



**Review of the implementation of the AGORA methodology in Afghanistan
under SRDP IV**

Foreword

ACTED has a long partnership history with Norway in the North of Afghanistan, implementing twelve Norwegian funded projects for a total of nearly €63 million since 2008, delivering a mix of emergency and recovery aid that has been essential to respond to shocks, build the resilience and shore up the livelihoods of millions of Afghans. The four Sustained Rural Development Projects (SRDP I to IV) implemented during that time have been at the core of this partnership, providing flexible and predictable multi-annual funding that has been at the center of ACTED's ability to implement and structure a meaningful, bottom-up community-based development-oriented program.

The SRDP's ability to become a platform for the effective and accountable delivery of recovery assistance in the midst of conflict was largely the result of our ability to build partnerships with affected communities, generating not only acceptance for our presence and program, but also a model to ground our response into local knowledge and empower local actors more meaningfully.

Since its creation nearly 30 years ago in Afghanistan, ACTED has been built around the idea that local knowledge is central for both aid delivery and effective local governance. Two ideas form the core of ACTED's reflection in this regard: first, the importance of planning and implementing with crisis-affected communities in the areas they inhabit by using territorial entry points that espouse existing socio-spatial realities meaningful to local communities; and second, the belief that in many fragile contexts where state formation is incomplete, there is a need to complement the traditional focus of aid actors on supporting formal governance mechanisms with a greater focus on supporting existing legitimate community-based systems and linking them with formal governance where relevant.

This reflection matured over the years through informal implementation and trial and error, leading to the decision to create the AGORA flagship program in 2016 as a joint venture with IMPACT Initiatives to practically implement the ambition of both organizations to ground humanitarian and development work in local knowledge in keeping with their motto "think local, act global". As a bottom-up area-based initiative that promotes the resilience and recovery of crisis affected people in fragile contexts, AGORA was conceived as a vehicle to concretely implement the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus, the Localization and the Accountability to Affected People agendas. Given the wide variety of fragile contexts in which aid actors intervene, the AGORA methodology was also designed to be flexible in order to adapt as closely as possible to each context of intervention, as shown by the experience of Afghanistan presented in this report.

The agreement reached with Norway to make the SRDP IV project a pilot program designed to practically demonstrate the relevance of the AGORA model for community level aid delivery in Afghanistan, and to use the *manteqa*¹ as a territorial entry point for aid planning and delivery should be understood against this backdrop.

This internal review of the SRDP IV project aims to take stock of the implementation of the AGORA methodology. Its findings are presented to inform and refine future programming in Afghanistan and potentially other protracted crises contexts. It is also our hope that the findings will usefully contribute to reflections on how to keep delivering resilience and recovery programming in Afghanistan in the most effective way in the context of the difficult political transition and acute humanitarian crisis the country is going through.

¹ The *manteqa* can be tentatively defined as a geographic area containing a number of villages and identified by both its inhabitants and the other inhabitants of the district under one common regional name. Although *manteqa* (area) in Persian is the singular of *manoteq* (areas), we have chosen for ease of reading to use the word *manteqa* throughout, and to pluralize the word in English when referring to two or more *manteqa*.



The Review clearly shows what can be achieved when a donor is willing to commit multi-year funding over the long haul and to give space to its partners to pilot innovative approaches, and when its partners invest in local knowledge and are willing to try new models to improve their delivery to affected populations. As such, it is clearly a best practice that we hope could be replicated in other contexts.

I. Key findings

1. The experience gained implementing the AGORA methodology under SRDP IV shows that the approach works and brings tangible benefits with regards to aid planning and delivery in Afghanistan, enabling direct delivery of aid to communities in an effective and accountable manner. The positive results obtained so far with the AGORA methodology in Afghanistan appear largely predicated on its ability to design a bespoke approach grounded in reliance on community owned mechanisms where they exist and on the *manteqa* as the territorial prism through which to engage with communities in rural areas.
2. The findings of the review therefore point to the significant potential of the AGORA approach as a community-driven development model appropriate for Afghanistan, able to leverage community governance mechanisms key to livelihoods where they exist, link communities and government systems where pertinent, or work through government systems where they exist and are legitimate. The ability of the AGORA model in Afghanistan to deliver recovery and development programming effectively, at scale and in an accountable manner directly to communities is also worth noting in the current political context.
3. The AGORA approach has worked well with and has been complementary to the Community Development Councils (CDCs) created under the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), and its successor the Citizen Charter for Afghanistan Programme (CCAP). Under AGORA, the *manteqa* community platforms provided a degree of coordination and planning at area level for inter-village needs and resources, while the CDCs would focus on the more micro but equally important village level needs. As Clusters of CDCs assessed are smaller than rural *manteqas* and taking into account the benefits of working at *manteqa* level in rural areas for the purpose of aid planning and delivery as well as its local governance potential identified by the review, there is a strong rationale for aggregating CDC clusters at the *manteqa* level in rural areas. A similar argument can be made in favor of *nahia*² level CDC clustering in urban areas.
4. Lessons learned in the last years suggest that the AGORA methodology in Afghanistan should be adjusted in several important ways. Given the differences between urban and rural areas, the territorial entry point for urban areas should be the *nahia* rather than the *manteqa*; block grant amounts should be adjusted to population size and more should be done to use the local recovery plans for our own planning and delivery within and beyond the SRDP project and to give them visibility with external actors. In parallel, more research should be undertaken to deepen our understanding of some the key community systems that underpin livelihoods, particularly in rural areas, in order to more effectively mainstream this knowledge into the AGORA methodology. Specifically: (1) the practices of ‘ashr’ and ‘chanda’³; (2) irrigation systems and; (3) the governance of pastures should be further researched.
5. With regards to the notion of *manteqa* itself that is at the centre of the AGORA methodology in Afghanistan, there is broad agreement across sources that the *manteqa* exist as bounded spaces that include a number of villages, that they are typically associated with natural terrain features such as a valley or drainage basin, and that they constitute an important identity

² *Nahias* are municipal districts. Article 16 of the Municipal Law of Afghanistan published in the Ministry of Justice Gazette 1316 / October 15, 2018 (amended April 30, 2019) defines the *nahia* and provides the purpose of its creation. The article gives authority to the mayor to create a *nahia* to execute his directives related to urban services, collection of municipal revenues and supervision of the municipal staff or representatives in the area that comes under its jurisdiction. As per the article, the *nahia* is called ‘the local office of the municipality’.

³ Ashr is the provision of free labor by the community members towards the creation or maintenance of a collective good, and chanda the provision of money or in-kind resources by the community for the same purpose.

reference for their population. There is also a clear consensus across sources about the existence and legitimacy of local informal community governance systems in most rural areas of the country, as illustrated by the existence of a range of such systems to manage common goods in assessed areas.

6. There is however discussion on the extent to which *manteqas* are spaces of solidarity beyond being identity references, with some authors correlating differences in agro-ecological zones and economic conditions with the strength of community solidarity. This should be further investigated.
7. *Manteqas* assessed in the literature reviewed were located in many different regions of Afghanistan, suggesting the notion's country-wide relevance. Many authors also found that the *manteqa* may have significant potential in terms of sub-national governance. In this regard, the Review found that the *manteqa* has been a key reference that both the Afghan government and communities have used to inform the process of creating new districts over the last decades under every government, suggesting that the *manteqa* is not at odds with but rather aligned with the ongoing process of sub-national administrative division of the country, with the *manteqa* likely to be the lowest territorial reference for district creation in most cases.
8. This notwithstanding, despite being taken up in a relatively large number of sources and infusing debate on key topics over the last 25 year, the notion of *manteqa* has not been adopted by the aid system for the purpose of aid planning and delivery, or by the government for the purpose of sub-national governance. The review found however that the notion holds significant potential in both regards.

II. Objective and content of the review

This review has been put together at the request of ACTED and IMPACT headquarters with the broad aim of taking stock of how AGORA has lived up to its ambition of being a practical vehicle to effectively localize aid, make aid more accountable to affected people, and deliver assistance tailored to locally articulated needs across the humanitarian-development divide. To this end, the review has tried to benchmark the different elements of the AGORA methodology as implemented in Afghanistan under the SRDP IV against these broad aims. A secondary objective of the review was to ascertain the compatibility between the AGORA approach and the CDCs created under the NSP and CCAP, and that have been central features of the Afghanistan aid landscape in the last two decades.

Against this analytical framework, the review focused in particular on what sets AGORA apart from other area-based programs: its use of the *manteqa* as a territorial entry point for community engagement, and the *manteqa's* relevance for the purpose of aid planning and delivery. For this reason, the focus on the SRDP implementation and methodology was complemented with three research workstreams on the notion of *manteqa* itself: (1) An initial literature review to ascertain the degree to which the notion of *manteqa* has infused research and practice among other actors; (2) research to ascertain the level of congruence between the notion of *manteqa* and the process of district creation in Afghanistan from a historical perspective and; (3) a case study of eight *manteqas* in Faryab Province.

The review's scope is therefore deliberately limited to these aspects of the project and is not part of or intended to replace the regular activity or monitoring reports that have been agreed with Norway.

The review was carried out by staff knowledgeable about Afghanistan but external to the implementation of SRDP. It is the result of an extensive process that included three field visits to Afghanistan undertaken in February 2021, February 2022 and March 2022 respectively. Its evidence

base comes from a combination of SRDP related documents as well as external academic and aid system sources, coupled with interviews with staff, community members and local authorities.

Four annexes provide the more detailed evidence that underpins the review:

- Annex I gives an overview of the work ACTED and IMPACT have done in Faryab Province with Norwegian support over the last fifteen years, drawing lessons and making recommendations with regards to the value added of planning and delivering aid through the AGORA methodology under SRDP IV from a programmatic perspective.
- Annex II is a review of external academic and aid system sources on the notion of *manteqa*;
- Annex III explores the congruence between *manteqas* and the ongoing process of district formation over the last decades;
- Annex IV is a qualitative study of eight *manteqas* in Faryab Province.

This report is a summary of these annexes.

III. The AGORA methodology under SRDP IV

The SRDP IV that is at the centre of this review was able to build on the results of nearly 15 years of cooperation between ACTED, IMPACT and Norway in the North of Afghanistan, with Norwegian support representing upwards of 60 percent of the more than € 100 million of funds received by ACTED to support affected communities there since 2001. Over the years, Norwegian support has been critical in at least two key respects: first, it enabled ACTED and IMPACT to respond with assistance tailored to both the emergency and development needs of affected communities; and second, it provided the type of multi-year implementation timeframe without which no proper development programming can take place and which allowed ACTED, over time, to develop and refine bespoke community based methodologies that have been essential for effective community mobilization and ownership.

A. Brief introduction to the AGORA model

AGORA is a joint venture between ACTED and IMPACT created in 2016. It is an approach anchored in local territories and knowledge to better support people in protracted crisis. It aims to deliver effective recovery and resilience programming in ways that are accountable to local communities as well as actors and promotes the resilience and recovery of crisis affected people in fragile contexts. AGORA also aims to provide support tailored to local needs that transcends the humanitarian – development – peace divide.

The AGORA model has three key features: (1) using settlements that make sense to people as the territorial unit for the planning, coordination and provision of assistance; (2) ensuring that this planning, coordination and assistance is guided by local knowledge, and supports local structures and capacity and; (3) developing synergies between local and exogenous aid stakeholders, including development and where relevant climate financing actors.

The AGORA methodology is designed flexibly in order to be able to adapt to the specific context of communities. As such, it is intended as a model that can work in both urban and rural contexts, and both stable and fragile contexts.

B. Overview of approach taken and achievements under SRDP IV

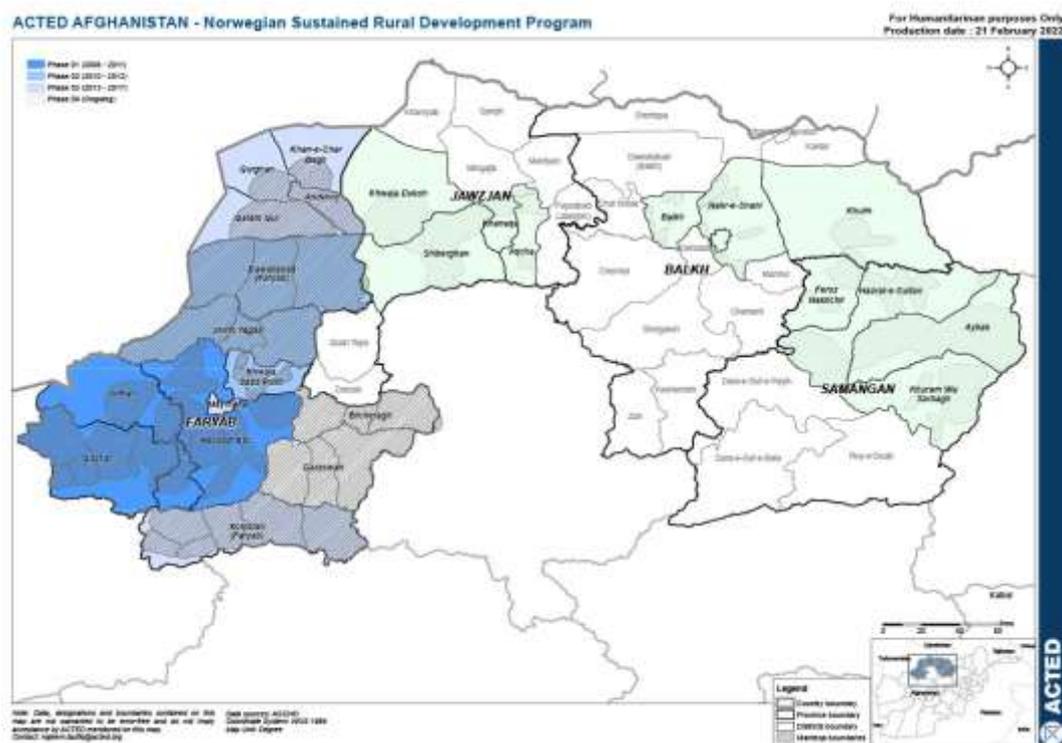
The program, which currently covers the four provinces of Faryab, Jawzjan, Balkh and Samangan, uses the AGORA methodology, including identifying and mapping the right territorial entry point for engagement, multi-sector needs assessments, planning and prioritization at the level of each territory, support to the implementation of priority projects identified by communities at territorial level, as

well as support to area-based coordination mechanisms and institutional cooperation.

In keeping with the AGORA approach, the SRDP IV uses an area-based approach that works through territories that are locally understood and owned, using the *manteqa* as its territorial entry point for community engagement, aid planning and delivery. Based on the *manteqa* mapping undertaken since 2018 under the SRDP IV in 27 districts, there three *manteqas* per district on average, or about 1,500 countrywide.

Five rounds of data collection were carried out as part of SRDP IV between 2018 and 2021 to map and understand 64 *manteqas* in 24 districts across the four province provinces, as shown in map 1 below. Two additional rounds of research were undertaken in the first quarter of 2022 to deepen our understanding of the key features of *manteqas* and refine our assessment tools. As of June 2022, ACTED and IMPACT have begun the mapping of all remaining *manteqas* and of all urban *nahias* in the four provinces.

Map 1 – Geographical expansion of the SRDP from 2008 to the present, and *manteqas* mapped under SRDP IV to date



Following the mapping of *manteqas*, community platforms were elected in each *manteqa* (called *Manteqa* Development Platforms or MDPs), using a similar model to CDCs created under the NSP and CCAP. A total of 2,032 people were elected or selected to the MDPs across the 58 *manteqas*, including 786 (31 percent) women, representing a wide variety of profiles, with 40 percent of members being traditional community leaders (elders, arbabs, mullah, commanders) and the remaining 60 percent representing civil society activists, intellectuals (*rushanfikr*), teachers, doctors and other professionals.

AGORA teams worked with every MDP to identify the key recovery priorities of each *manteqa*. These were then assessed for their feasibility, associated costs and time frames, and compiled into *Manteqa* Development Plans that have been used by the community platforms to advocate for funding with ACTED as well as other aid and government actors. Overall, the MDPs identified 471 priority projects, at an estimated cost of US\$ 12,7 million. The three top priorities for communities were irrigation, agriculture support and road / bridges projects, followed by drinking water, livestock, education and health projects. These community identified projects spanned the full gamut of needs from

humanitarian to development, with the bulk of projects falling in the development category.

From 2019 until now, ACTED has supported communities in implementing 79 of these projects, at a cost of over US\$ 2,3 million, picking up the projects identified as highest priority by communities. This support was provided in the form of cash block grants to each MDP, Agro groups and Water User Associations.

C. Value added from the AGORA methodology under SRDP IV

A review of the work carried out under SRDP IV since 2018 shows that planning and delivering aid through the AGORA methodology has come with a number of concrete benefits, as follows:

1. **Planning at the right scale:** As a notion familiar and tangible to Afghans that espouses pre-existing socio-spatial realities, the *manteqa* provides an entry point that is culturally appropriate, useful to understand the social and economic relationships between villages / neighbourhoods, and the political economy of target areas.
2. **Building resilience:** Because many of the resources essential to rural livelihoods serve multiple villages and are managed at that level through community solidarity systems, planning and delivering through the MDPs at *manteqa* rather than village level was instrumental in addressing key inter-village issues, building the resilience of communities and helping to address or manage local conflicts around natural resources. The potential for AGORA to understand and help address conflicts within and between *manteqas* was also found to be significant.
3. **Inclusive planning:** Working through community platforms representing all communities in a given *manteqa* has also enabled ACTED to include all communities into the planning of the local plans and implement multiple projects that served previously excluded groups.
4. **Localizing aid:** The bottom-up and inclusive community-based planning, the reliance on community governance structures, and the fact that the grants delivered through SRDP IV were managed by communities also ensured a high degree of community buy-in, oversight and accountability. An indicator of this is the fact that most of the projects prioritized and implemented through community platforms under the SRDP IV have benefitted from the traditional systems of community maintenance and upkeep of ashra and chanda.
5. **Operationalizing the nexus:** By shifting towards multi-sectoral responses to needs of crisis affected populations and helping local actors identify their own priorities outside of the traditional humanitarian-development divide, the AGORA methodology allowed for the planning and delivery of assistance tailored to the needs of communities, from emergency to development.
6. **Fostering participation of women and girls:** While the conservative nature of many of the areas in which the SRDP is implemented did not make full parity in terms of MDP membership possible, women still represented a third of MDPs and took an active part in their deliberations. Beyond MDP membership, efforts were made to address the needs of women and girls, in particular through the education, youth, and business development components of the SRDP IV, and a number of MDPs took steps to mainstream the needs of women and girls in their plans and priorities.
7. **Complementarities with CDCs:** Another key finding from the review of the SRDP IV is that the AGORA approach has worked well with and has been complementary to the CDCs created

under the NSP, and its successor the CCAP. Under AGORA, the *manteqa* community platforms provided a degree of coordination and planning at area level for inter-village needs and resources, while the CDCs would focus on the more micro but equally important village level needs.

8. **Empowering communities:** In several cases, MDPs also took responsibility to carry out their own projects independent of aid actors, while in other cases MDPs were able to give their *manteqa* plans visibility with government and aid actors beyond ACTED so as to encourage them to channel resources towards priorities included in the plans.
9. **Understanding urban – rural linkages:** Combining a *manteqa* based approach in rural areas and a *nahia/guzar*⁴ focus in urban areas has potential to generate a better understanding of rural / urban relationships, useful both to inform programming as well as broader policy choices.

D. Lessons learned and suggested improvements

While the review validated the appropriateness of the overall area-based and community mobilization AGORA methodology adopted under SRDP IV, it found that the program design would benefit from a number of adjustments, building on key lessons learned from the last four years:

1. **Develop a different approach for urban area:** While a *manteqa* based approach is appropriate for rural areas, a different approach is needed towards urban areas. First, population numbers and concentrations are much higher in urban areas, making a more granular territorial approach necessary. Second, unlike in rural areas, there are clear sub-municipal administrative boundaries in urban areas that aid actors must work within. Going forward, it is therefore recommended that the territorial entry point for work in urban areas should be the *nahia*, and to rename the *Manteqa* Development Plans Local Recovery and Resilience Plans (Local RRP) in the future.
2. **Adjust block grants amounts to population size:** Under the SRDP IV, block grants channelled through community platforms were uniform in size. Given the broad variations of populations numbers across *manteqas*, block grants amounts should be adjusted to population size as much as possible going forward in order to achieve more balanced coverage across areas.
3. **Ensure greater reliance on the MDPs for aid planning and delivery in each *manteqa* within and outside of the project:** Although *Manteqa* Development Platforms were setup, drew up local recovery plans, and received block grants from ACTED to implement part of the plans, much of the support provided through the project went to activities outside of the local recovery plans. While this may be warranted for some activities (for example small business development activities), going forward there is a strong rationale to further empower the MDPs and to make their local recovery plans the central planning tools against which programmatic priorities are identified. Beyond the SRDP, the review recommends that, as much as possible, ACTED should make the local recovery plans the central planning tool for the assistance that it delivers to areas where they have been developed.
4. **Improve women and girls representation and participation:** Given the challenges in achieving sufficient and meaningful female representation in MDPs, it is recommended to setup separate female *Manteqa* Development Platforms or *Nahia* Development Platforms wherever mixed platforms cannot operate for cultural or political reasons and ensure that the female specific MDPs have input and oversight over the development of local plans.

⁴ *Guzars* are small urban neighborhoods organized around one or more mosque. *Nahias* are made up of multiple *guzars*.

5. **Give more visibility to local plans with external actors:** While the ability of *manteqa* platforms to engage with government and other aid actors beyond ACTED to promote their priorities is a key potential benefit of AGORA, this potential has not been fully tapped into. ACTED and IMPACT should therefore make the promotion of the Local RRP more of a priority going forward in order to give them greater visibility with external aid actors interested in resilience. This would require paying greater attention to the local coordination element of the AGORA methodology.
6. **Use local plans to address gaps in basic service coverage:** Experience from the SRDP IV also clearly shows that *manteqas* are a good prism through which to ascertain gaps in Basic Service Units (BSUs)⁵ for education and health services. Going forward, the Local plans should be used more systematically to identify gaps in basic service coverage and inform advocacy with government and aid agencies towards meeting these gaps.
7. **Capitalize on existing complementarities with CDCs:** As clusters of CDCs are smaller than either rural *manteqas* or urban *nahias* and taking into account the benefits of working at *manteqa* level in rural areas for the purpose of aid planning and delivery as well as its local governance potential as identified by the review, there appears to be a strong rationale for aggregating CDC clusters at the *manteqa* level in rural areas. A similar argument can be made in favour of *nahia* level CDC clustering in urban areas. It is therefore hoped that the review's findings will help inform discussions on the issue of CDC clustering, notably with regards to the importance of ensuring that the parameters for CDC clustering are sufficiently flexible to allow for the creation of *manteqa* and *nahia* level clusters in places where it is found to be pertinent.

IV. Research on the notion of *manteqa*

Given its centrality to the AGORA methodology in Afghanistan, three research workstreams were undertaken as part of the review in an effort to better understand the notion of *manteqa*. First, the review conducted an initial literature review to ascertain the degree to which the notion of *manteqa* has infused research and practice among other actors; second, the review conducted research to determine the level of congruence between the notion of *manteqa* and the process of district creation in Afghanistan from a historical perspective and third, the review carried out a case study of eight *manteqas* in Faryab Province. The key findings from each workstream are outlined below.

A. Key findings from the literature review

The question of local knowledge was identified as a central issue in Afghanistan by ACTED's founders Marie-Pierre Caley and Frédéric Roussel, leading them to draft an unpublished paper for the United Nations in 1993 on the importance of the notion of *manteqa* in rural Afghanistan. This paper, titled "Constraints and Perspectives in the present context for the elaboration of an immediate rehabilitation strategy for the Afghan Rural Areas: Notion paper for UNORSA" has become something of a reference on the notion of *manteqa*, infusing much of the research that has been undertaken since then.

The literature review showed that the word *manteqa* appears in 125 sources from 110 authors between 1993 to 2020. It also showed that although the notion has been taken up in a relatively large number of sources and influenced debate on a number of key topics over the last 25 years, its treatment has remained limited mostly to sub-district governance and land management. The literature also presents the *manteqa* as a notion relevant primarily to rural contexts.

The review shows that rather than a single definition, the literature puts forward a range of tentative

⁵ BSUs are identified and mapped as geographic areas in which communities rely on the same basic services and facilities, such as health facilities, markets and schools.

definitions which may differ at the margins but share a number of common core features, whereby the *manteqa* can be tentatively defined as “a geographic area containing a number of villages and identified by both its inhabitants and the other inhabitants of the district under one common regional name”. *Manteqas* assessed in the reviewed literature were located in many different regions of the country, suggesting the notion’s country-wide relevance. Authors differ in their assessment of the number of *manteqas* in the country, ranging from 1,500 to 4,000. *Manteqas* can have different names depending on the region, such as *wanda*, *hazarkhanagi*, or *kent*, but they all refer to the same notion.

The review indicates that there is broad agreement across sources that the *manteqa* exist as bounded spaces that include multiple villages, that they are typically associated with natural terrain features such as a valley or drainage basin, and that they constitute an important identity reference for their population. There is also a clear consensus across sources about the existence and legitimacy of local informal community governance systems in most rural areas of the country, as illustrated by the existence of a range of community systems to manage common goods.

While acknowledging the predominantly segmentary nature of solidarity in pre-war Afghanistan, articulated around networks of kinship (*qawm*), some authors point to a shift after 1978, with the *manteqa* gradually also becoming a primary space of solidarity due to the war, in large part because the conflict forced a process of territorialization of solidarity owing to the rise of commanders as the new rural elite, and their requirement for territorial control. For their part, other authors correlated differences in agro-ecological zones and economic conditions with the strength of community solidarity. This should be further investigated in order to ascertain the extent to which *manteqas* are spaces of solidarity beyond being identity references.

The literature review also suggested that the *manteqa* is a socio-spatial construct that can evolve over time, although this evolution is likely to be slow. For example, the civil war that has raged on for the last decades may have re-shaped allegiances, urbanization may gradually weaken or strengthen community bonds, and the shift from rural to urban livelihoods will impact the reliance on community managed systems around which rural livelihoods are built.

Many authors also found that the *manteqa* may have potential in terms of sub-national governance. Indeed, as community based informal structures oversee providing key public goods at sub-district level in rural areas, a number of authors have argued that the *manteqa* could also be a useful operational unit for the purpose of managing and addressing a range of local governance issues that have not been adequately addressed to date in Afghanistan through formal governance. They suggest this could be done by recognizing and supporting, rather than replacing, informal systems and linking them with formal governance mechanisms, for issues such as water management, pasture management, and land tenure administration. Some authors have argued that reliance on these community-based systems could play an important part in solving Afghanistan’s local governance challenge, and more broadly be a catalyst for improved State-community relations going forward.

The discussions on the practical relevance of the *manteqa* in the literature overwhelmingly focus on two issues: sub-district governance and aid delivery within the framework of the NSP and its successor the CCAP, and land and natural resources management.

The literature discusses the decision of the NSP, one of the largest World Bank programmes implemented in Afghanistan as of 2003 / 2004, to deliver development projects through community level grants overseen by NGOs as Facilitating Partners (FPs) through a community-based approach that aggregated communities at village or sub-village level into CDCs based on a set number of households. This led to arguments amongst academics and aid practitioners, with critics arguing that instead of replacing existing community structures and realities, the approach should build on existing community recognized socio-spatial notions. Faced with this criticism, the NSP decided to cluster CDCs,

an approach which its successor program continued until the 15 August 2021.

The clustering approach that ended up being endorsed aggregated a set number of CDCs together, with the government initiating a process of redrawing *guzar* (urban neighbourhoods – the lowest formal administrative sub-division in urban areas) boundaries based on a set number of families that would allow them to match with CDC clusters, rather than adapt the clusters to the existing community-based *guzars*.

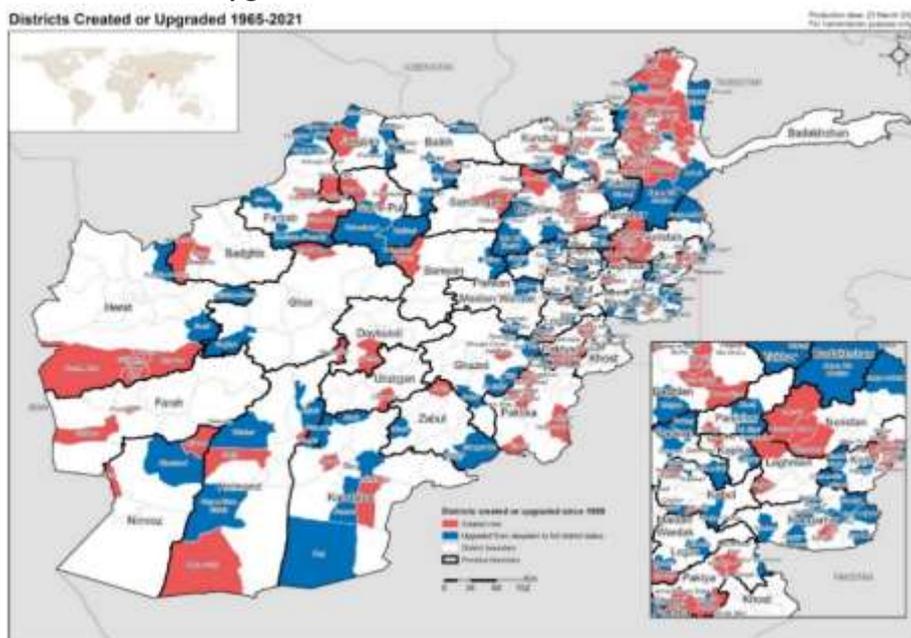
The *manteqa* has not been taken up at scale by the aid system for the purpose of aid planning and delivery, or by the Afghan government for the purpose of sub-national governance. However, as the below section shows, the notion has been an important reference that both the Afghan government and communities have used to inform the process of creating new districts over the last decades.

B. Key findings from research on the congruence between the notion of *manteqa* and the process of district creation

The 1964 Constitution mandated a review of the existing sub-national administrative units and the introduction of a new administrative law, passed by the new Parliament and enacted in 1965. This law simplified the sub-national administrative layers inherited from 1923 and established a clear hierarchy between provinces, large districts (*loy wolaswali/لویه ولسوالی*), districts (*wolaswali/ولسوالی*), sub-districts (*Alaqadari/علاقه داری*) and villages. The Law also listed all provinces, districts and sub-districts, providing a benchmark against which to assess the district creation process of the last decades.

Since the 1964 Constitution and the Law of 1965, people from different parts of the country lobbied successive governments to have their areas recognized as official districts. This in turn led to an increase in the number of districts and provinces in the country. Available information indicates that the combined number of districts and sub-districts grew from 296 in 1965 to 378 in 2021, as shown in map 2 below. Of these 187 districts remained unchanged, 90 sub-districts were upgraded to full district status (the sub-district category has now been discarded), 101 new districts were created, and several districts were abolished.

Map 2 - districts created and upgraded from 1965 and 2021



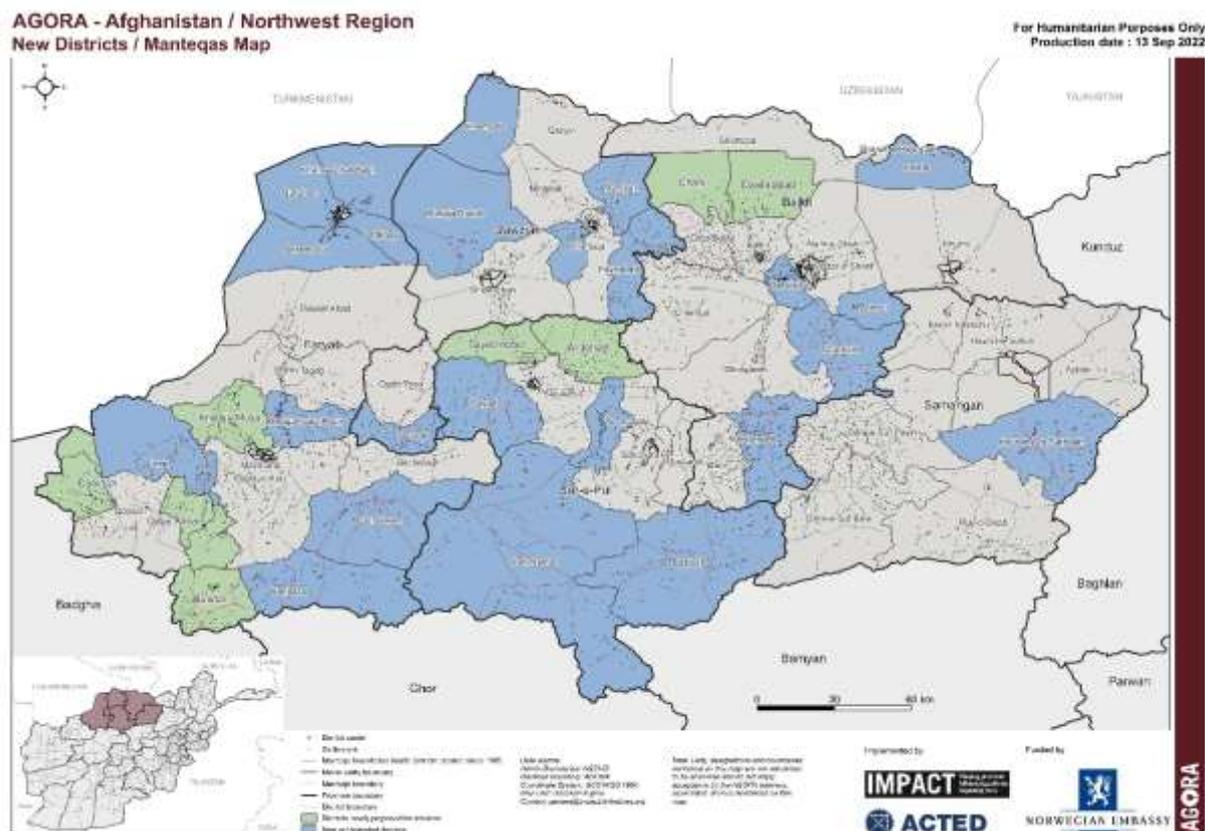
Two sets of available data suggest a strong relationship between the process of district creation and

the notion of *manteqa*: first the fact that, in areas where *manteqas* have been mapped, newly created districts always espouse the boundaries of one or more *manteqas*; and second, the fact that the term *manteqa* has been used repeatedly in official documents to justify the district creation or upgrade.

1. Congruence between the boundaries of new districts and *manteqas*

The boundaries of new districts established or upgraded since 1965 and those of districts proposed for creation by the interim Taliban administration have been compared with *manteqas* in Faryab, Balkh, Samangan, Jawzjan and Sar-e-Pul provinces, where all *manteqas* have been mapped by IMPACT and ACTED. As shown in map 3 below, the result of this comparison clearly shows that the boundaries of the 24 districts that have been created since 1965 across all five provinces align with the boundaries of one or more *manteqas*. The comparison also shows that the boundaries of the 8 districts that are reportedly being proposed for creation by the Interim Taliban Authorities in Faryab, Balkh and Sar-e-Pul also match with the boundaries of one or more *manteqas*.

Map 3 – Relations between districts created since 1965 / districts newly proposed for creation and *manteqas* in five provinces of North Afghanistan



2. The use of the term *manteqa* in official documents related to the district creation process

The review showed that in sixteen of the 39 cases of district upgrade or creation for which documentation was found, spanning three different political regimes (the government of the Peoples’ Democratic Party, the Mujahideen government, and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan), the official records show that new districts were created or upgraded from sub-districts (Alaqadari) to full district status in response to the requests of the residents of a certain ‘*manteqa*’, or it is a ‘distinct *manteqa*’ that must be converted to an official district.

These two datasets show that the *manteqa* has been a key reference that both the Afghan government and communities have used to inform the process of creating new districts over the last decades under every government, suggesting it is not at odds with but rather aligned with the ongoing process of sub-national administrative division of the country, with the *manteqa* appearing as the lowest territorial reference for district creation in most cases. This points to the notion's potential with regards to sub-national governance.

C. Key findings from the case study of eight *manteqas* in Faryab

As part of the review, a case study of eight rural *manteqas* (five in Qaisar district and three in Shirin Tagab district), was carried out in Faryab province in February 2022.

The case study showed the *manteqa* as a key reference point for the village population in each of the assessed area, and their geographical boundaries, which are often watersheds, mountain ridges or other geographical features, to be known to both their residents and to those living in neighbouring *manteqas*. The case study also served to underline the lack of clarity around the notion of village and village boundaries. Indeed, there was some confusion between villages and hamlets, and between larger villages and their neighbourhoods, particularly when large villages are aggregates of multiple older villages that have grown over the decades.

Beyond geographical boundaries, the case study found that the existence of each *manteqa* in the minds of its inhabitants stemmed from a feeling of belonging and attachment towards it, itself borne out of geographical proximity, common history, economic, social and tribal / ethnic ties and the solidarity derived from the community management of some of the resources upon which rural livelihoods depend.

Crucially, the case study confirmed that the customary governance structures in place at various levels within each assessed *manteqa* seemed legitimate and accountable to the local population, contradicting the view that informal governance is generally managed by authoritarian chiefs, unconstrained and unaccountable to the community. Rather, in the absence of a functioning state, customary informal governance mechanisms seem to have largely underpinned community resilience throughout decades of war in rural areas.

The above point was most clearly illustrated by the customary management of water, by far the most precious resource for rural communities. All seven *manteqas* with irrigation networks relied on sophisticated systems of community paid and managed customary water managers (Mirbashis, Mirabs, Chakbashis) in charge of allocating water and maintaining irrigation systems. A similar system was also put in place by the community of one *manteqa* to manage a drinking water system serving multiple villages. The irrigation system's maintenance was ensured through the two traditional community solidarity systems of ash and chanda. Beyond water, communities in all *manteqas* assessed also relied on ash and / or chanda to maintain key community infrastructures (roads, bridges, mosques, bazaars etc.), pointing to the importance of these mechanisms to foster community resilience.

The case study served to highlight that, as an important identify reference for the rural population, planning and delivering aid at *manteqa* level in rural areas comes with number of tangible benefits:

1. The notion of *manteqa* is familiar and tangible to Afghans and espouses pre-existing socio-spatial realities. In this regard, planning and implementing projects through territories that make sense and are owned by Afghan communities likely enables more effective and accountable livelihood support, building resilience and helping to pre-empt and address local conflicts over resources. For the same reason, and although beyond the remit of this review, the *manteqa* appears to have

strong potential as a territorial entry point for a range of essential local governance issues, including land management.

2. *Manteqa* level engagement can help address key inter-village issues, including with regards to the joint management of resources such as irrigation water, roads or markets. This is particularly important as resources upon which rural livelihoods depend are usually managed by communities at the level of multiple, not individual villages.
3. As a key reference for the population, the *manteqa* is useful to gather accurate data for the purpose of aid planning and delivery.
4. Because basic service units are usually smaller than *manteqas*, the provision of health, education, water, and other basic services can vary within a *manteqa*, and a *manteqa* based territorial approach provides a good entry point to identify gaps in BSUs and help improve planning for key government services in rural areas.

V. Conclusion

The review concluded that the peculiar area and community-based AGORA methodology adopted under the SRDP IV for aid planning and delivery was key to the program's ability to successfully localize aid, mobilize communities, create ownership, deliver assistance tailored to local needs, and increase resilience in a context of protracted crisis. It also concluded that the AGORA approach has been complementary to the CDCs, and that this complementarity could be maximized in future by clustering CDCs at *manteqa* and *nahia* levels.

The experience of SRDP IV coupled with research on the notion of *manteqa* undertaken as part of the review put into sharper focus the fact that the vast majority of support and collaboration systems developed over time to manage key economic resources essential for rural livelihoods (water, pastures etc.) are community-driven and managed, with formal governance structures and systems playing a marginal role at best. Beyond the maintenance of irrigation water systems, the review also found that all assessed communities relied on *ashr* and / or *chanda* to maintain key community infrastructures (roads, bridges, mosques, bazaars etc.), pointing to the importance of these mechanisms to foster community resilience.

In this regard, the positive results obtained so far with the AGORA methodology in Afghanistan appear largely predicated on its ability to espouse and build on some of these key features of the Afghanistan context to design a bespoke approach combining reliance on community owned mechanisms where they exist and on the *manteqa* as the territorial prism through which to engage with communities in rural areas.

The findings of the review therefore point to the significant potential of the AGORA approach as a community-driven development model appropriate for Afghanistan, able to leverage community governance mechanisms key to livelihoods where they exist, link communities and government systems where pertinent, or work through government systems where they exist and are legitimate. The ability of the AGORA model in Afghanistan to deliver recovery and development programming effectively, at scale and in an accountable manner directly to communities, is also worth noting in the current political context.

To tap this potential more fully, the review recommends that ACTED and IMPACT consider improving the AGORA methodology in line with the recommendations formulated by the review, as well as consider extending the approach throughout the North and to the Northeast under a future SRDP phase, and to work with other stakeholders and donors to further expand the approach to other regions of the country.

It also recommends that more research should be done to deepen our understanding of some the key community systems that underpin livelihoods, in particular in rural areas, in order to more effectively mainstream this knowledge into the AGORA methodology, thereby improving program design. Specifically, the review suggests deepening ACTED and IMPACT's knowledge in the three key following areas: (1) the practices of ash and chanda; (2) irrigation systems and; (3) the governance of pastures.

In closing, the review notes that the key enabler for both the past achievements and future potential outlined above is the nature of the partnership between Norway, ACTED and IMPACT itself. In this regard, the combination of a donor willing to commit multi-year funding over the long haul and to give space to its partners to pilot innovative approaches, and of partners investing in local knowledge and willing to try new models to improve their delivery to affected populations, is clearly a best practice that should be replicated in other contexts.