroding paths" (Wheeler & Haddad, 2005).

A common trend in development practice is to focus on key assets that allow low-income urbanites to better meet their other needs (e.g., Mitlin, 2003). While there have been numerous programing successes based in this approach, asset accumulation programs have also been critiqued for their limited focus on particular assets (notably, social capital, and financial capital), the inconsistent assessment of assets (Bebbington, Guggenheim, Olson, & Woolcock, 2004), myopic perspectives on the types of interventions that may bolster particular assets, and a non-critical view of the social and economic conditions that lead to poverty and inequality in the Global South. Because of these limitations, asset accumulation strategies may not lead to a meaningful change in livelihoods. For example, with respect to the accumulation of financial capital, development actors have focused on the proliferation of microcredit loans as a livelihood strategy, although it has been observed that the promotion of micro-borrowing can lead to poverty traps of indebtedness (Gehlich-Shillabeer, 2008). Similarly, social capital has been celebrated as the "missing link in development" by the World Bank and others (Grootaert, 1998). However, many approaches to accumulating social capital do not adequately address the overarching social structures that exploit or constrain relationships and connections for some people, such as patriarchy (Kantor, 2009; Molyneux, 2002; Thieme & Siegmann, 2010), caste/tribe designation (Arun, Annim, & Arun, 2013), race/ethnicity (Portes, 1998), and other insider/outsider dynamics. Mensah (2012) argues that a categorical perspective on assets eclipses analyses of the availability and utility of these resources, and notes that not all assets are equally accessible for all users.

While the livelihoods approach does recognize that access to assets may be mediated or constrained by societal forces, some critics persist in describing this conceptual framing as individualistic. The focus is often on the efforts of localized individuals to mediate their vulnerabilities rather than on the larger political and economic forces that lead to and perpetuate poverty, thus detracting attention from the kinds of structural change that could potentially address poverty at a macro-scale (Carney, 2003; De Haan, 2012; Small, 2007). Others argue that a focus on the efforts of localized individuals to mediate their vulnerabilities rather than on the larger political and economic forces that lead to and perpetuate poverty may detract attention and resources from structural changes that could redress inequalities and injustices at a macro-scale (Anderson, 2012; Carney, 2003; De Haan, 2012; Small, 2007). Such perspectives emphasize the importance of centering a livelihoods analysis on the vulnerability context of low-income urbanites, including macro-level vulnerabilities such as economic and political change.

Importantly, livelihoods approaches to poverty alleviation (and asset accumulation strategies in particular) focus on the conceptual separation of assets from vulnerabilities. Proponents of these paradigms acknowledge the complex interplay between different assets, and the limitations of such relationships for poverty reduction efforts: "... because of the interconnections between different assets in the portfolios of the poor, the effect of a program targeted to one asset may be misleading in terms of its poverty-reduction impact" (Moser, 2007; p. 9). However, there is little acknowledgment of the dynamic relationships between assets and vulnerabilities, which can also have implications for poverty reduction interventions.

Beyond categorizing and listing the assets available to low-income urbanites, it is therefore important to develop a more nuanced understanding of the ways that vulnerabilities can be inherent to certain types of assets, while also considering the on-going interplay between assets and diverse vulnerability contexts. In particular, livelihoods approaches to conceptualizing and addressing poverty would be strengthened by a more thorough assessment of the ways in which certain assets may inherently contribute to a person's or group's vulnerability, as well as context-specific assessments of the ways that macro-level vulnerabilities (e.g., economic change; political change; systems of gendered, racialized, and intergenerational power relations) influence the accessibility and quality of different assets. Such an assessment can provide insight into the contextual factors that prevent the development of a robust portfolio of assets, and allow for improved understandings of what makes livelihoods sustainable.