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Home sweet home! Repatriation, reintegration and land allocation in Afghanistan

Abstract. Since 2002, an estimated 6 million Afghan refugees have returned to their homeland. The world has witnessed the largest voluntary repatriation program in recorded history (Kronenfeld, 2011), with over 4.6 million returnees assisted by the Government of Afghanistan and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). While in 2002 Afghanistan was synonymous with return, in 2012 Afghanistan is synonymous with a stalling voluntary repatriation process, growing numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and trends of mixed migration, with families, men, and unaccompanied children leaving Afghanistan legally or irregularly in the hope of a better life elsewhere. In 2012, ‘hope’ is no longer synonymous with Afghanistan, nor with return, but with life outside of ‘home’, outside of Afghanistan. In a context of transition and changing migration patterns, increasing emphasis is nevertheless being placed on policies of return to and reintegration into Afghanistan. Central to this question of return is access to land, and the resources available on the lands where returnees settle. This paper discusses the return of refugees to Afghanistan and the strained relationship between refugee return, land allocation and reintegration, with reference to research conducted in Afghanistan between 2007 and 2012.

Keywords: Afghanistan, refugee, return, repatriation, reintegration, migration, land allocation schemes, UNHCR, MoRR, Australia

Résumé. Retour sur terre: politiques de retour et d'allocation de la terre pour les réfugiés afghans. Plus de 6 millions de réfugiés afghans sont retournés dans leur pays d'origine depuis 2002, dont 4.6 millions assistés par le Haut-commissariat aux Réfugiés des Nations Unies (UNHCR).

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Ce retour était, en nombre et en investissement, sans précédent pour l'Afghanistan comme pour le reste du monde. Alors que l'intervention de 2002 marque le début d'une décennie du retour, en 2012, l'Afghanistan est le reflet d'un contexte humanitaire et de développement marqué par un taux très faible de retours volontaires, une croissance du nombre de déplacés internes, et un profil migratoire changeant, orienté vers une migration mixte – volontaire et forcée – avec nombre d'individus, de familles et de mineurs non accompagnés qui tentent de quitter leur pays, légalement ou irrégulièrement. En 2012, l'espoir se tourne de nouveau vers les pays voisins et vers l'Occident, c'est à dire vers une vie en dehors de l'Afghanistan. Malgré cette évolution, les politiques migratoires et les états qui les dirigent restent encore focalisées sur des initiatives de retour et de réinsertion en Afghanistan. Une pièce centrale de ces politiques est la question de l'accès à la terre, et des ressources disponibles sur ces terres. Ce papier s'interroge sur la relation entre les réfugiés rentrés « chez eux », communément appelés « returnees », l'accès à la terre et les politiques d'aide au retour au travers de recherches menées en Afghanistan entre 2007 et 2012.

Mots-clés: Afghanistan, réfugiés, retour, rapatriement, réinsertion, migration, allocation de la terre, UNHCR, MoRR, Australie

Land and return in Afghanistan

Return, but return *where*?

The issue of land has been quasi-absent from the formulation of policies to return Afghans to their homeland. It is, however, an essential question. *Return* implies a return *somewhere*, 'to come or go back to a place'¹. If people are to return, the assumption is that they have a place to return to. Yet, after thirty years of war, this assumption is often flawed. Returnees cite access to land and shelter as their biggest challenges upon return. Where will returnees 'return' to? Where will they live? If they do not own land, will they stay on illegal or grabbed land, or migrate further?

Refugees tend to settle down where they choose, not where they are from. They make a choice, which is often not a sedentary one. Writing on the situation of Angolan refugees in Zambia, Bakewell argued for the existence of 'a sedentary bias in the concept of refugee, which implicitly suggests that people belong to a particular location as if by nature' (Bakewell, 2002). The events of the past decade in Afghanistan reinforce this view: repatriation is not the end of migration but another step in the migration process. *Stabilizing Afghan returnees, anchoring them in their places of origin* (UNHCR, 2012), goes against people's right to exercise their freedom of movement within the borders of their homeland.

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) launched the Land Allocation Scheme (LAS) in December 2005 with Presidential Decree 104, legalizing the distribution of intact and uncultivated

1 "Return". Oxford Dictionaries. April 2010. Oxford University Press. [<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/return>]

government land to landless returnees and IDPs. These scheme - consisting of over 30 sites in Afghanistan - aimed to solve the problem of the landlessness of returning refugees. Over 300 000 land plots have been demarcated, 13 754 distributed and over 290 000 ready for distribution, according to official figures shared by MoRR in February 2013. These figures are in line with 2011 numbers that estimated that 12 000 families actually live on these lands.

These figures indicate that only 24 percent of applicants received plots, and only 25 percent of those who paid for plots live on them. The rate of departure of residents has been as high as 80 percent on some LAS, due to lack of livelihoods and inadequate basic services (MacDonald, 2011, p. 8).

Some of these sites have, to date, consumed millions of dollars and continue to be a focus of key stakeholders – including the Government, the UN and donors. However, they have not fulfilled the expectations of returnees in terms of access to services, livelihood and security, nor the expectations of donors and policy makers as a migration management tool.

LAS distinguishes ‘natives’ from ‘refugees’ – those who stayed from those who left. The political process of return and reintegration is mechanic rather than organic, resulting in pockets of land throughout Afghanistan where returnees are bundled together, being granted identical plots of land and two-room shelters on the outskirts of major urban areas, with limited access to services and employment. Notions of autochthony² lie behind this treatment of the refugee-returnee population, generally resettled according to areas of origin but physically separated from the local or host population in those areas. Geschiere refers to the emotional charge these notions have acquired on the African continent (Geschiere, 2010) and similar conclusions can be drawn, if somewhat differently, in the Afghan context. On both sides, tensions have risen due to the preferential treatment – as seen by those who never left – and the marginalization and non-preferential treatment – as seen by those refugees who have returned – of returnees. In this tension between the returnees and the rest, the question of land is a material reality that shapes the outcome of reintegration initiatives.

Similar programs were established in other countries to address the social impacts and poverty associated with exile. In Sudan in the 1970s, the Government adopted a policy of placing refugees in settlements near large mechanized farms in need of wage-based laborers, or on other sites where land was available to be cultivated. This strategy meant that refugees could access land and a source of income, and could consequently achieve self-reliance. In the case of refugee camps in Sudan, self-reliance led to the complete cessation of food assistance programs (Bartsch and Dualeh, 2011). In contrast, in Afghanistan and with returnees, the focus was initially set on the profile of beneficiaries rather than on vulnerability criteria: by allocating land according to areas of origin, the Government ensured that areas

² In the works of Bayart Geschiere & Nyamnjoh (2001), Geschiere & Nyamnjoh (2000).



would remain aligned, either ethnically or politically, to the power structure in the province in question. Lands were chosen if they were free and unused, but also often uncultivated. The idea that families should be able to find a subsistence mechanism, livelihood restoration and income generation was not part of any study of the selected sites. Indeed, there were no feasibility or baseline studies done of LAS.

LAS became known, to some, as a form of exclusion, reflecting the dichotomy between the autochthones and the rest: a form of social and economic exclusion that led to instances of favoritism (land being a rare and sought-after commodity in Afghanistan, the holder of a land title also holding power), as well as instances of disadvantage and discrimination (living on deserted land is seen as a form of punishment when the expectations of refugees had been raised higher, to incite them to return).

This paper analyses the relationship between refugee return, land allocation and reintegration, through the case study of one land allocation site by the name of Aliceghan, situated 50 kilometers North of Kabul. Voices of Afghans living on this site are presented in this paper as a means of relating the voices of those directly affected by the tensions generated by states, institutions and migration management policies. More than this, these interviews are a rich source of qualitative data recorded as evidence of the limited understanding by policy makers of the centrality of land in the return process. The aim of this article is consequently to highlight the relationship between returnee expectations and the implementation of reintegration policies; the construction of communities and livelihoods undertaken without proper sociological and economic considerations; and finally the narrow understanding of land in the context of the world's largest repatriation effort to date.

The methodology of this paper is based on quantitative and qualitative research led by the author in Afghanistan between 2007 and 2012 (Majidi 2009, 2011a & 2011b). The most significant source of data is a series of qualitative interviews led in Aliceghan with community leaders, the head of the local *shura*, Mr Amighi, and community members, through semi-structured interviews in focus group settings and through individual case studies. The perspective provided in this paper is that of Afghan returnees who live on land allocation sites. They are often the most vulnerable within the population of returned refugees. Their experiences cannot be generalized to all returnees, but only to those who have acquired land through a government-led initiative supported by the international community in Afghanistan.

Aliceghan, a utopia or a land and housing project?

Aliceghan is a curious name in Afghanistan. It is a combination of Alice, for Alice Springs in Australia, and Ghan, for Afghan, in recognition of the historical ties between central Australia and Afghanistan (Kelly, 2010). It also reflects the growing willingness of governments to bringing Afghans back 'home', keep them within the national boundaries of their own country, and manage a population movement that is increasingly unpopular in Western domestic politics.

The first Afghans to arrive in Australia in the 19th century were camel drivers active in the carting business, providing transport to the mid-central regions of Australia and supplying the new gold mining communities as well as the remote sheep and cattle stations (Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2012). Renewed Afghan migration occurred in the early 1980s, this time corresponding to the context in Afghanistan. Many sought refugee status in connection to the civil war in Afghanistan, including educated professionals who settled in Sydney and Melbourne. This migration continued in the 1990s with the Taliban regime. With the fall of the Taliban regime and the enhanced border control systems in Australia, arrivals have decreased but are more spectacular: faced with the arrival by boat of asylum seekers from Iraq and Afghanistan, Australian political leaders began speaking of a ‘national emergency’ in 1999, and affirmed that these boats ‘should be turned around straight away’ (Maley, 2000: 1). In Maley’s view, a culture of control has superseded other considerations in determining Australia’s immigration policy and treatment of would-be refugees. ‘The obsession with control has been at the expense of more creative thinking about refugee issues’, and is detached from the actual numbers of entry, which remain low compared to the popular image of illegal migrants flooding the continent. In 2005, the more creative solution provided to address this perceived problem was to focus on return, repatriation and encouraging Afghans not to migrate again, in part through funding humanitarian and development programs such as LAS. This commitment was reiterated in 2011, when the Governments of Afghanistan and Australia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with UNHCR, in which the Australian authorities agreed to undertake a number of initiatives intended to build the capacity in relevant Afghan ministries, to finance the upgrade of the passport issuing system and to fund additional activities at Alicegha, such as reintegration support, in-kind assistance for provision of accommodation, skills training and small business creation (Australian Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, 2011).

Alicegha was built to be more than just a housing project. It was meant to symbolize the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Alicegha’s initial construction cost 10 million US dollars, and it is still receiving funding and remains the focus of numerous development projects led by Governments and UN agencies, including UNHCR and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Initially, Alicegha was identified as a housing project designed to provide homes to 1 400 returnee families, as well as working towards the establishment of a thriving community through livelihood support and community development plans. As in the case of all other LAS, the land distributed in Qarabagh was non-arable government land, distributed to landless returnees not already owning land or a house in Afghanistan under their name or under that of a spouse or child. The status of this land has not been a source of conflict – it is government land, which returnees can buy at a minimal cost. However, as discussed below, conflict has risen between communities over access to resources such as water.



The Government of Afghanistan provided this land, in the District of Qarabagh, 50 kilometers north of Kabul City and 20 kilometers southeast of Bagram Airbase, on the way to Parwan Province. The latest and most reliable figures estimate a population of 15 000 inhabitants in 2002, an estimate which more than doubled (potentially even tripling) following the arrival of returnees, primarily from Iran and Pakistan, and taking into consideration the presence of Kuchi nomads or sedentary families. In 2002, around 60 % of this population belonged to the ethnic Qizilbash group (Shiite and Farsi speakers) and 40 % were Pashtuns (UNHCR, 2002). The general situation after the end of the Taliban regime was one of severe damage to the agricultural, health and educational infrastructure of the District, with difficult conditions being recorded from 2002 for the large number of families returning spontaneously or through facilitating programs to the area. UNHCR estimated that 99 % of shelters were destroyed, with returning populations having very few houses with roofs, accompanied by a similar deterioration of potable water sources (*karizes*, wells, dams) and the lack of any land cultivation due to the lack of water for irrigation. In a district where 80 % of income was from grape cultivation and other agricultural activities, the lack of irrigation was a direct threat to the livelihoods of the families living in the area.

The Government of Australia hoped to relocate to Aliceghen unsuccessful asylum seekers and voluntary returnees from Australia, hence mixing the return of refugees with the return of other categories of migrants. However, during our visit to Aliceghen in December 2011, of the 1 400 targeted returnee families, only approximately 200 families (that is, 15 % of the housing project's initial capacity) lived in the township, and not a single family or individual was known to have returned from Australia. The objectives of the Australian Government have remained unfulfilled, as have those of the voluntary returnees themselves. Without a viable water system, electricity, livelihoods, a proper school or a clinic, this township remains nothing but a 'site' – a designated piece of unused government land designated under Presidential Decree 104 for the return and reintegration of Afghan refugees.

Recent efforts by UNHCR have brought solar power to Aliceghen, providing electricity to specific landmarks in the township, including on the main streets. The road connecting the township to the city of Kabul has been expanded – construction was ongoing at the time of our last visit in December 2011. Progress has been noted, but key lessons remain: the absence of a sustainable water source at the site, disputes with adjacent local communities over both ownership of the site and access to a viable water source, and the lack of employment opportunities in the area have contributed to the shortcomings of the project in providing a suitable housing alternative for a substantial number of returnee families, who have subsequently chosen to relocate to Kabul city. Another important weakness in the process has been the reported mismanagement by the Land Allocation Commissions and the Government of Afghanistan and their failure to ensure a fair and transparent beneficiary selection process.

The resilient voice of those living in Aliceghan³

The words recorded in field interviews in Aliceghan are an insight into and evidence of the fundamental relationship between land and refugee return in Afghanistan. Mr. Amighi, the head of the local community *shura*, identifies what has gone wrong: he speaks of the fact that international organizations and governments have invested their time, resources and efforts into improving lives, but have failed. According to Amighi, echoing the views of the community more broadly, if the ‘illness’ is not correctly identified then there can be no cure for Aliceghan. Amighi thus insists on identifying the source of the problems of Aliceghan, noting that even with good intentions, if there is no proper planning, consultation and assessments, there will be no way out of the current deadlock.

You are a doctor. There are many different kinds of doctors. There are those who understand people’s pain and hardship, and who can find ways to remedy them. But you have to be able to identify the illness correctly to help us.

Land, but no water

Mr. Amighi spoke of the ongoing disputes over access to water with locals from Qarabagh District, which began in 2006. The community leader of the nearby village – which has access to the water source – had asked for 25 % of the land titles of Aliceghan in exchange for the shared provision of water. United Nations agencies and government offices have not been able to resolve the standoff. Without access to water, the people of Aliceghan are forced to rely on water trucking – an expensive and unsustainable process of water delivery. In 2011, Mr. Amighi explained that UNDP, the development agency of the United Nations in charge of the development of this township, had already paid the local *shura* 10 800 USD for tankers and diesel for water delivery.

We get three tankers of water every day, but we cannot go on like that for ever. Our *shura* is \$20 000 in debt for the tanker. UNDP has not given us money, but they will; but for how long?

Reliance solely on water tankers is a strain not only on the hygiene, health, cooking, eating and drinking of families living in Aliceghan, but also on their livelihoods: with no irrigation source, there is no possibility to cultivate the land for self-reliant livelihood mechanisms or to grow grapes and the other key staples and products for which Qarabagh is known.

Everyday, women and children fetch the amount of water they require for the day’s chores. Many doubt the town can ever be sufficiently populated without an adequate source of potable water. Who, besides the international community, would

³ The following discussion draws from Majidi, (2009–2011).



be able to afford such an expense? The survival of the township is conditional upon sufficient funding from international donors, an amount which is presently shrinking in this time of transition.

Land, but no clinic

Mr. Amighi discussed plans to address some of the gaps in social welfare. He gave the example of an agreement between the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Afghanistan Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) to build a clinic in the township. Letters between the IOM and MoPH indicate that the IOM was planning for the construction of a basic health clinic (BHC) by March 2011. However, MoPH officials stated in response that the project would be taken under consideration providing that the IOM agreed to pay for the construction of the facility. Written exchanges back and forth over the project's terms of reference and funding have meant that Aliceghan is yet to see a proper medical facility. 'The Government has agreed to it; IOM has a plan for it; why does it not work? We have never heard back from them.' When asked why he has not called them to follow-up, Amighi responds: 'We do not want to make ourselves look any smaller! But can you check with them and remind them? Did they just forget?'

This statement refers to the failed expectations of return. Mr. Amighi returned to a life that does not meet the standards he had imagined, nor the standards of his urban exile in Iran. The experience of exile and the 'imaginary of return' play big roles in the lives of returnees, including the inhabitants of Aliceghan. Elders like Mr. Amighi remember fleeing the wars and migrating to Iran, where they had refugee status, until the day they were informed that a better life awaited them in Afghanistan. Amighi thought his life was difficult then; but he says: 'I lived for 23 years in Iran; all of us here are returnees and we have suffered more since we returned that the pain we felt leaving Afghanistan and living in Iran.'

The expectations of returnees from Iran are generally higher than those of returnees from Pakistan, as confirmed by this case study. This is in part because Afghans in Iran did not live in refugee camps, but spread out in the host country's urban and rural areas, and hence were de facto immersed in a country that offered a different type of lifestyle, specifically for women and girls. As indicated by previous research, notably that of Adelkhan and Olszewska (2006), 'Afghan Iranians', or Afghan refugees in Iran, now consider it a positive and important development that their daughters and wives were able to 'breathe' more freely in the Iranian cultural environment, notably on the issue of girls' schooling, but also simply on the social norms surrounding the freedom of speech and movement of women. On return, the living conditions of girls and women changed significantly: in Aliceghan, the lack of a proper school and the lack of both a clinic and shops for women to make use of within walking distance were highlighted as significant setbacks in comparison to their situation in exile.

A few gains

Some gains have, however, been made, if one compares the situation in Aliceghan in 2010 to that in 2011. UNCHR, the UN refugee agency, provided solar lights to the township, with 24 solar poles in the streets and 6 solar panels on the rooftops of various buildings, including a temporary clinic, a closed school, the mosque and a bakery. This had a direct, positive impact on life in this desert township, where lighting at night provides a sense of security. Girls and women consequently have greater freedom to move around the township without fearing for their safety.

Another improvement resulted indirectly from a nearby road construction project, which provided an opportunity for men to work and support their households. The main road outside of the township was being cemented and paved in late 2011, with men from the township being recruited to work as daily workers. About six or seven of the township heads of households were hired on the road construction project, although this work was not full time. Moreover, in Mr. Amighi's view, even this small improvement would not last. 'They hire our people for a few days until they can bring their own people and their relatives who they feel they can trust more than they will ever trust us.'

The bitterness apparent in Mr. Amighi's words persists despite the small recent improvements to the community's standard of living, by reason of the lack of trust, long since eroded, and the disillusion of return. Amighi explains that his sons have migrated back to Iran, so as to work and send money back to him in Afghanistan. Amighi lost his wife two years ago, when she became ill and died before she could be transported to the nearest hospital, which is too far away in emergency situations. Amighi cites this significant event in his life again and again as an incident that would never have happened in Iran and that should never have happened, even in Afghanistan.

How to live in a ghost town

'This is a ghost town', says Mr. Amighi, a collection of empty streets, with only a few children coming out of their homes to fetch water, play at the main playground or buy bread.

Two brothers, 14 and 16 years of age, run the bakery each day, supporting the nine family members of their household. Their father is a member of the *shura* council. This family previously lived in Iran as refugees, and then in Jalalabad, before they were given a piece of land in Qarabagh— their district of origin from before the birth of the children. The brothers did not receive any education in Iran, being identified as Afghan. Since the family arrived in Aliceghan, the neighbouring Qarabagh residents have consistently referred to them as 'the returnees'. They do not feel like they belong in this location, that they have settled in, partly because of the feeling of having been marginalized in a geographic space with no resources, on desert land, which does not offer them much more than a 'place' to subsist, and



certainly does not offer them a place to live their lives fully. The income from the bakery is no longer enough for the family.

When there were about 1000 families here, our situation was a lot better. But families started leaving, especially two to three years ago, and now we are just 200 families. We only make bread in the morning now but the income is still not enough: our family is indebted. We cannot even afford to go to Kabul, it costs 80 AFA round trip, so if we only earn 300 AFA in a day, it is clearly not enough money for us to go anywhere.

The brothers have had to find their own solution – living in their neighbor’s house until they have enough money to construct their own. In contrast to their ‘home’, which remains an empty plot of land, with no demarcation and no walls or doors, their neighbor’s house is a properly built home, with an entrance gate, windows and curtains, but a home which has remained vacant, as the owner actually lives in Kabul city where he owns his primary residence.

As illustrated by this example, Aliceghan is home to those who do need plots of land but who are too poor to build houses on them. It is also ‘home’ to those who already have a home – people who do not want to live in the township but who want to keep their property there as an asset and investment for their future, in clear breach of the eligibility criteria of the LAS schemes which require beneficiaries to be landless and without a house under any of their relatives’ names. In other words, by reason of the mismanagement of land distribution through the LAS scheme, Aliceghan has become an area of long-term speculation, with many having no intention to occupy their properties in the township in the near future (Reed, 2009). The selection process for this scheme was not fully respected, opening the door to investors, land grabbers and other powerful individuals with connections giving them access to distribution lists. Their ownership of land in Aliceghan gives them yet more power in a society where such assets are rare. If the Government and various donors, such as the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), bring to fruition their plans to develop a Great Kabul City Master Plan extending Kabul city to the North, near Qarabagh, the value of land in Aliceghan would immediately and drastically increase. In ten years, the value of land in the area has already increased tenfold. This represents an investment for those who bought land titles through the LAS scheme, and who only see the value of their land, not the need for services in the area (Majidi, 2011a).

It is part speculation, part imagination. The initial assumption of the Government was that this township would link up to the city, thus allowing its people to rely on their own livelihood mechanisms. Instead, Aliceghan has largely become a land of speculation for those who are better off and well connected. It is an investment: the initial cost of buying was so low that the return on such an investment is very quick. Being located only one to one-and-a-half hour’s drive from Kabul has meant that much of the township has been taken over by speculators.

I asked the bakery brothers about their neighbor – who he is and why he is not living in his Aliceghan property.

He is not giving it to us for free. He is rich and he is powerful. We live in his house so that nothing bad happens to it as he is mostly absent. We live in his home because we can't live in our home. We have not managed to finish our homes in these 4 years that we have been here. We will manage to find the money we need to build the doors and the walls of the house. For now, we live in our neighbor's house as guards.

For his part, while this neighbor is a refugee, he was not landless, owning a house in Kabul. He pays the bakery brothers a monthly retainer for them to watch over his house in Aliceghan.

A community? A centre for women, but no latrines for children

A 2009 progress report stated that Aliceghan's school was built without toilets because it was 'not included in [the] school contract' (Callinan, 2012). Instead, the 215 enrolled children used two pits, dug about 40 meters from the school buildings. The school was initially run by a full-time teacher. Numerous visitors have ironically noted that the lack of water in Aliceghan would at least mean that the children would not need to go to the bathroom too often, given that there are no hygienic facilities for them to use.

We have a school until grade 8 for boys and girls. There are teachers but they are not professionals. They are like our elders, they can say '1+1=2, 2+2=4', but we are not sure this will be enough knowledge to pass on to our children. At least, now we have this one teacher who comes to the school. Last year we had no teacher because no one wanted to come this far to teach in our township. This year, the situation is much better thanks to this one teacher. But it stops at grade 8 or 9. If we want more we have to go to Kabul, split our families, double our costs...it is not feasible for us in general, and me in particular, to send children to school in Kabul.

This complaint was expressed by a woman who is raising her children on her own – a female-headed household, a criteria of vulnerability among returned refugees, which makes her eligible for priority assistance in receiving land, food and non-food items. So far, land in Aliceghan is all she has received. She is thankful to be in this location but worried for the future of her children. She lives with her in-laws, as she has lost her husband. She cannot leave her home to work.

One of my sons goes to school, the other is too young; and my daughter's task everyday is to get us water. But this is normal. In each family here, one person is dedicated full time to water collection.

When her children are busy, she goes to the township's training centre for women. There are three centers for women to learn carpet weaving, tailoring and embroidery. These centers have all been set up by a private Afghan-German businessman who has been providing support to the inhabitants of Aliceghan for a number of years. Photographs of him are everywhere in the community center, which he built and which bears his name, as well as in the *shura's* main room. It is his name more than any other that the inhabitants mention.



A ghost town, Aliceghan is quiet. However, there is one area of the township where noise can be heard: the women's training centre. The women do not earn a viable income from this work. The training centers exist rather to keep the women occupied and active, and to provide them with a sense of self-worth.

The initiative thus serves a social purpose and helps to bring and hold together a community which otherwise lacks most of the characteristics of an Afghan community. What defines a community, what makes a community, is an endless sociological debate. However, certain key characteristics need to be present. A human community can be defined as a social unit or group of people living in one place and sharing a common sense of identity and values, built on sustained interactions, common beliefs, resources, needs, risks and identity as prerequisites for social cohesion. Inhabitants of Aliceghan use other words. They do not talk about a community. They speak instead of a *shahrak* or township, making reference to what Aliceghan was supposed to be in the planning phases, the infrastructure it was supposed to offer. They also refer to Aliceghan as a *shahrake mohajereen*, or returnee township, verbally illustrating the fact that this remains a planned community, and not a natural community.

In Aliceghan, the absence of a community is felt through the lack of interaction between its members and the established local community, as well as through the lack of social cohesion. The women's training centre is the only element currently working towards the creation of a common purpose and a sense of community. It allows women to meet, share, talk and take a break from their daily lives. Indeed, this was the main objective of the women's centre project – supporting women socially in a difficult living environment – rather than its income generating potential. The center is an exception within the broader township, where formal structures have been built, but where the creation of a community was not taken into account. The questionable selection process applied in this land allocation scheme and the lack of basic services and other key social services call into question the very feasibility of generating a 'community' in this desert land.

The people living in the township and the people of Qarabagh have been at odds ever since the township's foundation. There is mutual resentment between the two groups – the people of Qarabagh think of the 'returnees' as being privileged by the international assistance community, particularly given that they can buy land almost for free, while the people of Aliceghan view the host population as wealthy – *'even the poorest of them has a farm of grapes and still owns land for farming'*. This recalls the conceptual notions introduced at the beginning of this paper, with LAS, a political and social creation, emphasizing and opposing two categories of people: autochthones and returnees (as more recent arrivals). The imposition of the LAS scheme and the use of government land to serve a purpose of integration has not only failed due to a lack of resources, but, in this case, due to the weak consultation process with local communities and their negative reception of returnees. The host community does not want to share its resources and is determined to exclude the returnee population from sharing in

the wealth of Qarabagh, notably including its grape production. These two groups – the autochthones and the returnees of Qarabagh – are very critical of each other and of the practice of investment and speculation in Aliceghan. Indeed, this is the one point on which they agree: speculation by the wealthy may put all of them and their families in danger in a few years. If Qarabagh becomes a commercial development area and is integrated into the Greater Kabul City Master Plan, all of the area's current inhabitants will be living in uncertainty regarding the longer-term future of their homes and livelihoods. However, talks of the Greater Kabul City Master Plan have been ongoing for years without any concrete results. Moreover, the lack of consultation with the host community by the Government and the NGOs supporting the development of Aliceghan meant that the Aliceghan project had very little chance of success from the very beginning – there is too much opposition from key local actors, ranging from community leaders through to the Governor of the District, who have opposed the development of this site which presents no benefit for them.

An imaginary 'home sweet home'

We lived two to three years under tents when we first arrived. We were literally just dropped here by the Government, without anything other than a land number.

The words and actions of the residents of Aliceghan indicate that they did not expect their lives as returnees to Afghanistan to be like this. The township shows a 15 % occupancy rate. It is rumored that 5 % of beneficiaries have sold their land through the secondary black market, where land is sold and bought outside of legal regulations, passing from the hands of beneficiaries to the hands of families that are often neither returnees nor populations in need of land or shelter. Not all of the beneficiaries who have kept the land they received from the Government, along with some shelter assistance, have the financial capacity to build homes. Two-room shelters with latrines were co-financed by UN agencies and returnee families, who were required to bear half of the total cost of construction. However, without any activity on location, and consequently with no source of income, families were often unable to scrape together sufficient sums of money to build their own homes. Living in tents, then in temporary shelters, some families are now in their own, two-room shelters. Overall, the residential construction in Aliceghan nevertheless remains very basic and rudimentary.

We would have our land ready, with services, but we were in shock when we arrived. This is a desert. They said we will fix it all for you but nothing has been done. There is a 100-meter well to get water but the pump is broken.

Many returnee men from Aliceghan go to Kabul, leaving their families behind to spend weeks at a time working in and around the city. People know they will receive more aid if they go to one of the informal settlements of Kabul, home,



for the most part, to internally displaced persons. These informal settlements are a convenient and visible location for some of these returnee families to settle temporarily, benefitting from the assistance (food and non-food items like blankets, clothing and cooking utensils) distributed by organizations, particularly during the winter months. If such assistance was provided in Aliceghan, more of the men would probably be present and women would consequently be less vulnerable.

The categorization of Aliceghan (and other LAS) as a township has meant that it has not received the same level of attention from government authorities. According to high-level officials in the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD), one of the most successful national programs, the National Solidarity Program (NSP), which provides community-based assistance to rural communities of Afghanistan, cannot encompass these townships. Several reasons are given for this situation, including, first and foremost, their categorization as townships. According to the then director of NSP, the categorization of the Land Allocation Schemes as returnee *townships* bars them from being eligible for assistance from MRRD, one of the best staffed and best resourced Afghan ministries. Another reason stems from the fact that MRRD's objective is to provide for communities at large, not to favor returnee-only locations. The purpose of the NSP, for example, is to provide for the needs of the vulnerable, whether returnee or non-returnee, migrant or non-migrant. Focusing on criteria based on prior or past migration or displacement would discriminate against other communities in Afghanistan. The NSP accepts and understands the need to prioritize, among its selection criteria, high return communities, but generally when these are self-formed and when they are inscribed in a broader context of mixing with the local population, so that they engage in a natural integration process (Majidi, 2011b).

Wait a few more years and no one will be left here.

Outside of Aliceghan, few will openly and publicly recognize the weak social links, the lack of cohesion and the fragmentation of the township's structure. The policy discourse is cautious and uncertain. In 2010, the country director of the UNDP called for the Aliceghan chapter to be 'closed', expressly stating:

We have come to a point where we have to all come together, the Government and all the partners, and all of us agree on how to close the chapter on Aliceghan.

Yet, in 2012, Basnyat signed off on a Regional Solutions Strategy, with UNHCR, to invest more funds and institute a new reintegration approach in this same location. Simultaneously,

The Immigration Department [of the Government of Australia] spokesman said it was continuing to work with the Afghan Government on the completion of the project and would consider any application for additional funding on its merits (Kelly, 2010).

On the other hand, one of the key humanitarian donors in Afghanistan – the Bureau of Populations, Movement and Refugees (BPRM) of the United States Government – has asked the question of whether LAS can be salvaged.

Conclusion

Managing space and controlling populations

The Land Allocation Scheme was an attempt to find a solution to the issue of landlessness among returnees – one of the key obstacles facing returned refugees in Afghanistan. It was also a means for the Governments of Afghanistan, Australia and other aid donors to manage space and control populations in Afghanistan. The need by returnees of land was accurately identified, but policy makers and returnees held different understandings and expectations of what type of land was needed, and what it meant for returnees to want to have land – rather than simply representing a physical possession, their desire for land ownership was a translation of their expectations and hopes for their future lives.

As stated by Laura Hammond, the discourse of disaster management has grown in importance among development consultants, UN workers and aid practitioners, who treat human lives and community building in the same way that they approach the rebuilding of physical infrastructure after conflict, despite the fact that these two processes are very different and have different consequences and impacts.

There is little or no recognition on the part of most of these specialists that the ‘relief to development continuum’ which provides the basis for most disaster management studies, may not be applicable to individual or collective human actors in the same way that it is to physical objects, nor that the ‘community’ in question may not even exist as such any longer (Hammond, 1999).

In the Afghan context, returnees potentially did not expect to be marginalized in settlements upon their return, with no clear urban or rural demarcation, and on the margin of most National Priority Programs. The returnee townships that were built effectively fell outside of the scope of community building and rural rehabilitation and development programs in Afghanistan. The construction of a land-based solution did not fit with returnees’ own conception of return, reintegration and reconstruction.

The narrow understanding of land as a place to build a home, in this case a two-room shelter, was out of touch with returnees’ expectations about their lives upon return. For returnees, land represents not only the geographic space and territory on which to build a home, but also a potential source of water, food, livelihood, proximity to urban centers, like-minded individuals, ethnicities, and so forth. Following on from Hammond’s discussion of disaster management, the understanding of the role, use and significance of land in the LAS program remained superficial and simplistic, despite the fact that land actually represents a central element of the identity of individuals, households and communities in Afghanistan. The type of land you possess defines your ability to be self-sufficient, to have a source of income and consequently determines your socio-economic status and role within your ‘home’ community and country. Land is used as a means of gaining power, an investment and a source of speculation for the future. The importance of



land is not just a function of its size and physical boundaries, but also a function of the resources it can – or cannot – offer. Hence, when refugees or returnees mention the issue of land ownership as a key challenge to their reintegration, they are not just speaking of the physical implications of their landlessness – they are also referring to its social and economic implications. This is clearly illustrated by the fact that families living on LAS plots will still identify land as their main challenge to return, not because they do not own land, which they do, but simply because the land given does not have the attributes it should have. Merely possessing a plot number and title deeds does not address the issues and challenges associated with return.

How can individuals exist in these conditions, living in a ghost town, without a livelihood, water or latrines in the school? They often decide to leave Aliceghan. The community elder interviewed for this study reported that his sons had returned to Iran to find work; the bakery brothers reported that an ‘exodus’ from the area had taken place in the past few years, with families preferring to live in tents in Kabul than in mud houses in Aliceghan.

Those who stay do so because they do not have any other choice. They are the poorest of the poor, the most vulnerable, those whose children do not attend a proper school, whose wives cannot go to a nearby clinic, whose husbands do not have access to economic opportunities, and whose elders are in mounting tension with the local, host communities. They are the most vulnerable, and they consequently deserve attention. The focus today is on asking whether the LAS program can be fixed or not. However, the real question lies elsewhere. The real question needs to be centered on the people concerned. What options can be offered to them? Six years after the start of this expensive program, what other durable options can be offered?

Bursting the bubble of the Land Allocation Schemes

The Australian architect Andre Ullal, who spent 17 months managing the Aliceghan project in 2008-2009, affirmed that aid to the project must continue for the sake of those families who have settled there (Callinan, 2012). However, this statement is built on the assumption that the land chosen is appropriate for families to live on and that the governments involved have paid enough attention to the process of constructing this township. These assumptions are false. Land was seen, in the case of Aliceghan and countless other LAS sites, as a means of controlling a population and managing migration.

Ignoring the question of land is problematic, but over-estimating the capacity of land ownership to lead to a smooth process of return and reintegration is just as dangerous. Landlessness is certainly the most common plight of returnees in Afghanistan. However, landlessness is an issue for the majority of households in the country, especially in urban centers. How many families in Afghanistan possess deeds to their homes? How many families think they own a plot of land but

actually do not have legal rights to it? The problem of land is a systemic problem in a country with weak regulations and registration processes, as well as archival systems interrupted or destroyed by decades of war. Offering land to returnees is not a solution on its own. It ticks one box, but a long list of other needs must also be addressed: water, electricity, employment, education, security, transportation, and so on. Without the additional components that go to build a strong, well-structured and well-serviced community, land alone cannot solve the problems of return and reintegration.

The question of land – of where people will return to if they have no place to go – is central to analyzing and responding to migration in Afghanistan. If land is seen simply as a space, as a geographical location, it will not provide or represent a ‘home’ for people who have spent the past thirty years moving and migrating, across borders and internally, in response to conflict. If land is understood as the location of social cohesion for a community, then it has a chance to becoming a potential ‘home’, a place to live fully, rather than to simply subsist. The question remains: can communities be created through government planning, in the way LAS had been imagined, or has this been a flawed assumption from the start? The opposition between autochthones and returnees discussed in this paper points to the fact that providing a physical land allocation without the proper resources and services, and without the proper consultation processes and acceptance by local communities, will mean that even the returnees who are sold land will not see this as their home, but as representing their only solution for survival. As a result, only the poorest of the poor, the elderly, the single female-headed households and large families will remain in this township, sending their relatives back to Iran or Pakistan for work if possible, or choosing to live on the outskirts of Kabul and thus moving internally. The families, women, children and elders who are left behind on unpromising plots of land are the most vulnerable. If people who lack the resources to leave stay in Aliceghan for lack of a better option, this means that these return and reintegration plans have failed. In this situation, new durable solutions have to be considered for the population of landless returnees. This may not imply simply investing more funds into sites of land allocation, but requires a fundamental (re) questioning of the approach that led to the creation of LAS such as Aliceghan, of the actual results of this scheme and of available options to respond to persisting poverty and livelihood issues. In the case of Aliceghan, other durable solutions – such as resettlement – are available that would give to ‘land’ the holistic meaning it needs to have in the return process.

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