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On The Concept of 'Village'  
in Northeastern Afghanistan  
Explorations from Kunduz Province

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# On The Concept of 'Village' in Northeastern Afghanistan

## Explorations from Kunduz Province

Katja Mielke

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## Abstract

This paper discusses contesting notions of 'the local' in Northeastern Afghanistan's Kunduz province. Empirical evidence suggests that a high fluidity and pluralistic nature of the notion of 'village' exists at the local level within the boundaries of three irrigation systems. Taking into account the settlement history of the oasis landscape in Kunduz, the paper demonstrates the local government's limited capacity to survey and register land allocations and the establishment of rural settlements. The current implementation of the National Solidarity Program can be read as an attempt to correct the government's so-perceived governance deficit with regard to the rural countryside. The establishment and official registration of Community Development Councils potentially provides the foundation of a future fourth administrative tier resembling CDC-communities. Critical thoughts of how these newly established concepts of community match local population's notion of community and identity conclude the paper.

Keywords: concepts of local, community, village, National Solidarity Program, Afghanistan, Kunduz

## Acronyms

ACTED	Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development
CDC	Community Development Council (NSP-shurā)
CDD	Community Driven Development
CLDD	Community-led Development Department
DWHH/GAA	Deutsche Welthungerhilfe/German Agro Action
EU	European Union
FP	Facilitating Partner
FPM	Friday Praying Mosque
GRSP	Ghazni Rural Support Programme
IDEAS	Integrated Development, Environment and Sustainability
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
KRBP	Kunduz River Basin Project
LG	Local Governance
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development
NRM	Natural Resources Management
NSP	National Solidarity Project
RRD	Rural Rehabilitation and Development
SMWA	Social Management of Water in Afghanistan
ZEF	Zentrum für Entwicklungsforschung / Center for Development Research, University of Bonn, Germany

## Glossary

'alāqadāri	old district subdivision
ābi	irrigated
arbāb	village headman (official before 1978)
aylāq	summer pasture shelter for herders with their families
deh	'village'
emlāk	landholdings department
hauza	1) police precinct in urban areas, 2) semi-administrative village cluster, 3) cluster of minimum 25 families to elect a CDC-representative
havēli	compound, home (delimited by four surrounding walls)
jerib (jirēb)	common land measure, 1 ha = 5 jerib, 1 jerib = 2000 square meters
jihad	'holy war' of Muslims against non-Muslims
khānawāda	household with extended family living in one compound
kodestar	cadastre office
kuchi	nomad
lalmi	rain-fed
manteqa	village cluster, 'village', region of belonging
mērāb	water manager
mujāhedin	self-designation of Afghan resistance fighters against the communist government and Soviet occupation (singular: mujāhed)
qaria	'village'
qala	self-contained homestead surrounded by high mud-walls
qaum/qaumi	concept of belonging to ethnic group, lineage, sub-lineage, or local community
qishlāq	'village', originally designated winter quarters of non-sedentary population
sharwāli	municipality
shurā	traditional council consisting of male members
welāyat	province
wakēl	representative, deputy
wuluswāl	district governor
wuluswāli	district

# 1 Introduction

In European and other OECD-countries public government relies on hierarchical control over the state's territory (Foucault 2006). Depending on the type of the national political system territorial rights have been assigned to administrative entities on different sub-national levels with the village generally forming the basic unit of local administration in rural areas. As such a village is recognized as a legal entity in charge of governing the local affairs of its inhabitants. To varying degree and in accordance with the broader national administrative frameworks a local community disposes not only of competencies for administering different sectors of local public interest but is also involved in co-determining affairs on higher government tiers – from district via regional up to national levels.

Based on case studies from northeastern Afghanistan this paper argues that the 'western' concept of village cannot be automatically applied to local contexts in other (non-OECD) regions of the world, because they do not necessarily dispose of a similar extent of administrative penetration of the country's territory. This is not a mere truism if we take a look at the apparent difficulties which organizations, government agencies and national elites, who are used to thinking in idealized western-biased administrative terms, face when they are planning to implement local-level projects in Afghanistan.

This paper will try to make sense of the challenges practitioners, administrators as well as academics encounter in relation to the local level and in the determination of an appropriate intervention unit or unit of analysis. The whole question of 'What is the concept of village in Afghanistan?' surfaced while drafting a PhD-research proposal on local governance in north Afghanistan, and at the same time preparing the conduction of field research embedded in German Agro Action's (GAA) 'Social Management of Water in Afghanistan' (SMWA) project for which ZEF is supplying a research component to investigate basic issues related to the institutional, technical and social/livelihoods dimensions of local communities in five irrigation systems in Kunduz and Takhār provinces of northeastern Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup>

For this purpose – among other local governance related research – I carried out three months of intensive field studies in three of GAA's target irrigation systems in Kunduz province: Asqalān, Sufi Qarayatēm and Qala-ye Zal between March and November 2006. The following information and tentative research results should be considered preliminary.

Chapter 2 will condense the main argument and findings. These will be put into a broader theoretical framework to discuss how 'local' in general can be broken down and approached in a pragmatic manner. After a short overview of the current administrative system in Afghanistan and the position of 'villages' in it, chapter 3 will report empirical evidence from the research sites in Kunduz province. Chapter 4 will discuss the impacts of development interventions, especially the National Solidarity Program (NSP), on the local level. Concluding remarks are summarized in the final chapter.

## 2 Locating the 'village'

Afghanistan has seen high levels of foreign military and aid intervention during the last five years since the ousting of the Taliban which officially ended an almost quarter of a century violent conflict. Though most aid agencies and projects are being started in the capital city Kabul, there is a wide range of activities and organizations engaging in the provinces' rural areas. A prominent example is the World Bank co-financed National Solidarity Programme (NSP) of the Afghan government which aims to establish participatory local governance structures and to improve rural livelihoods via the implementation of infrastructural measures.

Project designs which target rural populations at the local level commonly take villages as intervention units for project implementation. This is due to the fact that NGOs are most often headed by expatriate

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<sup>1</sup> For other reports and an excerpt of the SWMA-project proposal see GAA 2005, Shah 2006, ter Steege 2006.

staff in charge of project management and implementation oversight. In other cases project designs and proposals have been written by people not familiar with the local situation, either also expatriates working at a desk in a far-off country who have maybe visited the target region shortly, or Afghan nationals who belong to an urbanized elite that does hardly acknowledge rural realities and the facts 'on the ground'. As for Kunduz Province this resulted in some uncertainty about how to handle projects which were supposed to target 'villages', though in the field, depending on who one referred to, local residents stated different settlement names which not at all complied with village lists provided by district administrations.

## 2.1 Main research findings

This paper suggests that there exists a high fluidity and pluralistic nature of the notion of 'village' on the local level in Afghanistan. There are no strict settlement boundaries and the previous pre-revolution attempt of territorializing the rural areas has been overhauled by developments during the last roughly thirty years. The concept of village in Kunduz province is particularly contested due to settlement history and natural-geographical conditions of the area. Field research in settlements of three irrigation systems in Qala-ye Zal, Chahārdara and the Center (markaz) districts of Kunduz province unveiled a dichotomy of perceptions regarding 'the village'. On the one hand, rural residents do not think and act in terms of clearly (territorially) delimited spaces in their everyday interaction. Rather, their frame of reference seems to be a socio-economic space in which they are active for their daily routines and which is structured by face-to-face social network relationships.

On the other hand, I witnessed a clear tendency of government initiated activities to penetrate rural spaces and to define them administratively by assigning proper names to some settlements and registering these in official records via the current implementation processes of the NSP. The government's attempts to administer the rural areas always encompassed administrative reforms and the establishment of sub-provincial governmental bodies/line-ministries and mere representatives. How successfully the central government actually permeated the provinces over time in terms of enforcement capacity and real influence in shaping local policies remains largely unknown and has not been subject of extensive investigation. What can broadly be stated is that the central government followed the common territorial governance approach by de-concentrating central government functions to lower-level offices in the hierarchy without granting them the legal right and financial resources to act on behalf of the people it aimed to administer. Domestic politics resulted in the formal establishment of a three-tier administrative system with the central authority in the capital, and (today 34) provinces, each of which consists of several districts.

The two opposing views – the territorial from the government side ('from above') and the social network perspective of rural residents ('from below') – are currently undergoing rapprochement processes via NSP implementation and result in broad-based formalization of a potential fourth administrative tier: 'the village'.

## 2.2 Conceptualizing the 'local'

Highlighted attention towards local level politics or local governance came about with the shift of international discourse towards empowerment, taking into account local people's needs and striving towards effectiveness in performance of political and socio-economic government policies. Other buzzwords and related concepts promoted along the line are responsiveness, responsibility and accountability. This shift had been preceded by the failure of structural adjustment programmes in various parts of the world. As one consequence the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) were carved out and elevated as long-term means for development and as solution for the reduction of large-scale poverty around the globe. The idea of participatory development has been fuelling projects that aim to



transfer planning authority, decision making and management of certain policies to lower administrative, i.e. local levels.<sup>2</sup>

As indicated above, the term 'local' inhibits a somewhat ambiguous meaning. On the one hand 'local' can include a spatial/territorial dimension, e.g. if we think the world in territorially administered units local governance projects could deal with the smallest administrative units of government. On the other hand, though, 'local' can be thought beyond administration as micro-level of social interaction, for example in families, households, kinship groups, communities etc. This complies with the non-territorial approach of social interaction in networks among members of a community. Their space of social action (sozialer Handlungsraum) does not dispose of territorially fixed boundaries; it is rather fluid and comparable to individual identities which change according to situation, context conditions and need. For example, the local action arena might be delimited by face-to-face relationships.

### 2.3 The village in Afghanistan's administrative system

In Afghanistan both analytically distinct meanings of 'local' overlap at most maybe by coincidence. Most likely they do not even touch upon each other because the state did so far never achieve to administer the rural areas completely. The 1382/2004 constitution of Afghanistan specifies in article 136: 'the local administrative unit is a province'. Thus, officially, Afghanistan has a two-tier government system consisting of the national and provincial administrations. Lower-level government bodies are specified in by-laws and include the district level (*wuluswāli*) as a third administrative tier. These sub-provinces usually, but not necessarily, comprise of one district center/rural municipality (*sharwāli wuluswāli*), where also a main bazaar is situated, and belonging settlements. Rural and provincial municipalities (*sharwāli welāyat*) are legally recognized elements in the formal administrative system. Beyond the district level, though, an administrative-territorial penetration of the entire rural space by the government has not taken place at any point of time since the state's coming into being.

On the one hand Afghanistan is a highly centralized state where all budgetary and staffing decisions are exclusively made in Kabul (Lister 2005, 3). Neither provincial nor district administrations are allowed a minimum level of autonomy in taking policy decisions. They are merely carrying out centrally determined programs. On the other hand foreign and one domestic NGO/s are implementing the NSP as facilitating partners (FP) under the official umbrella of the Afghan government. The NSP aims at the development of rural areas by infrastructure financing and at strengthening and reform of local governance structures. It has been taken over as blueprint development tool from East-Timor, financed by the World Bank. The sub-national administrative structures at provincial and district level are neither involved in the implementation of the NSP, nor in a large number of other projects that are being realized at local level by domestic and foreign NGOs. This approach seems to contradict the hierarchical government system of rule and administration. At the same time it hints at the crucial niche NGOs have found themselves in as agents of state-building in Afghanistan. Whereas donor-driven projects are guided by international decentralization, empowerment and participatory ideas, the high-grade centralization of the government system does not allow the diversion of financial resources and legal rights to sub-national levels. As a result, provincial and district-administrations are supposed to govern local affairs but are not provided any power for effective enforcement of decisions. Against this background the puny motivation of NGOs to involve and collaborate with sub-national administrations seems understandable.

Fiscal decentralization and intentions for lower-level planning are currently being discussed in Afghanistan; the actual state of implementation is unclear. Government agencies are not in the position to provide social services or public goods. Beneath district levels formal local governance structures are largely absent and the situation 'on the ground' can be compared to a 'black box'. This does not mean that outside intervention in local communities does not take place. On the contrary, NGOs, partly jointly with government offices at various sub-national levels, are quite active implementing projects that are in line with contemporary development paradigms – be it participatory development in general, the launching of natural resources user groups/NRM groups or the establishment of water user associations

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of national and international actors' perceptions of village institutions see Noelle-Karimi 2006.

in basin-wide water management schemes in particular. For example, in Kunduz and Takhār provinces of northeastern Afghanistan the European Union finances the so-called Kunduz River Basin Programme (KRBP), a pilot project to better manage (good governance) water distribution and supply with a diversified shareholder group of users and administrators from the highest ministerial ranks to an irrigation canal's water manager (*mārāb*) and finally the farmer whose livelihood depends on irrigation water.

In the case of irrigation water governance the answer to the question of what the local intervention unit is, seems to be self-evident: the irrigation system or canal. But actually it is not that easy if we consider the limited amount of resources and available practical strategies to involve as many water users as possible. Hence, an NGO engaging in a project like the SMWA has to make decisions about where to concentrate intervention efforts within an irrigation system in order to display the largest demonstration effects for neighbouring communities or representatives of all water users along the canal. Depending on the size of the irrigation system it is rather unlikely that all water users can be targeted in the same manner, thus, it is necessary to find a selection strategy. Targeting villages along a main irrigation canal seems most feasible in this regard from an outsider's point of view. However, the next chapter will show that this is not a point of departure for project implementation around Kunduz.

In short, villages are not legally recognized units of sub-national administration. This is an important fact which hardly any actor intervening in local settings is taking into account. All local governance projects target the 'local' area and assume it to be made up of villages without actually knowing what the concept of 'local' or 'village' entails in a particular environment.

## 2.4 Previous attempts at territorializing Afghanistan's rural areas

The about only previous attempt of territorializing the rural areas of Afghanistan took place from the late 1960s and was stopped by the onset of the 'revolution' in 1978. As a result of the implementation of the National Demographic Survey Project the Afghan government edited the Provisional Gazetteer of Afghanistan in 1975 (Favre 2005, 15) which for the first time included all of Afghanistan's districts as well as respective village (*qaria*) lists. The validity of these original information must be seriously questioned though, due to the fact that apparently village lists were established according to data held by ministries, and not on the basis of actual surveys where people would go out into the countryside to take stock of the number, names and population of each district's settlements. Most likely ministries relied on data collected in village surveys during the early 1960s by government and international agencies foregoing the reorganization of administrative districts and provinces. Dupree (1973, 144) cites from the 1342/1963 Population and Agriculture Survey of 500 Villages the number of 1.417 villages for Qataghān province<sup>3</sup>, stating that he assumed the data to be quite reliable because random cross-checks in the course of his own field research confirmed the survey results more or less.

Administrative reforms foregoing the National Demographic Survey Project established a new provincial system in 1964, sub-dividing the formerly 14 provinces into 28. Successive territorial changes have led to the establishment of 34 provinces up to date while the number of districts is still constantly changing because district borders are being re-negotiated according to powerful local interests and preferences regarding representation. Thus, except for demographic survey data collected of two thirds of the population in the only ever in Afghanistan attempted census in 1979 and recent surveys connected with voter registration (pre-poll census and voter's registry) for the 2005 parliamentary elections, no up to date information regarding villages and local population is available. A complete census is scheduled to be conducted in 2008 with the results being available not before spring 2009.<sup>4</sup>

Previous attempts at administering the rural areas of Afghanistan involved first of all efforts to survey and register landholdings as well as stock-taking of the amount, population and location of rural settlements. Until the early 1960s systematic information about land ownership structures, village borders and the rural areas in general was broadly lacking because the government did not dispose of

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<sup>3</sup> Qataghān was split up into the three smaller provinces of Kunduz, Baghlān and Takhār in 1970.

<sup>4</sup> According to ID Press Release of 13 December 2006, distributed via AfghanWire 15/12/06.

qualified staff, techniques and know-how about how to conduct large-scale land surveys. As a result the government and its local administrations were deprived of the possibility of effective resource allocation in the form of taxation. In the past land had been allocated to people according to estimates; exact and uniform measurements of use areas could not be carried out. Thus, the taxes, which a landowner paid, were based on the amount of land stated in his ownership document, though de facto in most cases the taxpaying landowner had much more land under cultivation.

The introduction of surveying techniques and a training facility run by USAID and the Afghan government in Kandahar enabled large-scale training of surveyors, and knowledge transfer regarding the use of equipment and drawing of maps. Furthermore, a National Cadastre office was set up in 1342/1963 in Kabul. Sub-departments of the central office were established at regional levels, e.g. in Kunduz which reportedly was in charge of land surveys in all four northeastern provinces until the early 1980s.<sup>5</sup>

In the course of its fieldwork the cadastre department staff managed to conduct between 1342/1963 and 1357/1978, only 35% of Afghanistan's territory was surveyed. For Kunduz province the surveyed land amounts to 923.233 jerib or 184.647 ha<sup>6</sup> which resembled the most part of the arable land at that time and makes up about 23% of the total area of Kunduz province today (804.000 ha). With the Russian invasion land surveys and thereof the determination of village locations and borders stopped due to increasing insecurity. The cadastral register has not been updated since 1355/1976, though the landholdings property department (*emlāk*) has been keeping track of officially notified property changes throughout the years of turmoil.<sup>7</sup> Reportedly the largest deficits regarding the amount of surveyed land exist in Imām Sahēb district, which shares a border with Tajikistan along the Amu Darya river. Only 10 out of 159 villages had been covered and their land holdings registered until 1978. Similarly, but to a much smaller extent than in Imām Sahēb, rain-fed (*lalmi*) areas and belonging settlements in Khānābād have not been surveyed entirely. To the extent that a survey covered a certain area the new survey techniques enabled the government to verify landholdings and to assign everybody exactly the amount of land as was stated in the land document. Excess land was assigned back to the government and went into the state's pool of land reserves.

If the information given and recorded in the limited surveying that was actually realized until the onset of the 'revolution' was correct, can hardly be assessed. What holds true for all figures and statistics for Afghanistan is that they need to be treated with the right amount of scepticism. Nevertheless, the numbers and landholdings registered based on the surveys have become official and, thus, formed social reality. The recordings in the cadastre book are the only ones available so far. In the course of the 40 years that have passed since the initial surveys<sup>8</sup> local environments, including agricultural and settlement patterns changed, if nothing else due to wartime destruction and population dynamics of flight, return and general population growth. Most pressing concerns today are illegal land seizures by local commanders and intra-family disputes about land that has been occupied by some members of the family who had not emigrated to Pakistan or Iran and who refuse to leave the land plots to its initial owners returning from abroad.

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<sup>5</sup> Still today the Kunduz kodestar office is formally responsible for Baghlān and Kunduz provinces.

<sup>6</sup> According to the head of the kodestar department Kunduz. The figure is calculated with 1 ha consisting of 5 jerib (1 jerib=2.000 qm), although actually before 1371/1950 one jerib amounted to 1.936 qm.

<sup>7</sup> The kodestar-data serves mainly as reference point for land disputes. In this context the *manteqa*-maps that have been drawn on the basis of land surveys conducted in the ten years between 1345/1966 and 1355/1976 are of special value.

<sup>8</sup> According to an informant in the Kunduz cadastre office the determination of village borders set in after 1345/1966 (Interview, 16 May 2006).

### 3 'Villages' in Kunduz Province

The subsequent paragraphs are based on qualitative field research in Kunduz which led to the research hypothesis that the concept of village in northeastern Afghanistan is very much contested. As has been mentioned by other Afghanistan researchers (Dupree 1973, Favre 2005) in the past, different terms and contested local concepts regarding the loci of rural community life exist: qaria, qishlāq, manteqa and keley (kelay), just to mention the most commonly cited ones. Most of the time, all of these concepts have been indiscriminately translated into English as 'village'. During field research in the northeast I have only come across the first three terms, which were most of the time used interchangeably. Keley is the Pashto word for village, but although there are significant numbers of Pashtuns living especially in Kunduz province, I have never heard an informant use the term keley. Another term, deh, also literally means rural settlement and is translated as 'village', but as a rule it is mostly used in name phrases to specify a place, e.g. 'Deh ta' in Warsaj.

Furthermore, the concepts which are commonly used to apprehend rural communities or settlements/'villages' are not limited to the above labels as will be shown in Table 1. Thus, in search for an intervention unit for any kind of development project work or unit of analysis for local governance research, questions arise regarding what comprises a village, whether it has borders, where these are and how they are determined, what the growth dynamics (population, migration, mosques) are etc. This is not fixed and remains largely unknown.

#### 3.1 *qaria – qishlāq - manteqa*

Informants in Kunduz province used qaria, qishlāq and manteqa interchangeably to designate their place of living. The context is decisive, though, local identities are always situational: a statement very much depends on the setting and the person who asks – so informants will give the wider area they are from if a person not belonging there asks, whereas they will be more exact if talking to a person from their own region or if questioned for details by a researcher.

The notion of manteqa is very prominent among the people and hints at the fact that their local/social identity is tightly bound to this concept. Yet, in empirical terms no indicator for some kind of self-enforced institutionalization of the manteqa beyond being in people's minds could be found so far. There is nothing like an institutionalized shurā-ye manteqa or even musafēd(hā-y)e manteqa (distinct from e.g. shurā-ye qaria or musafēd(hā-y)e qishlāq). In many cases the term manteqa is used to designate the wider region or communal cluster of belonging. For example, people living in the Sufi-Qarayatēm area<sup>9</sup> of Kunduz province/Chahārdara district speak either of Chahārdara as their manteqa or of Qarayatēm/Sufi respectively. At the same time Madrasa/Umar Khēl, a 'village' in Qarayatēm is also called manteqa – as well as qaria and/or qishlāq. The same – diffuse – situation I found in Asqalān canal area.<sup>10</sup> Whereas the irrigation system as such seems to be split up into two parts with two merābs in charge – one for the upstream area called Asqalān, inhabited by Tājik, Pashtun, Uzbēk, Laqai<sup>11</sup>, Aimāq, Qunghirāt<sup>12</sup>, and Turkman, and the second for the downstream, exclusively Pashtun settlements; informants from both areas called Asqalān their manteqa. Further and on other occasions, people from downstream would say their manteqa is Tobrakash, people from upstream stated belonging not to Tobrakash, but Asqalān-manteqa. Another example from Asqalān: Wulus, a settlement more or less located in the

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<sup>9</sup> Sufi-Qarayatēm area encompasses the territory that is irrigated from Sufi-Qarayatēm canal system consisting of two more or less independent smaller systems (Sufi and Qarayatēm) which share intake and a diversion structure. Qarayatēm canal (also called Umar Khēl canal) is further divided in two sub-canal – nahr-e Madrasa and nahr-e Surkhak.

<sup>10</sup> Asqalān designates the territory irrigated from the canal of the same name in Kunduz center district. Asqalān is famous in all of (at least Northern) Afghanistan for its melons. Maybe this fact (pride) is a source of a common 'Asqalān identity' for the inhabitants along Asqalān-canal.

<sup>11</sup> subtribe of Uzbēk clan

<sup>12</sup> subtribe of Turkman

middle of the canal where Turkic-speaking people are living (Uzbēk, Laqai, Qunghirāt, Turkman) has also – among other settlements along the canal – been labeled as *manteqa*. Outside of Kunduz city in the direction of Asqalān, Olchin *manteqa* was described as being subdivided into three more or less clearly delimited parts, although then these three part can themselves also be called *manteqa*, one being named after one of it's elders: *qishlāq-e Mullah Sardā* or *manteqa-ye Mullah Sardā*. It was also reported that these single *manteqa* consist of several *qaria*.

Favre (2005) has elaborated on the concept of *manteqa* and described it as 'the actual social and territorial unit of rural Afghanistan' and 'an element shaping identity and solidarity'. While I would support the identity argument, my own field research suggests that solidarity among people is actually lacking on a broad scale. On the contrary, if in some cases *manteqa* describes a naturally bounded system of joint resource use by a group of people, like for example an irrigation system or pastures that a community depends on for common usage, one might want to speak of solidarity in a normative sense, meaning that it should exist in order to have all people of the same catchment benefit from it. I would assume that in reality most likely differences exist in access, power and social control among natural resources users of a community or the *manteqa* which also prevent *de facto* solidarity in terms of mutual help and support to materialize.

The terms *qaria* and *qishlāq* designate more compact settlement patterns. In an administrator's office I was given the following, very handy explanation: ten families (1-2 mosques) would make one *qishlāq*, one *qaria* then would comprise of ten *qishlāq*. This information comes in too handy and has to be taken with caution given the fact that other informants (among them also government officials etc.) used *qishlāq* and *qaria* very much synonymously. So another version stated that one *manteqa* would consist of 10 *qaria/qishlāq*. My initial idea of *qishlāq* being an Uzbek term and therefore being used mainly by Uzbēks or turkic-speakers, did not hold true either. Farsiwān (Tājik, Aimāq et al.) - and 'even' sometimes Pashtuns - also refer to settlements as *qishlāq*. Given that Afghan society has been nomadic to a very large extent it is legitimate to look at an interpretation of the origins of the word *qishlāq* which originally means 'winter quarters' and is opposed to *aylāq*, denoting summer quarters on the pastures. An *aylāq* can be two hours away from the 'village' which is in Kunduz and Takhār provinces the permanent settlement for at least a small part of every family living from animal husbandry and staying behind during the seasonal migration time, or it can be high up on the mountains, to be reached only after several months of wandering up.

In addition, to complement people's perception of the notion of 'village' it must be mentioned at this point that, no matter what a certain settlement area is labeled in terms of *manteqa*, *qaria* and/or *qishlāq*, the same 'village' can have different names itself. One of the most prominent examples I encountered and thereby still a less confusing one is a settlement with the name 'Madrasa' in Qarayatēm canal area, but it is also known as 'Umar Khēl' and/or 'Qarayatēm'. It is very well possible that this could be explained with the idea that the first settlement of the people building the canal (the Umarkhēl<sup>13</sup>) has been called by surrounding tribes of other ethnic origins (e.g. Uzbēks, Tājiks, Aimāq) in dissociation of themselves 'Umarkhēl', though the Umarkhēl had given the settlement the name 'Madrasa' or this just was the place where they had built a madrasa, maybe even only a mosque, and came to call it 'Madrasa' for this practical reason. Eventually it could also be assumed that the settlement was for some good reason (Qarayatēm literally means 'black twins') called Qarayatēm first and with the ongoing construction of the canal it quite naturally got the same name or first the canal was named Qarayatēm relaying its name to the main settlement cluster somewhat automatically. To understand these sequences is of minor importance and thus may well remain subject to speculation. Instead, the example demonstrates the fluidity of names and attached concepts of rural settlements at the time being. They are all used interchangeably by their inhabitants and mirror the extent of identification with a local space of social interaction rather than a territorially limited place with a uniform name attached to it.

Adding to the confusion are temporary settlement names for *qaria/qishlāq/manteqa*. It is very common that a 'village' is named after an important elder or *arbāb*, mullah, local commander etc. In most of these cases the village ceases to carry the name of the famous person after his death, and instead takes on a

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<sup>13</sup> Pashtun tribe

new name which can either be derived from the dead elder's son's name, the new arbāb, mullah etc. If a settlement is named after a very famous commander who originated from the certain 'village', the name tends to remain in use also after his decease, for example qaria/manteqa/qishlāq Qalāj Āghā in Asqalān.

Asqalān as being the name of – for once – a canal and – second – for the whole region irrigated with water the canal diverts from the Kunduz river, is famous as honey melon-growing region/manteqa in the whole of Afghanistan. Thirdly, 'Asqalān' designates some semi-official settlements proper, though there are already two: Asqalān I and Asqalān II. Taken as canal Asqalān consists of two manteqa: Asqalān upstream and Tobrakash downstream. These are also the names that can be found in the cadastral register in Kunduz, smaller units (villages or sub-villages) are not listed. Thus, in order to find a person living in Wulus/Asqalan manteqa the cadastre clerk has to look through the whole cadastral register of Asqalān in order to make a find. In the Landholdings (*mudāryat-e emlāk*) and Cadastre Departments (*mudāryat-e 'umomi kodestar*) all landowners of a certain area are listed as belonging to the respective manteqa, no mention of 'villages'/qaria/qishlāq or village names can be found in the record books. The *emlāk* office, subordinated to the Ministry of Agriculture, is in charge of registering changes in landownership by sale or inheritance. Since its records serve mainly the purpose of past and potential future tax collection, the category of land (1-3) is the decisive criteria for the order of landownership records, not the exact location/'village'.

Does this render the concept/s of qaria/qishlāq meaningless? Police is being sent to a certain qaria/qishlāq if they are supposed to fine a person for not taking part in the intake construction work or after somebody has been caught taking water illegally etc. This indicates that still, in the perspective from above, manteqa is seen as an overarching structure consisting of smaller territorial units – 'villages' (qaria/qishlāq). How far people on the ground identify with belonging to a particular qaria/qishlāq remains open.<sup>14</sup> The question also probably needs to be rephrased with an emphasis on identification with villages' names versus a certain social space since the latter remains stable while the former is frequently due to change.

Summing up the above it seems that while the manteqa has not institutionalized in any form as a unit of action or administration, but 'merely' serves as a reference point in people's worldviews, some administrators who are at the same time members of local communities, and thus occupied with the same sort of ideas/worldviews as their fellow rural dwellers in a certain location, have – informally – made use of the concept and structured their bookkeeping according to manteqa. Nevertheless given the great extent of overlap between the different notions of village I would reject Favre's claim that the manteqa is the missing interactive link between district administration and settlement (Favre 2005, 1). The recognition and formalization (by registration and allocation of competencies) of any settlement type could fill the gap. Until such a condition materializes one has to deal with a great fluidity regarding settlement concepts and names, thus, rendering 'village lists' pretty much useless since they are never up to date after they have once been drawn up. The multiple names attached to settlements and using micro, meso and macro designations seemingly arbitrary makes outsiders – organizations as well as researchers – face difficulties because they are very much used to thinking along 'village' lines. Rural society in Northern Afghanistan is characterized by face-to-face relationships. In contrast to outsiders locals plainly know the elder of a 'village' and also his sons, even if it is a (far) neighbouring 'village'. Thus, the difficulty is not on their side, they have no trouble referring to one and the same settlement with various names.

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<sup>14</sup> New ID-documents (*tazkīra*) in Kunduz province are issued in Pashto language. For designation of the place of residence they include *welāyat*, *wuluswāli* and *kelay-guzar* ('whereabouts'; indication for place of residence at sub-district level, *guzar* literally meaning 'street') in the header. For example, a *tazkīra* of a person from a small settlement north of Aq Tēpa issued in 1383 (2004/05) states *welāyat Kunduz, wuluswāli Qala-ye Zal, kelay-guzar Aq Tēpa*, which is the district center (*sharwāli wuluswāli*) of Qala-ye Zal, but actually half an hour away from the *tazkīra*-bearer's home. Voting cards for the 2005 parliamentary and provincial council elections rather merely indicated (and 'indicate' - since they are now widely used/recognized as ID-cards) home province and district of the bearer. Only a small percentage of Afghanistan's population holds an ID-card.

### 3.2 Multiple concepts of community

This leads to the question of how many different layers of ‘the local’ actually exist and can be identified? Since obtained data is quite ambiguous in this regard, I would suggest that we have not only one single ‘concept of village’ but a multitude. Table 1 gives an overview of the different notions of ‘village’ I encountered in the field. Starting out from the first column I introduce three levels of what constitutes ‘local’ – from the nucleus of the family (micro layer) up to the medium and macro levels which can extend to include several settlements and hundreds if not thousands of people, but still might be considered ‘village’. The second column ‘local perceptions’ displays a broad overlap of concepts in regard to territorial space (micro-, meso-, macro level) and mirrors that e.g. *manteqa* is used by locals for denoting everything between the micro-cosmos of living as well as the wider region of origin. *Qaria* and *qishlāq* are concepts which are mostly used for comprehending micro and meso local levels, which on the smallest ground can be equated with an entity as small as a single *qala* or a household (*khānawāda*), if slightly bigger it might match a mosque-community or something an outsider and sometimes the locals themselves would call a sub-village. On a next higher stage – the meso-level – this could also amount to a Friday-praying mosque community.

Table 1: Overview of the different local notions of ‘village’

local levels	local perceptions
macro	<i>manteqa</i> , <i>hauza</i> , FPM-community, local NSP-council area
meso	<i>qaria</i> , <i>qishlāq</i> , <i>manteqa</i> , <i>hauza</i> <sup>15</sup> , local NSP-council area, mosque-community, FPM-community
micro	<i>qaria</i> , <i>qishlāq</i> , <i>manteqa</i> , sub-village, <i>qala</i> , <i>khānawāda</i> , mosque-community, <i>qishlāq</i> , local NSP-council area, <i>hauza</i> *

While an uninformed outsider would try to approach ‘the local’ with the village concept in mind, the table demonstrates that such an encounter is most likely to face difficulties and confusion since the scope of what local encompasses is very wide and not fixed. The locals’ insider-perception from below is very much more differentiable than the outsiders’ perception and at the same time fluid. Because interactions between the two are not taking place at the same level of perception, this causes confusion. Assuming that formerly ‘villages’ were determined and recorded, the last decades have macerated initial communities and the lack of government and incomplete state-building before the outbreak of violent fighting caused administration efforts to halt at a premature stage and to rely on more or less informally institutionalized personal relationships for linkages with inhabitants of the rural settlements. As a result locally existing perceptions form realities that are opposed by the outsiders’ perspective of local administration that – in the case of Afghanistan – cannot but to stick with the village category. As a result the rural areas are being approached with outdated village lists from the 1960s and 1970s because they are the only official documents available regarding local communities.

In addition to mere classical administrative categories which are always territorially grounded, Table 1 includes also three cross-cutting, non-administrative categories that are stretching in a certain space: mosque communities, natural-geographic units and the action arena of local NSP-councils (CDCs).<sup>16</sup> The latter approach of intervention at the local level encompasses the number of rural dwellers who elected a CDC and are represented by a newly established council and the electoral clusters thereof. This will be subject of elaboration in section 4 (below).

<sup>15</sup> *Hauza* literally means ‘zone’ and has been used in Afghanistan’s urban areas to designate police precincts, e.g. Kunduz city consists of four *hauza* which are numbered *hauza-ye awwal* etc. (*hauza* 1-4). These precincts are not part of the formal administrative hierarchy and have no legal recognition. As will be shown in section 3.3., though, in Warsaj the notion of *hauza* gained semi-administrative status on the macro- and meso-levels of local governance. In the course of NSP-implementation the term *hauza* has also been introduced to the rural areas as household cluster which had to be formed and elect their representative for the NSP-*shurā*/CDC. When relating to the latter I write *hauza*\*.

<sup>16</sup> In this text I use the terms NSP-council/NSP-*shurā* and CDC synonymously.

The first cross-cutting approach at intervention would entail a religious community of mosque visitors who go to their nearest mosque or to one particular Friday praying mosque for prayers. But, taking all the households whose male members turn to a particular mosque/FPM for prayers as a unit of intervention or a population to target with development measures inhibits two major caveats: First, people do not seem to always attend the same mosque for Friday prayers. Second, the approach would not include Afghans who do never pray in the mosque, most of all women, but also men. Furthermore, it is unknown if and how people who tend to turn to the same mosque for prayers share a sense of belonging to one single community and on which local level. For these reasons, taking mosques as intervention units cannot surrogate other forms of local administration. Cursory, targeting mosque communities and not villages in the first place makes sense as long as the extent of a project is limited and does not require exhaustive mapping of mosques and belonging populations.

From the outside perspective the mosque could be viewed as core of the smallest settlement cluster constituting a settlement as such, as opposed to a mere qala or *khānawāda*. How far the mosque-approach abides for administrative purposes and might be of use in the framework of current state-building and administration efforts remains open. In the context of the NSP-implementation mosque communities seem to be targeted as entry points to set up settlement clusters eligible of electing their own candidate who then should represent their interests in the local CDC. Such a (NSP) clustering exercise is based on territorial premises. The position and status of the mullah as spiritual leader and one of the elders of the community of people who gather in his mosque for prayers is not considered to be a number in the equation. A look back in time to the beginning of the 1990s when the Taliban movement emerged and thereafter, and the fact that Afghanistan is an Islamic republic today might justify taking an unconventional look at the religious-ideological-ideational substance behind this approach though. The fact that the Taliban were able to enforce the poppy growing ban Mullah Omar evicted in late 2000 might be viewed as a broad hint at the strong potential of religiously motivated governance mechanisms. One explanation for the ban's success despite of a three-year drought the previous years alludes to the Taliban's ability to penetrate the local levels via religious links with the local mullahs; of course based on an appealing ideology, backed with the threat of force etc. Nevertheless, with the same or similar means at its disposal, no other regime or government before had been able to regulate policies in the Afghan rural countryside to such an extent before and ever since. For proof of the latter a look at the latest opium poppy production figures and eradication amounts and the central government's and foreign organizations' and troops' failure to stop poppy growing is just one example, though regional differences have to be taken into account as well.

The second cross-cutting, but territorially based unit of intervention shall be introduced as topical/natural-geographic approach, referring to spaces delimited by natural-geographical conditions, e.g. inhabitants of a catchment area of an irrigation canal or communities sharing certain pasture ground or a forest. Thus, this approach is closely interlinked with natural resources governance. While the central administration's perspective 'from above' does not consider these types of territories as unitary because they do not fit classical administrative patterns, the view from below is quite different just out of necessity due to interdependence of downstream and upstream irrigation water users or pastors etc. Projects targeting issues of natural resources management are well advised if they take a holistic approach at NRM systems, but de facto financing might not allow doing so and instead require to concentrate on classical administrative units like single 'villages'.

As Table 2 summarizes, even the formerly registered 'villages' have never officially been part of the administrative hierarchy of the Afghan central government. The local level has never been effectively penetrated by formal administrative practices and neither legally acknowledged as formal local tier of the central administration. With the exception of local middlemen like formerly appointed *arbāb* and few elders, a link between government and rural dwellers has not existed so far. Recently, with the implementation of the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), CDCs were introduced and are being established as the local governance institution that is supposed to bridge the gap between the local level and existing formal governance (government) institutions.



Table 2: Stages of institutionalization of local entities in Afghanistan

	local intervention units →	admin	cross-cutting		
		'villages'	mosque/FPM	topical/NR-unit	CDC
↑ degree of institutionalization	fully official				
	- - transitory	'village'			CDC-'community'
	limited local	macro-meso-micro tiers of 'the local' with its overlapping concepts <sup>17</sup>	mosque, FPM	- irrigation canal system (eventually with sub-canal) - joint/communal pastures - joint forest	

#### 4 The territorialization of rural areas as result of NSP-implementation

Since the start of the implementation of the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) in late 2003 'the local' is being 'formalized' via the registration of newly established CDC-structures all over Afghanistan. On behalf of the Afghan government the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) is in charge of monitoring the NSP-implementation process at national and provincial levels, though actually 25 contracted FPs implement the programme below province level in the rural areas throughout the country. In Kunduz Province FPs are ACTED (covering two districts: Imām Saheb, Dasht-e Archi) and GRSP, an Afghan NGO covering the rest of the province. In Farkhār and Warsaj, the two research sites in Takhār, Concern Worldwide acts as FP.

The NSP's main objective is to facilitate community-based development measures in the whole of Afghanistan within a relatively short period of time, initially three, meanwhile five years. Two main goals have to be looked at separately: For once, reducing poverty and improving livelihoods is a goal that is tackled with the dissemination of block grants to communities to finance infrastructural projects. Secondly, by having CDCs democratically elected and letting them decide what to spend the block grant money on, participatory and representative mechanisms are introduced and supposed to transform traditional power structures towards sustainable 'good' local governance bodies. It has not been a prior aim of the NSP to administer the local level totally anew, or, put differently, that anybody in the government ever recognized the need to do so. Rather, every programme document as well as strategy papers of MRRD, Afghan government, FPs, international consultants and the World Bank assume quite naturally that 'villages' are the basic form of social organization and administration at the local level and form the spatial unit for the establishment of NSP-shurās/CDCs.

As of December 2005 the number of villages, also referred to as 'rural settlements', is estimated at 38.000.<sup>18</sup> The term 'community' is used for a unit of at least 25 families<sup>19</sup> eligible for a block grant which is calculated with 200 USD per family. In the process of NSP-implementation the inhabitants of rural settlements with more than 25 families are asked to form clusters (hauza\*) of 10-30 families (Karmacharya 2007, 219), who then select one representative for the community development council which is held accountable by its 'village' constituency. Since 60.000 USD is the maximum amount that

<sup>17</sup> See Table 1: Overview of the different notions of 'village'.

<sup>18</sup> MRRD 2006, viii. According to pre-December 2005 estimates the number of villages amounts to be around 20.000. The NSP manual further states, 'No accurate census data is available and it is unclear if consensus has been reached on a working definition of 'village'.' Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Initially, at the start of the NSP in 2003, block grants were allocated to villages of over 50 families (MRRD 2003, 6).

can be given to a single 'village'/community, maximum 300 families are meant to profit from it. Settlement clusters containing less than 25 families are forced to conjoin neighbouring 'communities' to establish a joint CDC. If a village is large and extends 300 families, more than one CDC can be formed.

Favre (2005, 11) has expressed objections regarding this approach arguing it would lead to a fragmentation of Afghan society and neglect local level governance units (*manteqa*) which were initially used to address public needs on the communities' own initiatives 'from below'. Given the disarray evolving around the concept of village stated in previous chapters, I would suggest not to talk of fragmentation processes, because what is it that is being fragmented? As I was trying to show above the different notions of village – *manteqa*, *qaria*, *qishlāq* – are contested. The current process of CDC-establishment has the potential to partly dissolve the confusion, at least from a top-down or official perspective. What can currently be observed in Afghanistan is that communities are being territorially fixed and formalized through registration in the course of NSP implementation. If and how this will affect local people's perception about their belonging to a certain *qaria/qishlāq/manteqa* remains to be seen.

The CDC-set up is a technical process from above, which is not taking into account local identity patterns of *qaria*, *qishlāq*, *manteqa* etc. In addition to the guidelines and definitions as stated in the NSP operational manual, implementing agencies have been confronted with the task of making sense of local conditions and making them fit according to the guidelines. In the course of NSP implementation, FPs' staff is usually being provided with 30 to 40 year-old village lists from the respective provincial RRD-line ministry or district administrations. Given the changes that occurred in the rural areas over the last forty years, these lists turn out to be of limited use in the field. Thus, FP-community mobilizers eventually have to search for the villages on the lists and find out that in many cases these are either not existent anymore, carry a new name, have several sub-villages or never actually existed by the name stated on the list. As a consequence it is on the community mobilizers to 'find' actual villages which they have no definition for in order to introduce the NSP and facilitate the setting up of CDCs for a territory/community via the election of cluster representatives. This process is close to resembling an outright invention of villages/communities, though passive from the FPs side. As a result of this policy newly registered local communities comprise of 25-300 families who are represented by a single CDC. The elected *shurā*-members are asked to register the name of their community/CDC at the provincial RRD department in Kunduz, a respective approval letter formalizes a village as such. Further, the information is passed on to other governmental agencies, e.g. the statistics department. Thereby villages 'materialize' officially – with a particular name in record books the administration will refer to in the future.

Regarding the local – non-administrative – perspective from below, the described creation of communities via CDCs-establishment and their official registration adds another dimension to the concept of village in Afghanistan. For cases where CDC-communities do not comply with local entities and imagined identities as sense of belonging to a certain *mantiqa*, *qaria*, *qishlāq*, often a new name is found and added to already existing designations of 'the local'. While a village comprises of one or more CDCs depending on the size of its population/families, or shares a CDC with a neighbouring community, the name of this new CDC-community which is being registered does not necessarily match the name of the rural settlement it originates from. To give an example from Chahārdara where the NSP-implementation has been almost completed at the end of 2006, NSP-councils are most often named after 'good *mujāhedin*-commanders', important elders, the NSP-head, or the CDC's geographical location ('upper'/'lower'/'center' etc.), thus adding to the confusion about names and labels. In Qarayatēm-center, for example, the newly-formed NSP-*shurā* 'Lower Qarayatēm' (Qarayatēm-e Sufilā) comprises of the 'villages' Usmān Khēl, Zābudin Khēl und Esā Khēl.

In Tobrakash people reportedly have already been asked to form five *hauza*\* for the establishment of NSP-*shurās*. The particular criteria according to which these *hauza*\* are created, remain in the disposition of community mobilizers who engage at the interface of the Afghan government/MRRD and local communities on the one side, but also in-between FPs and locals on the other side. Sketchy concepts of the local leave enough scope for the FP's staff to co-determine at least the agenda of community/CDC-formation. Thus, the FP's implementation practices have to be viewed as hovering

between the fulfilment of official guidelines (NSP manual) and personal objections of sub-contracted community workers, who have to negotiate processes with local communities on the ground. Presumably, local elites' priorities will be mirrored in the practice of who determines where which clusters are being formed and who unites for the election of representatives for one NSP-shurā.

The technical approach at administering the rural areas is emphasized by the fact that currently the MRRD is seeking an exit strategy to transform the NSP-process with CDCs into sustainable, self-carrying structures by pooling them into a newly to be established Community-led Development Department (CLDD) at district levels under the supervision of the Provincial RRD's Social Development Department (MRRD 2007). Thus, with the projected dropping out of the FPs from the rural development/NSP-process for the first time an administrative hierarchy from top-down will be established which is actually meeting with local-level governance bodies (household clusters of minimum 25 families) and will have the capacity of incorporating local level bodies into its administrative structures. The sustainability of newly established CDCs will forebode how successful central government structures penetrate the rural areas and administer them in the future. What has turned out to be a side-effect of NSP-implementation is a broad-scale territorialization of sub-district levels.

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested that the local concepts of village are quite different from the western idea and that they are contested. It can be concluded that the overlapping notions of what constitutes 'local' and where people's identity rests with, can only be understood in light of longer term previous developments. So the oasis landscape in Kunduz is a place of relatively recent settlement that attracted decade-long large-scale population movements from other parts of Afghanistan and resulted in fast-growing settlement clusters along irrigation canals with an ethnically mixed population.

Due to its limited capacity to survey and register land allocations and the establishment of rural settlements, the government did not manage to administer the rural areas beneath the district level and beyond personal ties of government administrators with representatives of 'villages'. As a result, little is known and understood about what happens at the local level. Currently the NSP-implementation process leads to an unprecedented extent of the state's penetration of the rural countryside. Even though CDC-communities are set up by FPs, they get officially registered with the government and resemble the first ever data base on local communities since attempts to conduct broad-based village surveys in the 1960s and 1970s. Local perceptions and identity units are not always taken into account when CDC-communities are being set up. It remains to be seen how effective new structures will administer qaria/qishlāq and manteqa-units and if overlapping notions dissolve into a fourth administrative tier - the 'village', which would resemble the CDC-community. The NSP-process will be completed at the time the population census is scheduled for 2008 and could reveal the impact of the NSP on territorialization of the rural areas if questions on spatial identity will be included in the survey and compared with CDC-community belongings officially registered.

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