"Where Is the Village?"
Local Perceptions and Development Approaches in Kunduz Province

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Summary
Based on research in Kunduz, a province in northeast Afghanistan, this paper argues that the 'Western' notion of a 'village' cannot be automatically applied to local contexts in other regions of the world. The perception that villages are the only type of rural settlement that exists is a very modern one. It reflects the fact that a state apparatus has achieved the penetration, ordering and categorisation of its territory on a micro level. This is not a mere truism if we take a look at the apparent difficulties which development organisations, government agencies and national elites that are used to thinking in biased administrative terms face when they implement local-level projects in rural areas.

1   Introduction[2]

In discourses among academics, policy-makers and practitioners, the 'village' is often associated with 'backwardness', 'tradition' or 'conservative attitudes' (Dewey 1972). These stereotypes of the 'village' ignore the fact that until the advent of colonialism and modern statehood in many places of the world, rural areas were characterised by a high variety of fluctuating and overlapping terms and denominations

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used for the identification of a settlement that depended on the social context. The categorisation of rural areas into 'villages', which consist of a clearly defined territory and a particular name, mirrors the achievement of a modernisation process.

In today's development industry, aid and development projects usually presuppose that rural areas are accurately territorialised and subdivided into villages. As we shall show by means of cases from Kunduz province in northeast Afghanistan, this developmental understanding of 'villages' is different to the perceptions that local residents have. Often enough, they use different categories and give various names to the same settlement, which do not usually coincide with the village lists existing in district administrations. The current implementation of the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) – a 'good local governance project' run by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development – induces the territorialisation and ordering of rural areas into communities of 25 to 300 families as a side effect. Their registration and legal acknowledgement as an additional administrative tier bears the potential to establish these clusters as a fourth administrative tier: the 'modern' village. However, if the NSP is not conducted in a sound and sustainable way, it is likely that this development programme will only manage to add a new, interchangeable concept to the ones that already exist.

2   The modern state, its territory and the village

Usually the modern state is defined as consisting of three pillars: a national population, a state apparatus and a fixed territory. A lot of research has been done on the relationship between the state and its respective population (especially on national identity and minority rights) as well as on the state apparatus (government) (e.g. Anderson 1983, Hobsbawm 1992, Gellner 1991). The third pillar, the state's territory, has largely remained neglected as the subject of research. This is surprising because the identification, categorisation and subdivision of space constitute a fundamental tool the state can use to control its population on the one hand and allocate power within the state apparatus on the other (Schetter 2005).

While the nation state has been understood by some thinkers as merely "a bordered power container" (Giddens 1985: 120), we observe that it shows a natural interest in controlling its territory (Tilly 1985); it attempts to measure its territory geodetically and to map the land owned by the state and its citizens exactly. Moreover, with a view to controlling its population, the state administration and the police force have a keen interest in binding each citizen to the smallest fixed territorial unit possible in order to identify and localise him/her whenever it feels this is necessary. This is why identity cards usually include the address of a citizen, or at least their county or township. To achieve this degree of control over its territory and people, the state attempts to order rural areas in accordance with its modern categories and to link them to the administrative system. Usually the state clusters rural settlements into 'villages' as exactly bounded units at the micro level that can easily be identified by a

particular name. The rural areas are a particular challenge for the state's orderliness: the population and the settlements are frequently much more scattered than in urban areas, and settlements are characterised by a confusing variety of types and denominations. Moreover, it has to be mentioned that the state's endeavour to order the rural areas often goes hand in hand with land reforms to break the power of influential landlords or independent communities. In state-building processes, the ordering of the rural areas is usually high on the agenda – and is also one of the most expensive tasks.

However, it would be misleading only to focus on the dimension of the penetrating control exercised by the state. It should also be taken into consideration that the state apparatus is not only functionally subdivided, but also spatially. Depending on the type of the national political system, territorial rights and duties are assigned to administrative entities on different subnational levels such as provinces, districts, counties etc. (Mellor 1989: 130-58); in modern states the village generally forms the basic unit of local administration in rural areas as such a village is recognised as a legal entity in charge of governing the local affairs of its inhabitants. To varying degrees and in accordance with the broader national administrative frameworks, a village not only disposes of competencies for administering different sectors of local public interest, but is also involved in co-determining affairs on higher government tiers – from the district level via the regional one right up to the national level.

The fact is often ignored that this type of standardised 'village', which is introduced by the state, is rarely to be found in countries that have not completed a state-building process of their own (Kemp 1987). Frequently, no clear, commonly understood labels for rural settlements exist because a categorisation and territorialisation of rural areas into villages did not take place.

3   The village in Afghanistan

Although Afghanistan is often regarded as 'a country without a state' (see Noelle-Karimi et al. 2002), state-building processes took place in the course of the 20th century. A first attempt to territorialise the rural areas started in the mid-1960s. In 1964 administrative reforms foregoing the National Demographic Survey Project established a new provincial system, subdividing the 14 provinces into 28. Successive territorial changes over the last 20 years have increased the number of provinces to 34, while the number of districts is still contested. Currently, district borders are constantly re-negotiated and changed according to powerful local interests and preferences regarding religious, ethnic or tribal representation.

Previous attempts to administer the rural areas of Afghanistan involved efforts to survey and register landholdings as well as stocktaking of the amount, population and location of rural settlements. Systematic information about land ownership, village borders and the rural areas was widely lacking until the early 1960s. A National Cadastre Office was only set up in Kabul in 1342/1963. In the course of its

fieldwork the cadastre department staff managed to survey roughly 35% of Afghanistan's territory by 1357/1978. With the Soviet invasion and the beginning of the civil war, land surveys and the identification and fixing of villages were brought to an end. Moreover, the decades of war, which were characterised by heavy destruction and forced migration on a large scale, led to tremendous changes in the physical infrastructure as well as in the denomination of the 'villages' once predefined by the National Cadastre Office. As a result, today, the rural areas are approached with outdated village lists from the 1960s and 1970s, which are the only official documents available. Maps provided by the Afghan government or the United Nations usually diverge enormously from each other and are opposed with a different reality on the ground. A territorial subdivision of the rural areas is still necessary. To date, the initiated reconstruction of the state in December 2001 and the approval of the new constitution in January 2004 did not lead to administrative territorial penetration of rural areas by the government beyond the district level.

In addition, administrative units beyond the district level have not been recognised legally to this day. Officially, Afghanistan has a two-tier government system consisting of national and provincial administrations. Lower-level government bodies are specified in by-laws and include the district level (wuluswālī) as a third administrative tier. The wuluswālī usually, but not necessarily, comprises one district municipality called shahrwālī wuluswālī, where a main bazaar and government buildings are located. Shahrwālī wuluswālī as well as shahrwālī velāyat, e.g. the city of Kunduz, display legally acknowledged elements in the formal administrative system as rural and provincial municipalities, while any other kind of rural settlements does not. This tends to be overlooked, but is still crucial, given the fact that most rural development projects target 'local' communities. As a result rural areas are approached with the Western assumption of the existence of 'villages' without actually understanding what the concept of 'village' entails in a particular environment (see also Noelle-Karimi 2006).

4   Manteqa – Qarya – Qishlāq

Due to the lack of state penetration and territorialisation of the local level, different terms and contested local concepts regarding the loci of rural community life exist in Afghanistan today: qarya, deh, qishlāq, manteqa and keley (kelay), just to mention the most commonly cited ones (Dupree 1973). Most of the time, all of these concepts have been indiscriminately translated into English as 'village'. In fact, the notions commonly used to denominate rural settlements are not limited to the above labels. By taking the example of Kunduz province in the northeastern corner of Afghanistan, we intend to describe this situation in more detail and to give an account of the difficulties outsiders and inhabitants sometimes face when dealing with rural communities within the framework of development projects and research on the one hand or requests for government assistance on the other.

Kunduz province, formerly part of the region of Qataghan (Kushkeki 1926; Adamec 1972), was a focal point of the internal colonialism of the Afghan state from the late 19th century until the early 1970s (Grötzbach 1972: 52-73). The state resettled Pashtuns from southern and southeast Afghanistan to Kunduz in several waves between the 1920s and 1970s (Barfield 1978); moreover, muhājerin who fled from Soviet Central Asia during the Basmachi uprising settled down in Kunduz in the 1920s and 1930s (Centlivres & Centlivres-Demont 1983: 90). These resettlement movements were flanked by the state's efforts to turn the swampy Kunduz river basin into an intensively irrigated oasis. As a result, the province has been transformed into one of the most prosperous regions of the country since the 1960s and has not only become the main cotton-growing area, but also the breadbasket of Afghanistan. Large parts of the province are highly irrigated today due to the development of a comprehensive canal system. Despite these interventions concerning the infrastructure and development, though, the state did not manage to measure the province geodetically in its entirety. Irrigated land (ābī) was surveyed first as the government planned to increase its taxation measures; lalmī lands (dry-farming acreages) have largely remained un-surveyed. According to the head of Kunduz's cadastre department, the surveyed land amounted to 923,233 jerib or 184,647 hectares[3] for Kunduz province, which corresponds to about 23% of the province's total area today (804,000 ha). In the following, we shall focus on Sufi-Qarayatim and Asqalān, two regions which resemble the respective catchment areas of irrigation canals that determine the livelihoods of several thousand families (Shah 2006). Intensive field research was conducted here between March and June 2006.

In the current situation, roughly five years after the Taliban government was ousted from power and with more than 20 years of recurrent violence and war preceding the Karzai government, attempting to take account of local rural settings and their recent past is no mean feat. Although there is a great deal of talk about destruction and the need for reconstruction, the irrigation systems in Kunduz province seem to have been left intact despite recent turmoil. Nevertheless, development interventions are targeting the canal systems and aim to improve irrigation water governance at the local level, among other things. In this context it turned out that it was not clear from the outset what the NGO's unit of intervention within the canal systems would be and who should be targeted – a however defined village, a mosque community, residents of a secondary canal catchment?

In the irrigation canal catchments around Kunduz province, it is hard to identify clear-cut 'villages', both in physical terms and in the perception of the people. In respect to the physical shape of the settlements, the canal system is the structuring element for large parts of the province. Often enough, a loosely connected alignment

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3   According to the head of the kodestar department in Kunduz. The figure is based on 1 ha consisting of 5 jerib (1 jerib = 2,000 sqm), although before 1371/ 1950 one jerib actually amounted to 1,936 sqm.

of qalas is situated along a canal. Usually the distance between the qalas is half to one kilometre, while compact settlements are missing. On the other hand, settlements consisting of a few houses which give way to other settlements can also be found, while clear-cut boundaries and the centres of these settlements can hardly be identified (ter Steege 2006). These physical shapes of the settlements coincide with a confusing variety of terms used for larger settlements, such as qarya, qishlāq and manteqa, which are employed interchangeably to designate places where people live. The context is key here, although local identities are adapted to the situation. This means that these terms are used to identify a social space rather than a territorial unit. Thus, a statement about spatial belonging very much depends on the setting, the respondent and the person asking the questions.

The notion of manteqa is very prominent and underlines its significance as a point of reference for local and social identities in Kunduz province. Yet in empirical terms no indicator for any kind of self-enforced formal institutionalisation of the manteqa in its own right as a regional concept distinct from and somehow encompassing qarya or qishlāq has been found so far. As for the manteqa level, beyond being in people's minds, there is no evidence of anything like an institutionalised shurā-ye manteqa or even muysafēd(hā-y)e manteqa in Kunduz, while shurā-ye qarya or muysafēd(hā-y)e qishlāq are very prominent. In many cases the term manteqa is used to designate the wider region or communal identity of spatial belonging (see Roussel & Caley 1994, cited in Monsutti 2005: 84). For example, people living in the Sufi-Qarayatim area[4] of Chahārdara district speak either of Chahārdara as their manteqa or of Qarayatim/Sufi – the catchment of Sufi or Qarayatim irrigation canals – respectively. At the same time, Madrasa/Umar Khēl, a rural settlement in Qarayatim, is also called a manteqa – as well as a qarya or qishlāq.

The same – diffuse – situation can be found in the Asqalān Canal area.[5] Whereas the irrigation system as such seems to be split up into two parts with two mirābs in charge – one for the upstream area called Asqalān, inhabited by Tājiks, Pashtuns, Uzbēk tribes (e.g. Laqais, Qunghirāts), Aimāqs, and Turkmens –, and the second for the downstream settlements, which are exclusively Pashtun; informants from both areas called Asqalān their manteqa. On other occasions, people from further downstream call Tobrakash their manteqa, while people from upstream say they belong to Asqalān manteqa, not to Tobrakash. Here is another example from Asqalān: among other settlements along the canal, Wulus, a settlement located in the middle of the

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[4] The Sufi-Qarayatim area encompasses the territory that is irrigated from the Sufi-Qarayatim canal system consisting of two more or less independent smaller systems (Sufi and Qarayatim), which share one intake and a diversion structure. Qarayatim Canal (also called Umar Khēl Canal) is further divided into two subcanals – nahr-e Madrasa and nahr-e Surkhak.

[5] Asqalān designates the area irrigated from the canal of the same name in Kunduz district. Asqalān is famous for its melons in all of (at least northern) Afghanistan. This fact of pride adds a special dimension to the manteqa concept – in this case shaping the strong common 'Asqalān identity' of its catchment inhabitants.

canal, where Turkic-speaking people are living (who are of Uzbēk, Laqai, Qunghirāt and Turkmen origin), has also been termed a manteqa. Outside the city of Kunduz in the direction of Asqalān, the rural area of Olchin was described as a manteqa that is subdivided into three clearly delimited parts, although each of these parts was interchangeably called a manteqa or qishlāq. One of these settlements was named qishlāq-e Mullah Sardā or manteqa-ye Mullah Sardā after one of its elders. It was also reported that each of these manteqa/qishlāq consists of several qarya.

Alessandro Monsutti (2005) and Raphy Favre (2005), who carried out research in Central Afghanistan, highlight the significance of the manteqa as "…the actual social and territorial unit of rural Afghanistan" (Favre 2005). Monsutti (2005: 84) underlines the significance of the manteqa as a "reference of identity" and "primary space of solidarity". While the manteqa also provides a significant point of reference for identity in Kunduz province, it is only one of several spatial references. It would be going too far to regard the notion of manteqa as a generally accepted spatial reference frame of solidarity. The fact that the manteqa is often described as a naturally bounded area in which joint resource use is the characteristic feature (e.g. use of irrigation water, pastures or forests) does not mean that the people automatically share a feeling of solidarity (see Kemp 1987). Research in Kunduz province – as in other provinces of Afghanistan – has shown that a lack of solidarity exists among people on a broad scale (Mielke 2007; Schetter et al. 2007). Thus, general differences in access, power and social control that also exist among the inhabitants of a manteqa in Kunduz province (whether in the narrower sense of a compact settlement or a wider regional cluster) are likely to prevent de facto solidarity in terms of mutual help and support among its inhabitants.

The terms qarya and qishlāq designate more compact rural settlement patterns. The following very handy explanation of the two terms was given to us in an administrator's office: one qishlāq consists of ten families (1-2 mosques), and one qarya comprises ten qishlāq. This information follows bureaucratic thinking in terms of pyramidal hierarchies, which typically matches the expression of a highly hierarchical state system. Moreover, this perception is contrasted by statements made by other informants, including government workers, who used qishlāq and qarya synonymously. Another version states that one manteqa consists of ten qarya/qishlāq. The assumption that qishlāq is a Turkic term and is therefore mainly used by Turkic speakers does not hold true as Persian speakers – and sometimes Pashto speakers – also refer to settlements as qishlāq. Given that Afghan society was nomadic to a very large extent in the past, it is worth investigating the origin of the word qishlāq. Originally it meant 'winter quarters', as opposed to yaylāq, denoting summer quarters on the pastures. Thus the use of the term qishlāq could refer to former winter quarters. Nowadays the terms qarya and qishlāq are simply used interchangeably by many people.

In addition, to complement people's perception of the notion of 'village', it must be mentioned that no matter how a certain settlement area is labelled in terms of manteqa, qarya and qishlāq, the same 'settlement' is often given a variety of names. One of the most prominent examples is a settlement called 'Madrasa' in the Qarayatim Canal area, which is also known as 'Umar Khēl' or 'Qarayatim'. The manteqa of Madrasa is said to comprise 12 mosques resembling 12 villages. The same informant stated the qarya of Madrasa consisted of 200 households.[6] While locals are rather non-committal regarding the origin of the settlement, different versions contradict each other. One explanation is that surrounding inhabitants from other ethnic groups originally called the settlement Umar Khēl in accordance with the name of the Pashtun tribe to which the settlers who dug the irrigation canal belonged. The name 'Madrasa' is supposed to originate in the fact that the settlement evolved around the first 'madrasa' in the vicinity of early settlers. The denomination 'Qarayatim', which literally means 'black orphan', could not be explained by any of the informants interviewed, although it seems to refer to the time when the canal was under construction. While it may well remain subject to speculation why which name was adopted and in which sequence this took place, the purpose of giving the example was merely to demonstrate how little fixed and how volatile place names and associated notions of rural settlements can actually be. Besides geographical conditions and settlement history, the dynamic developments of the past 30 years with major population reshuffles and fighting have surely contributed to today's situation. Nowadays all the above denominations are used by the inhabitants interchangeably and mirror the extent of identification with a local space of social interaction rather than a territorially fixed place with a particular name attached to it. Put differently, we can say that this reflects a low level of fixed identification with any location, which might also explain why solidarity among a large group of people that extends beyond the core family and household can hardly be traced.

Adding to this confusion is the fact that settlements often receive a certain name temporarily. It is very common for a rural settlement to be named after an important elder, arbāb, mullah or local commander. In most of these cases the rural settlement ceases to carry the name of this person after his death. Instead, the settlement takes on a new name, which often derives from another influential inhabitant, such as the dead elder's son or the son of an arbāb, mullah or such person who has passed away. If a settlement is named after a very famous 'good' commander who originated from this settlement, the name tends to remain in use after his death as in the case of the settlement of Kalēj Āghā in Asqalān. Kalēj Āghā was one of the key sub-commanders of Rashid Dostum and is still remembered with great pride by the local Turkmens and Uzbeks.

Although not officially acknowledged in administrative terms, bureaucratic usage of the concepts of manteqa, qarya and qishlāq sometimes plays a decisive role, too.

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6   Interview with a Madrasa elder on 8 May 2006.

This is a contradiction in researchers' eyes, but since local reality sets the frame of enquiry of our research, we hope that further investigation will bring more pieces of the puzzle to light and give us a better understanding of the situation. The Land-holdings Department (mudiriyat-e amlāk) and the Cadastre Department (mudiriyat-e umumī kodestar) both use the category of manteqa for the registration of land along Asqalān Canal, thus vesting a semi-administrative meaning in the concept. According to the record books, the catchment area is administratively divided into two manteqa, Asqalān and Tobrakash, each of which consists of an undetermined number of settlements (qarya/qishlāq) that bear various other names. In the case of up-stream Asqalān, two settlement clusters with the same name were able to be identified (Asqalān I and Asqalān II), while in downstream Tobrakash manteqa we were unable to find any evidence of a qarya-type settlement called Tobrakash. Instead, inhabitants of the area mentioned Nawābād (literally 'new town/settlement), Kharātī (name of a tribe), Haji Rustam (name of an elder who was still alive) and Haji Shirin (named after an elder who had died) as qarya. If we understand Tobrakash to be a manteqa which consists of several qarya or qishlāq, then the role of mosque communities comes into view, adding another dimension to the notion of 'local'. To-brakash is a classic case in the evolution of contemporary settlement configurations. The tail-end manteqa of Asqalān Canal was settled comparably recently in the course of large-scale land allocations to people from the southern parts of Afghani-stan under Zahēr Shāh and the local governor of Kunduz, Shēr Khān. The grandfa-thers' generation of current elders led by Haji Sarvan – at first only a very small group of people who would share one mosque – came to the area and extended the irrigation canal, thereafter further subdividing the reportedly obtained 10,000 jerib of land (2,000 ha) between relatives and qaum following them up north. Taking a look at current mosque clusters, one can deduce that settlements revolved around local mosques which bear the name of their founders. According to locals, there is no rule for the 'right point in time' or the maximum number of families that cause a new mosque to be built; rather, it depends on the financial and organisational abili-ties of the prayer community, the population dynamics of the surrounding area and a person's initiative to mobilise their fellow dwellers to collect money and undertake the construction of a new mosque. Compared with upstream Asqalān manteqa, set-tlements in Tobrakash frequently bear the names of important people; almost all contemporary mosque communities are named after their founders. Most of the founders are still alive, which hints at the fact that a mushrooming of new clusters has developed recently due to accelerated population growth in relatively modern settlements. Qishlāq and qarya always evolve around one or more mosques.

The notion of mosque community belonging is one example of how local minds structure their identities according to references distinct from the known administra-tive ones that local communities are approached with from the outside on different manteqa levels. It indicates that the manteqa is only one of several reference sys-tems shaping people's local identity. Policemen are sent to a certain qarya or qishlāq

if they are supposed to fine a person for not taking part in construction work or if somebody has been caught taking water illegally, etc. Summing up, although manteqa, qarya and qishlāq have not been incorporated in the official state administration, these notions serve as points of reference and belonging in people's mindsets. Administrators who share the local mindset make use of these notions to structure their bookkeeping or to cope with the needs of and interact with local people in their daily administrative routine.

Given the great extent of overlapping, interchangeable use and terminological fluctuation between the different notions of rural settlements, we reject Favre's claim that the manteqa is the missing interactive link between district administration and rural settlement (Favre 2005, 1). The recognition and formalisation – by registration and allocation of competencies – of any type of settlement could fill this gap. One will have to cope with a great deal of fluidity regarding settlement categories and names until such a condition materialises. There is no such thing as a single concept of 'village', but there are a multitude of local notions concerning spatial and settlement belonging. While an uninformed outsider would try to approach 'the local' with the village notion in mind, such an encounter is most likely to face difficulties and cause confusion since the scope of what local encompasses is very wide and not fixed. The locals' insider perception is much more differentiated than the outsiders' perception and it is strongly contextualised at the same time. The multiple names of settlements and the use of micro-, meso- and macro-categories in an obviously arbitrary way confuses outsiders – organisations as well as researchers – because they are very much used to thinking along 'village' lines. Finally, it has to be taken into account that rural communities and local identities in Kunduz province are much more determined by face-to-face relationships and networks than by belonging to the same territorial unit.

5   The invention of the village

The relevance of the village topic has to be seen in the context of rural development discourse, which can be traced back to the 1950s and was recently rediscovered (Ellis & Biggs 2001). Greater attention was paid to 'local-level politics' or 'local governance' when the focus of international discourse shifted towards empowerment, taking into account local people's needs and striving for effectiveness in the performance of political and socio-economic government policies. Other buzzwords and related concepts promoted along the line are 'participation', 'responsibility' and 'accountability'. 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 (for a critical review see Mosse 2005). A prominent example of these 'good local governance' projects is the multi-donor-financed National Solidarity Programme (NSP) of the Afghan government under the supervision of the World Bank, which aims to establish participatory local

governance structures and to improve rural livelihoods via the implementation of infrastructure measures.

The Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development is in charge of monitoring the NSP implementation process. Some 25 contracted foreign and domestic NGOs are implementing the NSP below district level in rural areas as facilitating partners under the official umbrella of the ministry. The provincial branches of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development are involved to a limited extent: Their staff and documentation material serving as resources for facilitating partners in charge of implementation, but due to the practically non-existent capacities in financial and human capital, their role is nearly as limited as the districts' administrations' as far as the implementation of the government programme is concerned. The NSP is designed to achieve two main goals: on the one hand it aims to reduce poverty and improve rural livelihoods via the dissemination of block grants to communities for financing infrastructure projects, and on the other hand, the establishment of participatory and representative institutions is supposed to alter traditional local governance arrangements, which are assumed to be inequitable and power-locked. For this reason the spin doctors of the NSP development tool – which was last applied in Timor Leste – introduced the concept of Community Development Councils (CDCs), so-called NSP shurās, which were intended to be in charge of planning and implementation of the rural infrastructure project(s) foreseen by the allocation of block grants to CDC communities after free, fair and open elections. According to the textbooks, this should result in the transformation of traditional power structures in the long run, thereby creating sustainable 'good' local governance institutions (Barakat et al. 2006).

What can be witnessed so far is that since the start of the implementation of the NSP in late 2003, 'the local' is being 'formalised' via the registration of newly established NSP shurās all over Afghanistan. However, it has not been a priority of the NSP to administer or territorialise the local level totally anew, or, put differently, nobody in the government ever recognised the need to do so before the implementation process started. Rather, every programme document and strategy paper of the ministry in charge, the Afghan government, the facilitating partners, the international consultants and the World Bank quite naturally assumes that 'villages' exist as the basic form of social organisation and administration at the local level. Consequently, the general assumption has been that 'villages' form the spatial unit and core of social organisation in the countryside and can be taken as a point of departure for the establishment of NSP shurās. Aware of the fuzziness of terms, to escape uncertainty and largely due to a lack of reliable information about the rural areas, its settlements and population, the authors of the NSP implementation handbook chose to speak of 'CDC communities' that are being set up on the basis of families rather than merely referring to 'villages' as a (non-territorial) social category.

According to the same document, the number of villages in Afghanistan (also referred to as 'rural settlements') was estimated at 38,000 in December 2005.[7] The term 'community' is used for a unit of at least 25 families[8] eligible for a block grant, which is calculated at a rate of 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)[9] of ten to 30 families (Karmacharya 2007, 219), who then select one representative for the CDC, which is held accountable by its 'village' constituency. Since 60,000 USD is the maximum amount that can be given to a single CDC community, a maximum of 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 NSP shur$\bar{a}$. If a settlement is large and includes more than 300 families, then more than one NSP shur$\bar{a}$ can be formed.

Favre (2005, 11) has expressed objections regarding this approach, arguing that the clustering would lead to a fragmentation of Afghan society and neglect local-level governance units, especially the 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 above, Favre's concern about fragmentation goes in the wrong direction. Rather, the NSP approach to cluster 'communities' stands in contrast to all of the existing notions of rural settlements such as manteqa, qarya or qishl$\bar{a}$q because it takes the social category of families as its point of departure. From a top-down or administrative perspective, the current process of establishing NSP shur$\bar{a}$s has the potential to partly dissipate the confusion about different notions of the village. The pooling of families into clusters whose aggregation leads to the set-up of CDC communities results in territorial fixing of rural communities. As a side effect of the NSP implementation across Afghanistan and the official registration of newly established CDC communities, we are currently witnessing a territorial formalisation of the rural countryside. It remains to be seen

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[7] MRRD 2006, viii. According to pre-December 2005 estimates, the number of villages amounts to around 20,000. Furthermore, the NSP manual states: "No accurate census data is available and it is unclear if consensus has been reached on a working definition of 'village'." Ibid.

[8] Initially, at the start of the NSP in 2003, block grants were allocated to housing and settlement clusters of over 50 families (MRRD 2003, 6). According to the NSP operational manual (MRRD 2006, vii), a family is understood as comprising of a husband with his wife/wives and their unmarried children or a single head of the household and his/her unmarried children. An average estimate holds that a household comprises five families, thus the smallest settlement unit eligible for a block grant would amount to an agglomeration of five houses.

[9] Hauza literally means 'zone' and has been used in Afghanistan's urban areas to designate police precincts, e.g. the city of Kunduz consists of four hauza which are numbered hauza-ye awwal, etc. (i.e. hauza 1-4). In a similar meaning, hauzas had been formed in some parts of northeast Afghanistan as semi-administrative entities for defence purposes during the time of the Russian occupation and the civil war. Today hauzas are being used in many areas as an additional concept of local belonging, e.g. in the Warsaj district of Takhar province. The NSP programme has now added a third notion to the term 'hauza', designating a settlement or housing cluster of at least 25 families.

whether and how this will affect identity patterns and potentially replace local people's perceptions about their belonging to a certain qarya, qishlāq or manteqa.

The set up of NSP shurās is a technical process from above that fails to take local identity patterns into account. In contrast to the neatly formulated 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 matching these realities with the guidelines. In the course of NSP implementation, the staff working for the facilitating partners is usually provided with 30- to 40-year-old lists of village names by the respective provincial branch of the Ministry for Rural Rehabilitation and Development or district administrations. Given the changes that have occurred in rural areas over the past forty years, these lists have obviously turned out to be of limited use in the field. Thus, the community mobilisers employed by the facilitating partners have to search for the villages on the lists and may well find out that many of the settlements mentioned no longer exist, have been given a new name, now consist of several subvillages or that they were never actually called by the name stated on the list. As a consequence, it is the task of the community mobilisers to 'find' villages – a term they are hardly able to define. Thus they have to identify and territorialise communities to which they introduce the NSP and facilitate the setting-up of NSP shurās. This process and the formal registration of the new 'communities' resembles an outright invention of 'villages'. They often have a new name, which the elected members of the CDCs are asked to register at the provincial branch of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development in Kunduz. An letter of approval by that ministry finalises the set-up, and depending on the capacities of the ministry, the information is passed on to other governmental agencies, e.g. the statistics department. Villages then 'materialise' officially – with a particular name listed in the record books to which the administration will refer in future.

Regarding the local, non-administrative perspective, the inventing of villages via the establishment of NSP shurās and their official registration adds another dimension to the fluid notions of what constitutes 'local' and 'belonging' in Afghanistan. In cases where NSP shurās do not comply with local entities and imagined identities in the sense of belonging to a certain mantiqa, qarya or qishlāq, a new name is frequently found and added to pre-existing designations of 'the local'. While a settlement comprises of one or more NSP shurās depending on the size of its population or shares an NSP shurā with a neighbouring community, the name of the new community being registered does not necessarily match the name(s) of the rural settlement from which it originates. In Chahārdara district, where the NSP implementation had almost been completed at the end of 2006, the NSP shurās are often named after 'good' mujahideen commanders, important elders, the NSP head or the NSP shurās' topographical location ('upper'/ 'lower'/'centre', etc.), thus adding to the confusion about names and labels. In Qarayatim Centre, for example, the newly formed

NSP shurā 'Lower Qarayatim' (Qarayatim-e Suflā) comprises the settlements of Usmān Khēl, Zābudin Khēl and Isā Khēl.

In Asqalān's downstream manteqa, Tobrakash, the home of approximately 16,500 people, five settlement clusters (hauza) are reportedly being formed for the establishment of one NSP shurā/CDC community. The particular criteria according to which these hauza are created remain at the disposition of community mobilisers. Sketchy concepts of the 'local' dimension leave enough scope for them to co-determine the agenda of the formation of NSP shurās at least. Thus, the facilitating partners' implementation practices have to be viewed as hovering between the fulfilment of official guidelines (NSP manual) and personal objections by the community mobilisers, who have to negotiate processes with the communities. 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 – and in the end, following our line of argumentation, the creation of 'villages'.

The technical approach to administering the rural areas is emphasised by the fact that the Ministry for Rural Rehabilitation and Development is currently seeking an exit strategy to transform the NSP process with its shurās into sustainable, independent structures by pooling them into a Community-led Development Department at district levels under the supervision of the provincial office of the Ministry for Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD 2007). Thus, with.2(pr.5(st)6.3r.5(st)5(i)3 in1.1³0.0012 Tc0.157

locally accepted government institutions and thus gain ground in administering the entire territory of Afghanistan, including the rural areas (Noelle 2006). On the other hand, in settlements where CDC communities overlap with formerly existing settlement as well as identity clusters and have taken on one of the well-established names, the formalisation process bears the chance of bringing together government and local ideas about subdistrict governance. This process also inhibits the potential to manifest also in people's minds as a particular place within the range of authority of one CDC community. However, if the NSP implementation runs counter to local perceptions and fails in setting incentives for the CDCs to have long-lasting responsibilities and the means to meet these in financial and managerial terms, it is likely that CDC communities will not replace existing terms but only add a further term to the existing categories of manteqa, qarya or qishlāq – which are all (mis)understood as meaning 'village'. The pooling of settlement clusters into new 'villages' as well as the competencies that certain individuals possess who are involved in the process of setting up NSP shurās and CDC communities, bears the risk that established power structures continue to exist and thus runs counter to the initial goals of the NSP to establish 'good' local governance structures.

6   Conclusion

The notion of 'village' in different regions of Afghanistan is highly fluid and of a pluralistic nature. There are no strict settlement boundaries and the previous pre-revolutionary attempts of territorialising the rural areas have been overhauled by developments during the armed resistance and civil war over the last thirty years. The concept of 'village' in Kunduz province is particularly contested due to its settlement history and geographical conditions. Field research unveiled a dichotomy of perceptions regarding 'the village': on the one hand, rural residents do not think and act in terms of clear-cut territorially delimited places in their everyday interaction. Rather, their frame of reference seems to be a socio-economic space in which they are active regarding their daily routines and which is structured by face-to-face social network relationships.

On the other hand, from the government side there is a clear tendency to penetrate the rural areas and break them down 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 subdistrict governmental bodies and representatives. How successful the central government actually permeated the rural areas over time in terms of enforcement capacity and real influence in shaping local policies is still unknown. What can broadly be stated is that the central government followed the territorial 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 they aimed to administer.

These two opposing views – the territorial one from the government side ('from above') and the social network perspective that the rural residents have ('from below') – are currently undergoing *rapprochement* processes via NSP implementation. With the establishment of CDC communities, they result in a broad-based formalisation of a potential fourth administrative tier: 'the village'.

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