Conducting Fieldwork on Land Conflicts in Kabul's Peri-Urban Areas

Introduction:

In Afghanistan, a primary source of conflict is land as it represents one of the principle assets owned by an individual or household. Urban areas have grown in recent years from the return of Afghans living abroad including Afghan refugees from neighbor countries. Furthermore, ongoing internal insecurity has forced many families to leave their rural homelands and settle in the cities. This sudden influx of people into Kabul, the Afghan capital, has caused a rapid expansion of the city's peri-urban areas, where land ownership is not formally registered.

Our research in Kabul seeks to uncover the main reasons for disputes, often violent, over land in Kabul's peri-urban areas. Kabul's peri-urban spaces represent a fascinating area for study given the strong push by the government in recent years to have properties in and around Kabul formally surveyed and registered. Such registration could prevent conflicts with respect to land, especially amongst family members claiming inheritance rights. This piece focuses solely on the process of conducting fieldwork and collecting data in Kabul, with the specific goal of providing information on what it means to conduct fieldwork in Kabul's peri-urban sites, by identifying challenges a qualitative researcher may face. This piece does not focus on the finding of our research, as this will be produced in a subsequent report.

Interview method:

This project involved qualitative, face-to-face interviews with people from different backgrounds – lay persons and government officials – who have been directly involved in land disputes in Kabul. Our reason for choosing semi-structured interviews was to developed a textured and granular understanding of the micro-dynamics that lead to conflicts in peri-urban areas. Interviews were recorded and lasted for approximately 30-45 minutes.

Interview groups:

Interviews consisted of two general categories of people: first, members of communities living in Kabul's peri-urban areas who have either faced conflict or who are responsible for dealing with conflicts; second, government officials, particularly those who are part of the Afghanistan Independent Land Authority (ARAZI). To identify appropriate interviewees, we employed snowball sampling, which involved introductions through third party gatekeepers. We worked against selection bias by relying on a range of unrelated informants from a variety of backgrounds such that collusion was impossible. Furthermore, with all potential interviewees, we first confirmed with them that they had some familiarity with land disputes. We conducted a total of 18 interviews.

1- **Community members:** Amongst community members, we interviewed two sub-categories – lay persons and community leaders. Lay persons were particularly important for this study since they represent the parties directly involved in conflicts. The sources of conflict could be attributed to difference causes, such as security, poverty, inheritance, power struggles, and otherwise. Community leaders were important to interview as they were often asked to intervene when a problem arose between two individuals. Talking to community leaders was particularly helpful since they were better positioned to report trends given the volume of disputes that they had dealt with.

2- **Government officials**: Government officials were engaged in preparing land reform policies, which they hoped to implement in the near future. They provided important information on the official position of the government, reasons behind the push for formal titling, and the method being undertaken to implement change. Different offices were involved in different tasks, and thus it was important to speak to several individuals to better understand their varying roles.

Provisional insights from fieldwork

Our research provided our team insights on the opportunities and challenges of conducting fieldwork in Kabul, generally, and on property issues, specifically.

- The most important factor in gaining access to interlocutors was third party introductions. It would have been largely impossible to gain any access without the assistance of gatekeepers, which applies both to government officials and community members. The primary reason is trust. Individuals of all stripes are suspicious of newcomers asking questions about their activities. Moreover, a culture of conducting research has yet to full establish itself in the country, thus adding a layer of hesitance towards researchers amongst people. Generally, third party introductions by gatekeepers would overcome this barrier as it placed us into a network of reliable persons. Furthermore, as our discussions did not concern a particularly charged political topic but rather concentrated on a community problem, we found that people were generally willing to talk. However, there were occasions where participants were still uneasy being interviewed despite a third party introduction. This was usually conveyed to us through repeated rescheduling requests, thus insinuating a lack of interest.

- At times, people had a tendency to de-emphasize problems. With lay individuals, unless people were implicated in a property issue themselves, they tended to idealize their environment by asserting that land conflicts were non-existent. Thus, our initial search to find people who had experience in land conflict took some time, after which identifying individuals become progressively easier.

- Meetings with interviewees had to be rescheduled regularly. This was especially true with community leaders. It was difficult to know whether the rescheduling was due to genuine reasons or the party's reluctance to speak. After a few rescheduling attempts, we would generally revert back to our gatekeeper who would then assess whether to continue contacting the individual.
- Variations existed between the men and women who were interviewed. Noting that our target area was the peri-urban regions of the city where education and economic levels were lower compared to those living within more developed areas of the city, women were reticent in providing their opinion as many had never had their opinion sought by anyone outside of their community.

Overall, conducting fieldwork in Afghanistan, while presenting challenges in gaining access, is not impossible nor is it starkly different than conducting fieldwork in other parts of the world. It is essential for a fieldworker to have capable gatekeepers, since otherwise gaining access to communities would be greatly challenging.

Nafay Choudhury (PhD Researcher, King's College London; Senior Research Fellow, Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies)

Mohammad Hadi Ayoobi (Research Assistant, Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies)

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