LIVELIHOODS AT THE MARGINS

SURVIVING THE CITY

James Staples, Editor
Contents

Preface 7

Chapter One
Introduction: Livelihoods at the margins 9
James Staples

Chapter Two
No money, no life: Surviving on the streets of Kampala 31
Stan Frankland

Chapter Three
Embodying oppression: Revolta amongst young people living on the streets of Rio De Janeiro 53
Udi Butler

Chapter Four
Children on the streets of Dhaka and their coping strategies 75
Alessandro Conticini

Chapter Five
Hindu nationalism and failing development goals: Micro-finance, women and illegal livelihoods in the Bombay slums 101
Atreyee Sen

Chapter Six
Keeping it clean: Discipline, control and everyday politics in a Bangkok shopping mall 127
Alyson Brody
Chapter Seven
Fast money in the margins: Migrants in the sex industry 145
Laura María Agustín

Chapter Eight
Begging questions: Leprosy and alms collection in Mumbai 163
James Staples

Chapter Nine
Vulnerable in the city: Adivasi seasonal labour migrants in western India 187
David Mosse, with Sanjeev Gupta and Vidya Shah

Chapter Ten
‘Moving up and down looking for money’: Making a living in a Ugandan refugee camp 215
Tania Kaiser

Chapter Eleven
‘In-betweenness’ on the margins: Collective organisation, ethnicity and political agency among Bolivian street traders 237
Sian Lazar

Index 257

About the contributors 271
Introduction: Livelihoods at the Margins

James Staples

Livelihoods – what people do to get by – both in terms of fulfilling biological needs and giving meaning to their existence – is an area of enquiry salient to disciplines across the social sciences. For anthropologists the activities people carry out in a bid to survive and fulfill their desires are significant in constituting people as social beings. Observation and analysis of those activities, including the relationships they involve us in, how we relate to them, and how they interconnect at local and transnational levels, help to inform us about multiple socio-cultural issues. For economists, these same activities have first and foremost been viewed as rational and materialist: people's strategies for making a living offer real-life examples of the ways in which scarce resources are distributed. For those in the related fields of development studies (as well as for those working hands-on in development), analysis of livelihoods and the assets used by people to get by are increasingly being seen as pivotal in creating countrywide solutions to poverty and social exclusion.

Others, too, have become increasingly interested in livelihoods as an entry point from which to start making sense of the world at the onset of the 21st century. Geographers and scholars of migration from across the disciplinary spectrum plot how the pursuit of employment and other forms of livelihood activity relate to the ways in which people criss-cross the boundaries of nation-states (e.g., Duany 2002; Thomas-Hope 2002). Sociologists, meanwhile, use data on work patterns to document and predict wide-ranging social trends. How people make a
living – or how they make a life, in the widest sense – provides a point at which a large variety of different interests converge.

This book, which focuses on livelihoods in urban settings, is made up primarily of contributions from social anthropologists and scholars working under the umbrella of development studies. Some of the authors might place themselves within both those categories. It was a deliberate intention in selecting and ordering the chapters, however, to blur disciplinary borders, to encourage readers to explore in particular the correlations and disjunctures between anthropology and development studies and to see if, in juxtaposing different kinds of material, the result might be more than the sum of its parts. As some of the chapters show, development studies’ expansion of the livelihoods concept offers anthropologists something useful to think with. Conversely, anthropology’s multi-perspectival focus provides those seeking solutions with alternative ways of interpreting their data. But this is not just about a creative dialogue between disciplines. I also want to rupture the dichotomy routinely drawn between those in development and applied anthropologists on the one hand, and scholarly anthropologists on the other. As Mosse puts it:

While some of the latter accuse the former of contributing to the reinforcement of ethnocentric and dominating models in development, some of the former accuse the latter of elitist irrelevance driven by the intellectual trends of Northern academia. Caricatures of mercenary consultants or ‘feeble forms of politically correct anthropology’ (Grillo 1997) abound, seriously misrepresenting the varied spectrum of positions from which anthropologists work and their individual capacity to combine engagement with policy and critical work. (Mosse 2005: 241)

The contributors to this volume reflect some of that variety, their work evidence of the scholarly and practical value of blurring disciplinary boundaries.

What their work shares – and what, to some extent, unifies the chapters – is an approach that is primarily ethnographic. That term may be used as a gloss for a variety of research methods. What for the anthropologist is the long-haul participant-observation of ‘being there’ is, for some of the harder-edged social scientists, research that draws on open-ended questionnaires as well as statistical analysis. Despite differences at the boundaries, however, for most of us ethnographic method falls somewhere between those two extremes, incorporating elements of both. I use the term here to describe qualitative analysis that draws on detailed first-hand research, conducted with people, on the ground, in cities across the world. The ideas, themes and theoretical positions
discussed in the book emerge out of those ethnographic encounters, rather than predetermine how they will be read.

Before launching into a selection of fine-grained ethnography of livelihoods at the margins across a range of urban landscapes, I want to explore a bit further some of the key concepts that have framed the book, namely, what we mean by the terms ‘livelihoods’ and ‘marginality’. In exploring and problematising these notions in a diverse range of contexts – all the way from Ugandan tour guides and drug dealers to Bolivian fish sellers – we find that there are a number of other themes that keep recurring. Two of these are encounters with the tensions that exist between explanatory models that favour structure and those that favour human agency, and the attempt to avoid either falling captive to a victims’ discourse or allowing oppressors to hide behind the shield of cultural relativism. Each chapter also serves to chip away at a series of taken-for-granted dichotomies that often frame thinking about livelihoods. The conceptual distinctions between the rural and the urban, the formal and informal sectors of the economy, tradition and modernity, and the margins and the centre are rightly shown to be flaky. The final sections look more closely at some of these emerging themes, provide outlines of the chapters and draw out the threads that join them together.

LIVELIHOODS

The term ‘livelihoods’, as it is employed in everyday discourse to refer to the means by which people make a living, has an obvious relevance to economists. The search for income, whether in cash or kind, through which they can access resources to sustain themselves and their families, is a significant factor in understanding how people structure their everyday lives and in plotting their movements – sometimes across national boundaries – through space. And because of the centrality of economic activity to these pursuits, ‘livelihoods’ are also of clear practical interest to those whose work is concerned with tackling material poverty – namely, those working in development.

A dominant argument that has shaped this connection between a focus on economic factors and poverty alleviation is that ‘economic growth is not only the most important anti-poverty strategy but is also the only strategy that can generate meaningful poverty reduction in very poor countries’ (Mills and Pernia 1994: 11). This neo-liberal position, which holds that the metaphorical cake should rise to meet the demands of the poor rather than be cut up into different sized
slices, takes centre stage in much of the literature produced throughout the 1990s (eg, Behrman 1993; Fields 1994; Mazumdar 1994; OSCAL 1996; Quibria 1993). Economies were conceptualised as needing to grow in order to meet the livelihood needs of the populations they served. To achieve such growth a broad understanding of macroeconomic conditions was seen as imperative.

Reduced to the mechanics of what people and institutions need to do in the capitalist marketplace in order to survive, ‘livelihoods’ appear to have only limited interest to anthropologists. The domain of economic activity, one might argue, is but one of a whole series of interconnected arenas through which social life is constituted and reconstituted. The old anthropological categories of religion, ritual, marriage and kinship jostle alongside economics in a combined and discursive effort to construct ‘society’. Economics can be dealt with by the harder social sciences; anthropologists can be left to pick over the remains.

If, however, we resist the reduction of ‘livelihoods’ merely to the means of making a living and let it also refer, as it does in the older sense of the term in English, to ways of living, then the notion begins to have much wider relevance. There has been a clear move towards this over the last 10 years. Sorensøn and Olwig (2000: 2–4), for example, usefully call for ‘livelihoods’ to be reinvested with the socio-cultural since the means by which people make a living only make sense within their wider social contexts. Conversely, wider economic organisation – such as the trading associations we encounter in the final chapter of this book – only makes sense through understanding the social relationships in which it is simultaneously embedded.

Those working in development have also made strides over the same timeframe in reconceptualising livelihoods, as the burgeoning literature, such as the UK’s Department for International Development’s (DFID) expanding livelihoods website (www.livelihoods.org), and the International Institute for Environment and Development’s journal Environment and Urbanization bear witness to. In his work on rural livelihoods development, for example, Ellis (1998) went beyond conventional economic models to define livelihoods as including social institutions (such as family or community), gender relations and property rights, as well as income (in cash and in kind), recognising that ‘[a]ny study of livelihoods … requires an awareness of the wider spatial context of the unit of analysis’ (Sorensøn and Olwig 2002: 4). Long, in bringing together these newer arguments, suggests that the livelihoods concept ‘best expresses the idea of individuals and groups striving to make a living, attempting
to meet their various consumption and economic necessities, coping with uncertainties, responding to new opportunities, and choosing between different value positions’ (2000: 196). Livelihoods, in short, are about more than just achieving an income.

Researchers in development studies have been especially active in thinking out ways of using this broader definition of ‘livelihoods’ to address issues of deprivation – a category that has also been broken down into the dimensions of physical weakness, isolation, poverty, powerlessness and vulnerability (Chambers 1989). Others, in refining our definitions of poverty, have attempted to address how chronic poverty might be measured over time, highlighting the relevance of age, gender, ethnicity and education to the experience of material deprivation (eg, Mitlin 2005). A ‘livelihoods framework’ recognises that households construct their livelihoods within broader socio-economic and physical contexts, using social as well as material assets (Carney 1998: 4).

Assets, within this framework, include human capital, social and political capital, physical capital, financial capital and natural capital (Rakodi 2002: 14). Their inclusion as central to the analysis of livelihoods is intended to focus on what people have – and to build on that capital – rather than to identify them as passive victims (ibid). While we need to be aware that such an approach runs a real risk of obscuring the wider political causes of people’s marginalisation, it does at least enable us to consider their agency in responding to that marginalisation. These policy models also set out to nuance the rather static notion of deprivation – previously reduced to economic poverty – by placing much greater emphasis on ‘vulnerability’, a concept seen better able to capture processes of change (Moser 1996: 2, cited in Rakodi 2002: 14). The notion of ‘social exclusion’ – which can be traced back to Lenoir’s (1974) study of those who fell through the French insurance-based social safety net and led to the excluded (les exclus) rather than the poor or unemployed becoming the object of social policy (Cannon 1997: 78) – has developed out of a comparable analysis. Vulnerability, like the plight of the socially excluded, is defined as a high degree of exposure and susceptibility to risk of stress and shocks, and little capacity to recover.

These aspects of a ‘livelihoods framework’ have been elaborated elsewhere in the literature (eg, Carney et al 1999; Rakodi 2002). To summarise the guiding principles, such a policy framework is intended to put the priorities of the vulnerable at the centre: ‘The first priority is not the environment or production but livelihoods, stressing both short-term satisfaction of basic needs and long-term security’
In shifting the focus of policy from outputs to people and what they defined as their priorities, sustainable livelihoods frameworks (SLF) challenge assumptions about what those priorities might be, and place them within a wider context. In particular, SLF analysis:

... highlights the importance of macro-micro links: how policies, institutions and various levels of government and non-government organisations affect people’s lives in multiple ways, and the extent to which people themselves can influence these structures and processes (DFID 2000).

There is much to commend such an approach, and a number of authors in this volume use it as a starting point for thinking about issues that concern their informants’ livelihood strategies. As a model-based approach, however, it has important limitations. First, as DFID’s own guidance concedes, the SLF approach fails explicitly to address issues of politics, power and authority (DFID, 2001). If we confine ourselves to a consideration of people’s own ‘assets’ and ‘capital’, we miss out on the wider conditions of their existence and, moreover, we let the institutional structures that force some people to the margins off the hook. We need, as Collinson (2003) argues from a political economy perspective, to understand vulnerability in terms of powerlessness as well as in terms of material need. A livelihoods approach sidesteps the wider historical and geographical perspectives required to answer the question of *why* particular groups of people are marginalised in the first place (*ibid*: 4–6). Arce draws broadly similar conclusions when he suggests that Chamber’s sustainable livelihoods approach ‘suffers from a peculiar narrowness’ (2003: 203). It does so, he argues, in part because ‘it focuses on the internal dynamics of net assets at the expense of contests over social value and actors’ understandings of their own reality’ (*ibid*).

One of the reasons for this narrowness, as DFID’s guidance also accepts, is that the SLF approach is an oversimplification. Rather, ‘the full diversity and richness of livelihoods can be understood only by qualitative and participatory analysis at a local level’ (DFID 1999). Furthermore, because measurability is an important part of such analyses, ‘assets’ that in reality can only be fully understood in qualitative terms, by necessity become quantified. In short, people’s assets are ultimately reduced to attributes that can be measured and then weighed against other factors. This might be necessary for designing widely useable policy that successfully addresses issues of vulnerability, but it...
does run the risk of treating other social factors as if they were qualitatively similar to purely economic factors. This is problematic because it is difficult to compare the advantage one might gain from, say, one’s particular standing in relation to a network of people, with the amount of money one might earn from a particular activity. It is right that neither should be treated in isolation, but homogenising complex socio-political realities as ‘assets’ or ‘capital’ risks obscuring the very nuances of people’s situations that we need to explore if we are to gain an understanding of their livelihoods. We need to find contextually specific ways of learning what particular ‘assets’ mean to particular people in particular situations. A relationship defined as ‘social capital’ or as an ‘asset’ in one context, for example, might become a burden in others. Deployment of other ‘assets’ might be reliant on external factors over which individuals have little or no control.

Several of the authors in this book have attempted to address these issues, whether they specifically refer to the SLF approach or not. Butler’s exploration of young people’s livelihoods on the streets of Rio de Janeiro, for example, considers how *revolta* – a Brazilian term which loosely translates as ‘inner rage’ – simultaneously aids and abets his informants’ capacity to live as they wish (Chapter 3). Conticini’s consideration of Bangladeshi street-living children’s livelihood strategies (Chapter 4) likewise goes beyond conventional socio-economic assets to include such ephemeral qualities as love and trust within his analysis, while Frankland (Chapter 2) reconceptualises the expatriate clients of the Ugandan guide and drugseller as a particular kind of asset or commodity. Kaiser’s description of Sudanese refugees (Chapter 10), meanwhile, suggests uses and limitations of a livelihoods approach by setting refugees’ capacities to exploit their resources against the limiting policies of their hosts. My point, then, is not that a livelihoods framework should necessarily be discarded; rather, that we should see it as a possible way in to thinking about different ways of living: as a methodological tool rather than as a rigid theoretical model. Some of the contributors to this book illustrate how that might be done in practice. Others, in adopting different approaches, show very clearly that there is more than one way of addressing questions of livelihoods.

**MARGINALITY**

The other main theme of this book is, of course, marginality. As a category of analysis, the term is going to prove a slippery one, but
suffice it for a general definition to state that the livelihoods of all those discussed here are in some sense excluded, either from the wider social groups with which they identify or from the geographical locations in which they make a living. Most of them are also thought of – when they are considered at all – as victims: as groups of people who, as a consequence, ideally need rehabilitation that will draw them from the peripheries and back towards the centre.

A related danger in drawing an analytical distinction between the margins and the centre – or between the periphery and the core, as Wallenstein (1974) conceptualised it – is that we end up with 'Orientalism all over again' (Washbrook 1990: 492). Talk of the margins, and the orientation of policy towards bringing people closer to the centre through economic growth, creates a new kind of ‘other’: those implicitly deemed as lacking the dynamics needed to transform their lives. As several chapters illustrate, however, people are seldom marginal because of their failings or by simple accident of geography or time. They become and remain marginal because it suits those at the centre that this should be the case. As Kaiser (Chapter 10) shows, certain categories of people – in the case she describes, refugees – have literally been ousted, sometimes violently, to the marginal positions they occupy. In attempting to represent the voices of those so ‘othered’, this book intends to take us beyond the notion that livelihoods can only be assessed against the yardstick of Western capitalism.

In so doing, Livelihoods at the Margins also sets out to further break down one of the ubiquitous dichotomies that dominate mainstream analyses: that drawn between formal and informal sectors of the economy. Not all of those working in regulated employment – like the shopping-mall cleaners Brody writes about in Chapter 6 – escape marginalisation and reap the rewards of global capitalism. Neither are all of those working in the so-called informal sector – which accounts for as much as two-thirds of the workforce in some countries (OSCAL 1996: 5) – marginalised in a conventional sense. The Bolivian fish sellers described by Lazar (this volume, Chapter 11), for example, might operate within the informal sector, but are far from the margins of political power. Marginalisation, all this suggests, is not uniformly experienced, and – like the sectors within which one’s livelihood gets categorised – neither is it static over time. The split between the margins and the centre – a division mirroring that between informal and formal sectors of the economy – needs problematising. Not only do livelihood activities on the social boundaries have implications for those in the mainstream and vice versa, it is often difficult – as we shall see – to situate them in either one or the other.
Perlman’s influential analysis of life in the slums of Rio de Janeiro is useful here. Not only does it help challenge the distinction between formal and informal economies, it also disrupts routinely drawn links between marginality and separateness. Despite their spatial separation from the rest of the city, she argues, squatter settlements are highly integrated with the urban economy, and should be seen as part of the solution to, rather than a symptom of, social deprivation (1976; 1990: 6). Offering free housing and reception centres for migrants, the *favelas* are recast in her work as ‘thriving communities inhabited by some of the most energetic, creative, and highly motivated individuals in the entire city’ (1988: iv). In contrast to Lewis’s (1966) idea that groups marginalised by poverty are also culturally separate and deprived – part of a ‘culture of poverty’ – Perlman points to the importance of favela culture to Brazilian identity more generally. Her claims about the centrality of the slums to the wider economy have subsequently formed a focus of critical discussion, but her thinking on the ‘myth of marginality’ (1976) remains a useful counterpoint to the assumption that socially excluded people are necessarily a group apart from the mainstream.

Despite the limitations of marginality when placed in direct opposition to notions of the centre or the mainstream, or when it is used to fix groups of people in particular locations, the concept has its uses. Tsing’s summary of the utility of using a notion of the margins should resonate with several, if not all, the contributors to this volume. She uses the concept to ‘indicate an analytic placement that makes evident both the constraining, oppressive quality of cultural exclusion and the creative potential of rearticulating, enlivening, and rearranging the very social categories that peripheralize a group’s existence’ (1994: 279). Livelihoods at the margins, it seems to me, speak very effectively to this tension between constraint and creativity.

**EMERGING THEMES**

This brings us, rather neatly, to consider some of the other themes that recur through the chapters of this book and which suggest wider connections between very disparate livelihoods undertaken in a range of cities across the world. The tension between constraint and creativity highlighted in Tsing’s (1994: 279) definition of marginality is akin to that drawn between approaches that favour structure and those that focus on agency. To phrase the problem as a question: are people constrained by their circumstances, their actions socially determined, or
do they determine their own circumstances by making choices and decisions? While social deterministic analyses have rightly been criticized for overlooking people’s capacities to shape their own lives, the subsequent stress on agency has also come under fire for its tendency to overstate the range of choices people have at their disposal when placed in difficult circumstances.

Elsewhere (Staples 2007) – and again in my contribution to this volume (Chapter 8) – I have attempted to cut through this tension by drawing on Bourdieu’s argument that action is constituted through a mixture of individually and collectively embodied constraints – what he calls the ‘habitus’ – and freedom, within these constraints, to act (Bourdieu 1990: 52ff). Despite the criticism that Bourdieu does not move sufficiently far from social determinism (eg, Comaroff 1985: 5; Farnell 1994: 931; Shilling 1993: 146), I would argue that this approach provides a space in which to consider how marginalised people make meaningful choices – or, to paraphrase Ortner (1995: 190), make their own politics – without pushing the structural sources of their marginalization out of the picture. People embody elements of the social structures that simultaneously oppress and enable them, their actions undertaken in the context of that embodiment. This is not, of course, a new problem: it was, for example, an important concern of the post-colonial Subaltern Studies project in South Asian studies (see, for eg, Guha 1998: ix–xxii), the background against which Scott’s influential *Weapons of the Weak* (1990), referred to by several authors in this book, emerged. Nevertheless, it remains an issue that ethnographic analysis of livelihoods is particularly well placed to tackle, as many of the contributions to *Livelihoods at the Margins* illustrate.

Frankland (Chapter 2), Butler (Chapter 3) and Conticini (Chapter 4), for example, all highlight the multi-layered difficulties experienced by urban street-dwellers in, respectively, Uganda, Brazil and Bangladesh, but they also illustrate the ways in which they retain control over their destinies and create fulfilling lives. Agustín (Chapter 7) exposes the logic of migrants working in the sex industry – otherwise homogenised in the literature as the powerless victims of traffickers – who potentially earn more in one day than in several months of hard factory labour. But she does so without glamorising what is often the prosaic nature of the work. Brody (Chapter 6) and Mosse (Chapter 9) both draw on Scott’s ‘everyday forms of resistance’ (1990) – implicitly, in Mosse’s case, to show how groups as different as Bangkok cleaners and labourers in western India exercise a range of subtle survival strategies that undermine attempts to label them as supine victims of modernity. Kaiser’s work with Sudanese refugees in Uganda
(Chapter 10) similarly shows how, despite the inhospitable conditions in which they find themselves, refugee camp dwellers continue to develop meaningful strategies for their survival. Sen (Chapter 5), who also uses Scott in her analysis, illustrates how the militant slum-dwelling women of her ethnographic description are in some ways the antithesis of conventional representations of oppressed women. Armed and much feared, these right-wing Hindu women 'manipulated their notorious image to threaten factory owners, business men and entrepreneurs within the unorganised sector to acquire legal and illegal jobs and assets' (Sen, this volume, Chapter 5). In short, the cumulative effect of the chapters is to rewrite conventional notions of victimhood – within which marginalised people come to be represented only in terms of their failings – while, precisely because of their ethnographic richness, avoiding the trap of romanticising poverty and resistance (Abu-Lughod 1990; Brown 1996).

Power – and its relation to agency – is never monolithic, as a number of studies have shown. Dube, for example, in his analysis of mission stations in colonial India, demonstrates that colonial authority was never a ‘totalized terrain’ (2004: 10). Rather, colonial hegemonies, ‘dripping with dominance’ (ibid: 53), in themselves offered the tools by which they might be resisted. To use an alternative metaphor, the more dominant that ideas at the centre become, the more they are prone to seep out to where they might be appropriated, often in unexpected ways, at the margins. The dominant distinction drawn between rural and urban domains, for example – with the former characterised as backward and traditional, and the latter as progressive and modern – might well be used to exclude and stigmatise but, as Lazar shows (this volume, Chapter 11), it is also picked up and used to provide salient markers by which people negotiate their own lives. In the case she describes, distinctions between the city and countryside were invoked not as taken-for-granted distinctions but in order to protect their livelihoods at particular times. In reality – both in Lazar’s Bolivian example and elsewhere – the urban and the rural are heavily inter-connected domains, with people, as well as material goods, flowing back and forth between them. As both Mosse (Chapter 9) and Brody (Chapter 6) illustrate, rural livelihoods often rely on urban migration, while marginal urban livelihoods are frequently made bearable through social ties back in the countryside. In the case of refugee settlements, as described by Kaiser (Chapter 10), the distinction between urban and rural to some extent breaks down, the settlement constituting a liminal space that challenges rather than expresses the categories.
Nevertheless, the work represented here undeniably shares a focus on the ‘urban’: the centres of activity distinguishable from the rural settings within which a number of studies of livelihood have been carried out (eg, Homewood 2005; Ellis 2000), and for which the notion of sustainable livelihoods frameworks was originally devised. Accepting that the urban/rural split should not be overplayed, the chapters of this book also indicate that it is usually within cities that livelihoods at the margins are most clearly pronounced. For the hawker, the beggar, the petty drug dealer and the migrant labourer, the city offers spaces in which to create opportunities that do not exist to the same extent in the countryside. As several chapters attest, urban environments also bring with them distinctive problems. In addition to more restricted access to physical space, migrants to the city also report the fragmentation of extended kinship affinities (cf Sen, Chapter 5) and, with the shift of ethos towards individualism, an increased sense of alienation (cf Butler, Chapter 3). Cities are clearly rich sites for the study of livelihoods, as Stan Frankland’s description in the next chapter suggests. He refers to Kampala, but the description could well be applied to several of the other cities we encounter in this book:

Here, in the ‘disorder of development’ (Chernoff 2003: 47), the aspirations of ‘formal’ space merge with the frustrations of the ‘informal’ into an uncertain and ambiguous cityscape. While the skyline of cranes and neon signifies all the benefits that can accrue from economic development, the streets of the city represent a far more complex picture of the consequences of progress.

The city thus emerges as a centre of transnational flows and cosmopolitanism; as a place where formal and informal spaces merge; and where the head-on collision between economic and industrial development with nationalist fears of cultural erosion takes place.

Another recurring theme is the difficulty – experienced in many different kinds of ways – of looking at marginal livelihoods through the prism of ‘development.’ While the chapters challenge the traditional (but much contested) notion that ‘development’ is necessarily an unmitigated force for social good – exposing it as the product of particular worldviews, embedded in particular political structures – they also go beyond that general critique to look at the specific ways in which policy interventions fail, and ask what might be done to rectify this situation. Many of the people encountered in this book, for example, are not only economically marginal but are variously stigmatised as dirty, backward, immoral, criminal and depraved. The develop-
ment gaze tends to accept these perceptions as unproblematic, with interventions designed to cure people of these negatively ascribed identities rather than changing how they are labelled in the first place by contesting the wider external causes of their stigma. Finding ways around this in order to find appropriate solutions to deprivation are self-evidently complex and, if the examples in this book teach us anything, it is that policy needs to be carefully tailored to each situation. Its practice – as Sen’s detailed example of a politically-motivated micro-credit scheme shows so well (Chapter 5) – also needs to be interpreted with due respect to context. Blanket strategies for poverty alleviation tend at best to be ineffectual and, at worst, counterproductive.

However, despite their ethnographic specificity, there are some general findings that emerge through the chapters that might usefully inform policy. For example, the ways in which legal restrictions – often intended to protect the socially excluded – serve as impediments to livelihoods at the margins recur sufficiently often to suggest a more general problem. People struggling to make a living on the streets as hawkers and beggars; refugees in settlements; and workers in the sex industry are all shown here to suffer the consequences of legislation ostensibly there to protect them. Mosse’s analysis of the difficulties faced by migrant labourers in western India shows that even when appropriate legislation is in place, its benefits are frequently inaccessible to the marginalised. Exploration of the wider implications of such legislation – and of policy in general – is overdue, and suggests a widespread failing to connect micro-concerns to macro-policy. How can the particular priorities of socially marginalised groups be incorporated into the development-driven focus on countrywide policy? The case studies offered in this book provide policy makers with the kind of raw material vital to making these connections and point the way towards considering that material outside forceful disciplinary and moral narratives. Several chapters also suggest how such approaches might be applied in particular settings.

Further elaboration of these central themes – and more besides – is best undertaken through an overview of the chapters that make up this book and the links between them.

CHAPTER OUTLINES

The chapters in this volume have been organised thematically, in the hope that by placing alongside each other chapters that deal with apparently similar issues, readers will be encouraged to make connections
and to reflect back on the material in ways that might not have been likely had the chapters stood alone. That said, there are a number of different ways in which the book could have been ordered, and readers might wish to find their own way in, taking cues from the titles and/or from the summaries below to create a personal ordering based on region or some other factor.

Read chronologically, the first three chapters are linked by the themes of youth and livelihoods on the streets, starting with Stan Frankland’s exploration of the livelihoods of the bayaye, a pejorative term used to describe the young men who survive on the social boundaries of Uganda’s capital city, Kampala. The bayaye cluster in groups according to the activities they are engaged in; in the case described, this is selling drugs to the expatriate community. Each group has its own territory and set of loose elective affinities and strategic compliances that bind them together. As Frankland shows, the same demonising mythology that defines them as the ‘other’ in relation to which positive Ugandan identities are constituted, also provides a unifying identity around which the bayaye can organise. From one another they obtain the moral and physical support they need to survive the streets, while from the provider-user relationship with their expatriate clients they find the individual means to escape the hardships that come with such a life. Beyond this, the chapter also offers a particularly evocative account of the wider urban landscape within which the bayaye are enmeshed. Kampala is, of course, every city every time, but many of the points Frankland draws out resonate through the chapters that follow. The chapter also exposes us to an alternative vision of the city to that framed by development discourse: a specifically Ugandan vision that also sees economic development in terms of cultural and spiritual loss.

Udi Butler’s chapter likewise deals with youth and street-based livelihoods, drawing on fieldwork with young people who live on the streets of Rio de Janeiro. Here the focus shifts to their emotional motivations and survival strategies that, Butler contends, are encapsulated in the concepts of revolta and of freedom, its antidote. Revolta roughly translates as ‘inner-rage or rebellion’ and, Butler argues, is a common experience and organising narrative expressed by many young people on the street. The chapter analyses revolta as the embodiment of oppression: the encounter of the individual with a set of social relations that are experienced as repressive, violent, discriminatory or excluding. It also explores the experience and narrative of revolta, examining how the ‘structural oppression’ on which it draws is individually experienced, and how these experiences and narratives may
serve to justify certain kinds of practices and the claiming of particular identities. Revolta, in this sense, is explored as a form of resistance as well as the consequence of oppression.

Continuing the theme of youth and the streets, Alessandro Conticini’s chapter takes a more applied perspective to focus on how children in street situations – the precursors, perhaps, to Frankland’s bayaye and Butler’s ‘enraged’ youth of Rio’s favelas – protect and promote their livelihoods in Dhaka city, Bangladesh. Street life here involves a consequential process of adaptation through which newcomers pass from survival strategies to the development of more complex coping strategies typical of well-established street dwellers. Theoretically, the chapter draws on a top-down rights-based approach integrated with a bottom-up sustainable livelihoods framework – an orientation that provides Conticini with a unique perspective on children’s priorities and preferences in comparison to their institutional rights. In particular, this approach allowed observation of what street-living children are already doing in terms of managing their poverty to serve as the starting point, later setting their coping dynamics – how they built on their assets – into a broader context of children’s rights.

Despite their ethnographic specificity – and the range of approaches to street life outlined in these three opening contributions – more widespread concerns are already beginning to emerge. People who survive on the urban streets might be trapped within the politically powerful and morally negative identities that are imposed on them – depraved, corrupting and dangerous – but they are not the passive, absolutely deprived ‘other’ that the moral majority simultaneously defines them as. Like the other marginalised groups encountered in this book, these chapters show how street-dwellers across the globe draw imaginatively on an array of resources way beyond material assets in order to get by.

In Chapter 5, the focus shifts from youth to women. Here, Atreyee Sen’s emphasis is on low income, working-class women who allied themselves with the Shiv Sena, a Hindu fundamentalist political party, in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), capital of the western Indian state of Maharashtra. The chapter builds on the author’s previous research, which traced women’s transformation from a submissive support group (the Mahila Aghadi) within a manifestly male movement, to a violent, partially autonomous women’s task force. The Aghadi’s micro-finance scheme was the first large-scale economic policy for women formulated by the Sena, and the chapter discusses how a micro-credit society created under political patronage was
privately intended to provide political and economic gains for the party, despite its publicly stated motive of empowering women with marginal livelihoods. In the process of manipulating genuine socio-economic concerns of its ordinary members, however, the wing also jeopardised the cohesiveness of identities that it had attained through its other mobilisational strategies. Sen’s analysis of the ramifications of all this further nuances the discussions of agency and exploitation that have emerged through the preceding chapters, and points to the implications of leaving out those whose work is at or beyond the boundaries of legality from policy-making. It also challenges – in common with the two chapters that follow – stereotypical notions of what it is to be a woman.

Chapter 6 begins an overlapping set of contributions exploring issues of migration while continuing a focus on women’s livelihood patterns. Here, Alyson Brody draws on research conducted among rural migrant women who worked as cleaners in a smart shopping mall in central Bangkok. The women were mainly from Isan in the northeast of Thailand, an area commonly associated with extreme poverty and backwardness. The chapter considers the modes of control and discipline evident in the mall, with a specific focus on the role of cleanliness and order in maintaining working relations and identities. It then goes on to look beyond these mechanisms of control to explore how everyday actions of the cleaners served to challenge the apparent primacy of established rules and hierarchies within the mall. In particular, with reference to the women’s life stories, Brody suggests that there are limits to women’s tolerance in respect of what they were willing to accept at work. Their stories indicated that, even as casual, low-paid workers, they had an implicit sense of their labour rights, even when this was not realised fully as unionised activity. The chapter concludes that those ‘in charge’ of the cleaners were well aware of what the limits of their tolerance would be and that the boundaries of the acceptable within the workplace could not be imposed. Rather, they were matters of subtle negotiation within the matrices of employer, supervisory staff and cleaners.

Chapter 7 also deals with migration, taking as its focus migrants to western Europe who work in a variety of jobs in the sex industry. Here, Laura Agustín argues that discussion of commercial sex is usually framed as a moral problem, with those selling it classified – like the children Conticini describes (Chapter 4) – as victims without agency. Agustín challenges this moral framework and the assumption that sexual jobs are necessarily a wholly negative experience. Based on ethnographic research conducted in Spain, she reveals the enormous
diversity of sexual jobs, many of which cannot usefully be called ‘prostitution’, in which skills and working conditions vary widely but high wages are the norm. Migrants who sign up for three-week live-in contracts in Spanish sex clubs, for example, may earn €5,000 a month. The chapter also demonstrates, however, that employment in the sex industry is not only about money. The locations she describes are also informal markets for migrants seeking sponsors, lovers and spouses who can help them in the process of becoming ‘legal’ in Europe. Sex work should, therefore, be understood as complex strategies for getting ahead and not simply as ‘work’. Agustín also demonstrates how the traditional focus on marginality and victimisation mask how this huge, unregulated, sector belongs to the ‘informal’ economy and thus represents significant opportunities for migrant workers.

Like Sen’s chapter, Agustín’s contribution points very clearly to the twin problems of situating certain groups of people as beyond the pale, and – when they are included in the policy-making process at all – of starting from the assumption that they necessarily want to change their lifestyles and should therefore be treated as victims and helped to change. Policy, as Conticini notes, is too often based on common myths and on what is politically acceptable rather than on evidence: ‘[T]he truth is that not learning from experience characterises the knowledge-creating dynamics of much of the development endeavour’ (Conticini, this volume, Chapter 4).

Another form of migration comes under scrutiny in Chapter 8, but a more important reason for placing it here is that, like Agustín’s contribution, it attempts to consider a livelihood practice outside the moral discourse within which it is usually constrained. In this case, we are not talking about commercial sex but about begging, a form of interaction that falls betwixt and between the more widely analysed categories of market exchange and of gift giving. It is explored here, in my own contribution, as an embodied practice and as a survival strategy employed by a group of South Indian people affected by leprosy. This group, which regularly migrates to Mumbai in western India from a rural community on the opposite coast, is shown to utilise begging to positive effect, its practice fulfilling the development-defined goals of ‘empowerment’ and ‘self-help’ more effectively than most of the non-governmental organization (NGO) projects conceptualised as alternatives to begging. Although begging is technically illegal, for the ‘leper beggars’ I worked with, it provided a route to self-respect and financial security otherwise denied them. When begging, the bodily signs otherwise associated with social stigma were positively
utilised. The chapter thus demonstrates the range of symbolic, political, and socio-religious resources available to leprosy-affected people within the constraints of a begging identity, and concludes by considering the implications of all this for NGOs and State organisations working with leprosy-affected people.

Chapter 9, by David Mosse, extends further our scrutiny of migration, placing the experience of tribal migrant labourers in the cities of western India within the broader context of institutions and agencies of State, trade unions and NGOs, contractors and brokers. The chapter asks how and why those who are mandated to protect those labourers manifestly fail to do so. These are not simply academic questions, but are posed specifically in the context of the author’s work as a consultant to the DFID on its efforts to set up a programme to support adivasi (tribal) migrant labourers in the western region. The chapter’s concern, then, is with hardship and exploitation, and how to contend with it, without denying the positive opportunities urban migration might offer. At the same time, it also sets out to avoid being held captive to powerful disciplinary narratives, within which anthropologists have tied the analysis of migration to narratives of modernity or progress, and environmentalists and developers have linked migration to narratives of decline, de-peasantisation and the creation of ‘ecological refugees’ or itinerant proletarians. Rather, Mosse argues that migration may index neither transformations of social mobility, nor the erosion of rural ways of living. On the contrary, it may have become the only means by which settled, agricultural livelihoods are possible or sustainable.

Chapter 10 concerns itself with forced migration, exploring the livelihood chances of refugees – displaced populations living not just figuratively but literally at the margins, shunted to border regions and confined to refugee camps. In the chapter – based on ethnographic fieldwork in a settlement for Sudanese refugees in neighbouring Uganda – Tania Kaiser considers some of the strategies employed by refugees to overcome the multiple obstacles to their social and economic survival. The immediate and most pressing question facing them – one which resonates with the socially demonised groups encountered in previous chapters – is how to get by when many of the economic activities open to them are officially illegal, or involve behaviours that contravene or transform social norms. As Kaiser demonstrates, they do so not, as one might expect, because of the legal and institutional structures supposedly put in place to protect and support them, but despite these measures. The well-intended ‘Self-Reliance Strategy’, for example, typically involves the allocation to
refugees of inadequate plots of agricultural land, but does not enable them to trade or work freely beyond the boundaries of their refugee settlements. In this sense, the chapter shows that not only do development practices often fail – as we have seen in previous chapters – but that their apparent successes are often more ambiguous than they might initially appear. Refugees who succeed often do so because they transgress social and legal boundaries. Importantly, the chapter also shows that social and economic processes are inextricably intertwined and that understanding the values and priorities of refugee communities with respect to subsistence issues must incorporate an awareness of their socio-cultural ramifications.

The final chapter, by Sian Lazar, explicitly links the micro-practices of marginal occupations with much wider macro concerns, highlighting the connections between informal street traders and national upheavals. El Alto, Bolivia, forms the backdrop to the chapter – an ‘informal city’ where up to 50% of the economy is derived from commerce in the informal sector, the overwhelming preserve of Aymara-speaking rural-urban migrant women. The chapter examines the ways in which street traders organise themselves collectively in order to interact with local and national governments. Those associations are then affiliated to a citywide federation, which acts as a union, negotiating with and confronting State bodies on their behalf. Using ethnographic work with the leadership of this federation and an association of fish sellers, Lazar explores organisational structures and modes of interaction with the State, and the ethno-cultural position of middle-woman in which the street traders are located – between indigenous producers and consumers – and the implications of these for their political agency. A particular insight of the chapter, suggesting one way of reflecting on the other contributions to this book, is its challenge to conventional notions of marginality: in the case Lazar describes, people are not only constrained by the wider socio-political structures within which they are marginalised, they also play a significant role in shaping and reconstituting them. Her notion of ‘in-betweenness’ provides a less emphatically negative framework through which to consider livelihoods at the margins.

AND FINALLY …

One of the major aims of this book has been to present the kind of material and analysis of urban livelihoods not produced when one begins with the assumption that there are particular problems to be
resolved through external intervention. That is not, however, to confine the contributions of this volume to what some might consider arid academic debate. On the contrary, they provide precisely the kind of data, critique and analysis – unconstrained by perceived needs of policy – that is needed if policy makers are to find more workable strategies for engaging with urban marginality. It would be misguided to presume that ethnographies of marginal livelihoods, disassociated from the imperatives of constructing politically acceptable policy or the hegemony of ‘development’, are value-free and thus present a truer picture of how people live. No research is disinterested. Nevertheless, the cumulative drip-drip of accounts from a range of different perspectives does have the potential to change, sometimes in subtle ways, both political imperatives and policy. Such accounts also enable the micro-concerns of significant numbers of people across the globe to inform and guide the macro-concerns of governments and global institutions. This book is intended to be part of that process.

References

Introduction: Livelihoods at the Margins


