# FROM URBAN TO RURAL: LIVELIHOODS AND ADAPTATION OF ARMENIAN REFUGEES

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## Background and research problem

Armenians living in Azerbaijan primarily fled to Armenia in 1989. Most estimates agree that Armenia hosted around 360,000 refugees from Azerbaijan. The influx of refugees roughly coincided with a devastating earthquake in the north-eastern part of Armenia, leaving about 25,000 dead and more than 300,000 homeless and jobless. The change in political and economic systems following the break-up of the Soviet Union and the blockade by Azerbaijan and Turkey resulted in a dramatic social and economic crisis, which formed the background for the refugees' new life in a newly independent country.

Most of the refugees were accommodated in Armenia's rural areas (UNHCR, 2005). The majority of them – 81.3% – came from large cities (Baku, Kirovabad, Sumgait), 16.3% were from medium or small towns, and only 2.4% from rural areas (ibid).

As mentioned above, although a majority of the Armenian refugees (nearly 80%) had an urban background, most of them were given new homes in rural areas (Messina, 1996). Also, it is well-known that the process or ruralization of the rural population took place in most of the post-Soviet countries, and Armenia was no exception in this regard. Hence, the focus of the research will be on the refugees whose living environment changed from urban to rural.

The research questions:

- What livelihood strategies have rural refugees in Armenia used in the past two decades?
- How did the change in Armenian refugees' background from urban to rural affect their livelihood strategies and influence their adaptation/integration?

# Theoretical framework and methodological approach

## Operationalization of the livelihood concept (adapted to refugee research)

A review of the available literature showed that there is still no clear definition of refugee livelihoods. A widely accepted definition of livelihoods is the one given by Chambers and Conway, according to which livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living (Chambers and Conway, 1992). The best way to operationalize the livelihood framework to the current research is to view the household livelihood as a triangle of assets (financial, physical), capabilities and activities. Household members use their capabilities and their assets to carry out the activities through which they earn their livelihood. Capabilities will be viewed in the present research as a combination of knowledge, skills, health conditions and ability to work or manage a household. In his definition of "livelihood" Ellis (2000) placed more emphasis on the access to assets and activities influenced by social relations (gender, class, kin and belief systems) and institutions.

The key unit of the present research is "household". The term household refers to those who may or may not make up a family, and jointly earn their livelihood with decisions affecting all members of the household more or less equally.

Household assets refer to the resources that households own or have access to for earning a livelihood. Therefore, in the present research the assets include financial, physical and natural capitals. The notion of social capital closely intersects with the concept of capabilities – both imply the existence of social networks, knowledge and professional skills and health. All these will be considered as capabilities. The research looks into livelihoods from the perspective of social relations. So, it should not be seen as a pure study of the "economics of livelihoods".

Household strategies are the ways in which households deploy their assets and use their capabilities in order to meet their objectives. They are often based on past experience. Household strategies therefore reflect the "actions" part of the livelihood framework triangle (capabilities, assets and activities).

## Methodological approach

The research is designed as a case-study and presents a total of three cases. The multi-faceted term “livelihood” points to social relations and how they are processed, while focusing on only one person will limit the possibilities of the framework. Thus, a refugee household, including several representatives of both genders, is the unit of the research. My family’s case serves as a basis for the research. For the same reason (livelihoods pointing to social relations), preference was given to studying and comparing biographic cases of a single community, the village of Karin, Ashtarak region, Armenia. The literature review showed that livelihoods can be further hindered by refugees being placed in remote and/or unfamiliar environments. For this reason, border and remote regions have been excluded from the research as potential geographic areas providing a rural setting for refugee households (Karin is around 25 km from Yerevan, capital of Armenia). Biographic interviews were chosen as a major method for data collection. My own family case representation is based on the method of auto-ethnography, when the author both interviews his/her parents and keeps a diary. None of the interviews were one-off. Follow-ups were conducted to get additional data.

The main criterion for pre-selecting the cases within a given setting was the change in a refugee household’s background from urban to rural. The final selection was determined of the basis on the availability of a household. All three household cases are from the same setting – the village of Karin. All the households have lived in the same setting for at least 15 years. The cases are named after the main interviewees.

# THREE CASES FROM THE VILLAGE OF KARIN (ASHTARAK REGION, ARMENIA)

Our family arrived in Armenia by plane on December 4, 1988. The escape from Azerbaijan was spontaneous and chaotic, without any preliminary preparation (as was the case for most of the refugees). My parents had no opportunity to sell or

exchange our apartment. Like many others, in all three cases the households were able to take only personal belongings and some documents with them.

> *"Armenian authorities were doing their best to accommodate the refugees and provide them with all help they needed... but then the earthquake struck... there were dead, injured, and homeless people all over, and they were probably in a much worse situation than the refugees. The authorities provided a place for us to live, but conditions were very squalid there. But we were ready to accept any offer to avoid sleeping outside. It was an old dilapidated police station in the town of Ashtarak. The four-member family was given a small room of 8 $m^2$. Some 25 refugee families were accommodated in this building. We lived there for 7 years, till 1995, when we received a cottage in the village of Karin; each family was given 36 $m^2$ (half of a cottage). But living conditions were really hard there – no water, no sanitation, no natural gas supply, no kitchen. We have lived there ever since" (Lyudmila H., my mother, 58).*

Inna M., 33, moved to Armenia in 1988, together with her parents and two brothers. She and her father came to Armenia first on November 26, 1988, looking for an opportunity to exchange their home in Baku for an apartment in Yerevan, or to find any other housing option, but with no success. Inna's aunt lived in Ashtarak at that time, so they stayed there for a couple of days. They were given shelter in the same former police station building – 10 $m^2$ for 5 people. Then, in March 1990, her parents went to Baku to sell their house and to bring some of their belongings. But they could not sell the apartment and brought very little with them. Inna remembers:

> *"It was extremely difficult to organize transportation of property to Armenia. But even if a suitable transport had been available, it would have made no difference to the family because the room they were given in Armenia was too small to hold all the belongings."*

Anya O., 57, was born in Kirovabad region [currently known as Gandja, in Azerbaijan], in the village of Red. She is married, with three daughters and a son. Her family also had to leave in 1988. Anya had relatives in Yerevan and they allowed her and her children to stay in their home for some time. From

April to December 1991 Anya lived in a tent on the land she was granted by the state (her family got possession of the land during the privatization process). In March 1992 the family built a one-room shelter and moved from the tent to that room. Her husband and mother-in-law came to Armenia two months later, in February 1989.

## "Urban to rural refugee" livelihoods (assets, capabilities and activities)

The land privatization process started in Armenia in 1991, and our family also received a land plot in the newly built village of Karin (established on former agricultural lands), 5 km away from Ashtarak town. Most of the lands were given to refugees from Azerbaijan, and the village has been mostly populated by refugees ever since. Inna M. and Anya O. also received a land plot there. In 1994, UNHCR, together with the Armenian government, launched a project to build small private houses for refugees and in 1995 our family moved in. My parents have lived in that village since then. My brother is married now and his family lives with my parents. My grandmother died in 2004.

A common feature of all three cases is that the refugees first came to Armenia with only a small amount of the personal belongings they needed most of all. Afterwards, my father arranged for the family's movable property to be delivered to Armenia. Unfortunately, it was not possible to do anything with our apartment, so this essential family asset was lost. Basically, the refugees were unable to transport anything else to Armenia. The case of Inna M. was almost the same, while Anya O.'s family somehow managed to sell their apartment, albeit at a very low price.

In the following years the dynamic of our family's material resources was quite typical for a refugee family, and very similar to the other two cases. It was difficult to find a job – the families had to rely on their savings, which were basically sufficient to survive for a year or two. Before the collapse of the USSR, many households had jobs, permanent or temporary, and earned enough for a decent living. The negative aspect here is that the galloping inflation in 1990-1991 forced the households to use both their wages and savings to ensure more or less appropriate living conditions. Until the middle of 1992 my grandmother worked in Yerevan and supported our family. The labour migration in 1992-1995 was another important source of the households' livelihoods.

It was common for the households to make use of their previously accumulated assets, transported with so much difficulty to Armenia. This type of "negative" strategy, as described in literature, included selling gold (jewellery) and other household belongings (for example, piano, carpets). Refugee livelihoods were also supported by humanitarian assistance (food, fuel) from international community and the Armenian Diaspora. It is interesting, however, that in all three cases the impact of this humanitarian aid on the refugee livelihoods was not significant, contrary to popular belief that it had great importance.

> *"Like the other refugees, we also received humanitarian assistance (some food and fuel), but it did not have very significant impact on our situation" (Lyudmila H.).*

Despite having lost their savings and assets, the households at the same time managed to acquire some new property, such as houses and land plots. In Inna's and Anya's cases, their houses were half built, as they were unable to finish the construction. The village of Karin was a newly-established community which lacked water supply, irrigation, natural gas supply and sanitation. There were no asphalted roads, as it was located in a remote, isolated area with poor transport links to other towns of the region. Another common trend in these cases was that the land ownership became the more significant factor. The land was not fertile. My parents and other household members were more or less engaged in other, non-agricultural activities. Some rural practices developed in our livelihoods since then.

At first, neither of my parents had adequate skills for farming or other agricultural activities. Gradually, my mother got accustomed to the rural way of life, even though the process proved very difficult for her. It was a matter of knowledge, skills and psychology (previous profession, lifestyle, etc.). For my father, it was a bit easier because, firstly, the man is responsible for his family's well being, and, secondly, my father was originally from a village.

> *"In 1995 we came to the village of Karin. Our land was bare and we started planting different trees... …at first we grew fruits only for our own consumption, but over the years out production gradually increased. We tried to sell the surplus, but it was difficult, we felt 'shy', as we had never traded before... Later, we*

> *accepted the idea that it was our work... With time, I gained some experience and learned a thing or two about trade. Now I can easily sell fruit" (Albert H., my father, 59).*

Today, my mother sometimes collects berries and fruit, and barters them for other goods, or sells fruits from the garden. Learning was an important part of the search for new livelihoods strategies and adaptation – acquiring new skills (gardening, trade), building networks (contacts, clients, neighbourhood) and making decisions (what to cultivate). Positive outcomes of learning also were influenced by the greater socio-economic context of the economic progress in Armenia and the rising purchasing power of the people's incomes. My parents say that it was the right decision. Since the early 2000s our land (household garden) has played an increasingly important role for our livelihood – we had enough for our own consumption and were also able to sell the surplus of fruit or barter them for other goods, like milk and cheese. However, my parents said a firm "no" to livestock farming – they had neither experience nor knowledge about how to rear domestic animals.

My family had rather weak ties with Armenia until 1988. None of our relatives lived there (my aunt lives in Russia, while my mother's uncle is a resident of Ukraine). My father knew Armenian quite well, but my mother spoke only the Karabakh dialect, though she mastered the classical Armenian language afterwards. My father is engaged in farming and also employed as a guard at a scientific institute where he previously – before 1991 – worked as an engineer. My mother (also an engineer before 1991) was retrained as an accountant and worked in Yerevan until 2001. Since then she has focused on housekeeping. In my parents' words, they took advantage of their connections, which provided them with a range of useful opportunities. I also benefited from their new connections during my education and at early stages of my career. My parents succeeded thanks to the real-life experience they gained through overcoming significant problems and challenges (debts, borrowings). They gave me a good education in Yerevan, which they think is already paying off – I got an opportunity to continue my education in Sweden with a scholarship. This did not cost anything to our family. I am self-sufficient, I have a good job, and I'm pretty much satisfied with it. Together with my brother, I can now support my family.

My family's case demonstrates that activities, another component of livelihoods, are certainly linked to capabilities, i.e. the activities (adoption of the rural lifestyle, farming and gardening) are based on capabilities and resources. At the end of the day it is the activities that determine how efficiently the capabilities are used within the existing resource base (or exceeding it, taking risks) and shape a livelihood strategy. This aspect is clearly present in the other two household cases as well.

Inna left secondary school in 1993 and continued her education in a vocational school. Her family could not afford to send her to Yerevan for education because of very high costs (education fees and transport fares). Afterwards she enrolled in a private university that opened in Ashtarak in 1994 and graduated in 1999 with a degree in Finance and Credit. Inna never worked permanently in her speciality, and was unable to find other permanent jobs too. Inna's parents did not have higher education. Her father worked as a construction worker and continued to work in the same field in Armenia. Her mother had various jobs and from 1994 (the year they moved into their half-constructed house) until her death in 2000 she worked as a laborer in a local farm. Her brothers did not have higher education either. They had occasional jobs and sometimes sought seasonal employment in other countries. Today one of them is a taxi driver in Armenia (his son studies at Politechnical University), while the other has settled in Russia and got married there. In 2008 Inna completed a computing course in the hope that this qualification, which she thought was much needed, might help her in finding a job. But she failed to find any and currently, she scrapes together a living from private tuition for school children.

Household farming, mainly gardening, is another source of income for Inna's family. These two cases illustrate that refugee households employ diverse livelihoods strategies – labour migration and incomes from land (both monetary and non-monetary), part-time jobs. Regular work played an important role for the household livelihoods.

Anya's and Inna's household asset dynamics are very similar, just like in my own case – some old assets were lost, but new ones were acquired, family savings were widely used to ride out the tough times, diverse means of gaining livelihoods were adopted – full-time and part-time jobs, farming. Since 1998 Anya has worked – both in Azerbaijan and Armenia – as a nurse in the medical facility of her village. After moving to Armenia she acquired

some additional skills. Her husband had worked as a driver in Gandja, Azerbaijan and continued driving in Armenia (her father gave him a MAZ truck, which was an important asset for them but they were forced to sell it 10 years ago in order to repay the debts they had accumulated to give education to their children). Now, he is a driver at the regional bus service. All Anya's daughters are married and live separately (not part of Anya's household anymore). Her son is a trained dental technician. But due to the lack of money for buying assets he needed to start working, he opted to take cooking courses and now works in a restaurant.

Anya's and Inna's household cases differ from ours in the sense that both have some relatives living in Armenia, in other regions. In addition both households built their own social networks of friends. All households invested substantial sums in the education of their children, but the results are different because of personal differences and the difference in decisions and environment (local connections vs. ties with Yerevan, borrowing for education vs. avoiding going into debt).

Analysis of the correlation between adaptation and integration revealed considerable differences in the situation of two generations. Being put in a different setting and external environment, coupled with hardship and poor knowledge of the local language and customs, the households had rather strained relationship with their neighbours at first but relations gradually improved over time. Due to several objective reasons, younger generations usually integrate into a local society quicker and easier than older people. At the same time, integration is not equal to adaptation; rather it crucially depends on the latter. It is an important psychological aspect. The vulnerability of the households is not a result of their refugee status or a consequence of what they have experienced in the last two decades. It stems mostly from the general social and economic context. Some excerpts are interesting in this regard:

> *"I do not consider myself a refugee, either formally (I am an Armenian citizen) or emotionally. At first the locals were not kind and hospitable to us… It made me feel sad as we were all Armenians… we kept our Armenian traditions … I tried not to take it to heart very much and turned my attention to other things… As to my current situation, I am dissatisfied that I am unemployed and receive*

*no pension. But I am happy that my sons have jobs, even though my younger son is currently working in Russia, far away from his own family… My husband is discontent with the poor implementation of laws and low salaries in Armenia" (Lyudmila H.).*

The excerpt shows that Inna's family is not happy with its situation, though both households adopted similar, and quite flexible, livelihood strategies and had more or less similar resource bases. The most likely explanation is that they had different capabilities, which resulted in different levels of their integration and adaptation:

*"For me, my life is divided into two parts – before and after 1988… Since 1988 we have just lived in the moment… During all these 22 years he never stopped dreaming of going from Armenia to Russia, as he was greatly dissatisfied with his life here – no opportunities, no positive changes… integration was very slow and painful… I do not like the word "refugee" at all. I have lived in Armenia for over two decades; I have an Armenian passport… I do not consider myself a refugee any more, this is my motherland. At first we were treated very well in Armenia, but soon public attitude towards refugees gradually worsened… I always feel bad about that. At the same time, I have to mention that I have a couple of friends here, who are wonderful people and who are very close to me, as if they were my real relatives… I have grown much attached to our home; I no longer want to leave it" (Inna M.).*

*"I don't think I am a refugee. But you know, in my heart, I still feel pain and suffering. I had an orchard in Kirovabad [Gandja] with many persimon trees – we call it 'korolyok'. You know, I just cannot buy them, even now. My children feel much better than we do. They have grown up here, they have friends, acquaintances, and they know a lot of people. When we came here they were aged 3, 9, 13 and 15, respectively. Even though we had very tough days here, we do not regret coming to Armenia" (Anya O.).*

## Conclusions

The research showed that the households had to resort to a combination of all available livelihood strategies (labor migration and land cultivation) to survive. Despite some parity in assets and capabilities, decisions and actions influenced by psychological factors, within or outside the existing pool of resources, appeared to have played the key role in determining the long-term goals, opportunities and plans of the households, albeit with different results.

Also, the research demonstrated that adaptation was especially important for the livelihood strategies of the refugees. My own family's case (my father's case in particular) and Anya's case showed that social learning plays an important role for livelihood strategies and greatly helps in coping with hardships and challenges. Long-term changes in livelihood strategies, conditioned mainly by the absence of or limited nature of opportunities for employment and labour migration for older members of the households, such as the adaptation to rural lifestyle and adoption of rural practices appeared to have had a strong impact (in all three cases the refugees were forced to move from urban to rural areas). For the younger generation, however, rural practices, i.e., farming and gardening are not the priority. But this problem relates to external factors and is common for all rural communities of Armenia. Although the transition from urban to rural life had an overall positive impact, the livelihood strategy was limited to land cultivation (as a major source of income) – there was no case of livestock farming or any other agricultural activity. Another finding of the research is that capabilities directly affect, or even precondition, the choice of livelihood strategies, paving the way for the adaptation and further integration of the households and their members, though there are objective differences between older and younger generations.

The cases have shown that a common and clear agenda for all household members ensures consistency in actions and this is reflected in livelihood strategies. It was found also that humanitarian assistance, contrary to all expectations, played little, if any, role (even though I feel differently on an emotional level) as its share in the household livelihoods was very insignificant (the households knew they could not rely on it). Finally, while adaptation is a direct long-term result of the livelihoods, integration, albeit based on adaptation, seems to be a more complex, multi-factor and – to some extent – even a psychological process.

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