

USAID/IRAQ COMMUNITY ACTION PROGRAM

Final Report

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Mercy Corps

Cooperative Agreement No. 267-A-00-08-00505-00-CAP III

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Pictured above, children in Thi Qar's Al-Eslah sub-district celebrate the opening of a new family park. Young people comprise more than one-third of beneficiaries across USAID/Iraq Community Action Program projects, demonstrating the value communities place in cultivating the future of Iraqi youth. Photo by Essam Al-Sudani/Mercy Corps.

Executive Summary

Abil Abded Allah Spty, a Local Council Member from Muthanna Governorate used to think that local government budgeting and prioritization should be left to technocrats and elected officials. Community members could contribute nothing, and did not need to be consulted. Three years later, Adil is a changed man who sees value in participatory government and has concrete skills in advocacy, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation and procurement. Adil, the son of a local Sheikh, is the new face of Iraq who bridges old traditions with new concepts of inclusive governance.

Abil is just one of the hundreds of local council members, technical directorate employees and community action group (CAG) members from all fifty-two districts and sub-districts in the South AoR who have attended training under CAP III. Thirty-two of these local councils now offer regular opportunities for community outreach and participation, and twenty-eight now regularly create joint government-community action plans. This sustained and deep impact on attitudes and behavior towards participatory governance has been coupled with significant accomplishments in achieving community priorities and meeting needs. **759** projects—ranging from awareness campaigns to the refurbishment of roads, bridges, electricity, schools, and water—have been completed through CAGs. Around **2.7 million** Iraqis have directly benefitted from the program, and many more will indirectly benefit from the improved governance environment. The Iraqi government and local communities have expressed ownership and commitment towards these projects through significant cost share (**43.5%** of total project costs for government and **1.3%** for communities).

Over the past four years the CAP program has been successful in fostering the seeds of participatory governance at the local level. An external evaluation conducted by Mercy Corps in the final year of the program found that communities trust their local councils more, and LCs provide more opportunities for feedback and are more willing to listen. The CAGs have been empowered to represent their communities' interests, and many of them have taken the lead in reaching out to oil companies for training, employment and CSR projects. We can be confident that they will continue to use the skills and confidence they acquired through the CAP program to lobby both their government and private companies, and to continue the process of improving their community. In the eyes of its citizens the renewed legitimacy of the government also opens up a new space for civil society to grow, expand and collaborate, whilst representing diverse interests.

Civilian victims of war have received humanitarian assistance and economic support through kick-start business grants. Over 19,000 people have benefitted from the program during CAP III, including 100 families who have received vital economic assistance and are now proud business owners.

Introduction

Mercy Corps has been operational in Iraq since July 2003 as a partner on ICAP and CAP II, and has implemented over 900 projects in South and South-Central Iraq focusing on: education, vocational training, conflict mitigation, rights for women and persons with disabilities (PWD), civic outreach, health, and labor intensive small infrastructure projects such as water and sanitation, electricity, and transportation.

Under CAP III, Mercy Corps has worked in Basra, Maysan, Muthanna, and Thi Qar Governorates, which include fifty-two districts and sub-districts. The Southern AoR was severely impacted by the Iraq-Iran war, and later the US invasion. Many areas have received little to no government attention. The area is home to some of the largest oil fields in the world at Rumaila and Majnoon. Major international oil companies such as BP, PetroChina, Shell, and Lukoil have contracts with the government. Most of the IOCs, along with second and third tier oil services companies, have developed relationships with surrounding communities and offer prioritized employment opportunities for local residents.

Social inequalities and government ineffectiveness continue to pose the greatest challenges in the South AoR. Unemployment, illiteracy (especially among women), inadequate educational opportunities for youth and associated absenteeism, and lack of basic municipal services all have significant impacts on the livelihoods of the South AoR's population and greatly impact the current operating context in the region.

Mercy Corps had four fully-functioning program offices in our AoR located in Basra, Maysan, Muthanna and Thi Qar, which are fully staffed by Iraqi nationals. Mercy Corps expanded its office in Basra to act as a hub and accommodate centralized operation functions to include finance, human resources, procurement, logistics, monitoring and evaluation, as well as management and programming functions.



The Al-Qurna Youth and Sport Committee hosted the Friendship and Peace Marathon in November 2010—for the first time in seven years. The security situation in the area, as well as economic conditions, had prevented it from being held. With more than 270 athletes taking part, the marathon reinstated a long tradition and encouraged community and youth participation in sports.

Key Achievements: Community Action Program III

- Achieved \$25,379,705 in local government cost share, comprising 43.5 percent of total project costs, and \$763,108 in community cost share, comprising 1.3 percent of total project costs
- Prioritized, Implemented and Completed 759 CAP projects and 111 Marla projects
- Provided over 22,000 women with literacy skills and an understanding of democracy and human rights
- Provided advocacy, monitoring and evaluation, procurement, and IT training for local council and CAG members in all 52 districts and sub-districts
- Local Councils have held **223** outreach meetings and now work together on joint-action plans that focus on community projects and budgeting

Description of Activities and Accomplishments

Under the CAP III program, Mercy Corps has strengthened participatory governance and increased the ability of communities to articulate their needs and mobilize resources. CAGs have implemented 759 projects that have improved health, education, and social services. The focus on these important sectors—particularly youth through education, recreational and transformative activities—has strengthened the relationship between the community and their elected leaders. There is now continuous collaboration including identification, planning, and implementation of projects. Most importantly the government and community match, often of in-kind labor and land, underscores the importance of these projects to the community and their commitment to sustainability.

Education

The Community Action Groups (CAGs) requested support for educational activities in two categories: rehabilitation and construction of school facilities, and transformational learning projects. Under CAP III, over 172 schools and universities were upgraded to meet current demands including classroom construction, main hall renovations, and rehabilitation of water and electrical networks. 270,000 students now have safe, hygienic, learning environments which will facilitate a higher quality of education. Over 500 schools have benefitted from projects which have supplied them with furniture, computers and other informational technology, toys, and water purification units. These projects have reduced overcrowding in schools by limiting the number of students having to share desks, and provided students from kindergarten to college with materials to stimulate learning. In addition, around 14,000 students benefitted from a wide variety of educational opportunities including scientific conferences, drama, poetry and music festivals, and health and environmental awareness campaigns. The drawing/mural and drama festivals inspired a healthy sense of community pride and enhanced public areas.



Right, children in Maysan governorate participated in the Kids for Peace Singing Festival held in April. One hundred children from nine kindergartens throughout the Amara area participated in the event, which included the composition and performance of original songs about national, community, and family pride and togetherness. The celebration was attended by members of the Provincial Council, the Deputy Governor, the Amara Department of Education local councils, community notables and CAG members.

Youth and Sports

Providing youth with safe and healthy spaces for recreational activities is crucial in limiting their exposure to destabilizing elements. The CAGs prioritized the construction/rehabilitation of over 65 family parks, youth centers and multi-purpose sports centers; the sponsorship of sports tournaments; and the supplying of sports clubs and youth centers. These projects targeted the specific needs of communities including an irrigation system for the youth center in Al Zubair, Basra; and video equipment, IT equipment and classes for a youth center in Maysan. Over 265,000 youth now have outlets to engage in safe, recreational activities that will lead them towards a brighter future.

Persons with Disabilities

Twenty-four projects were targeted specifically at improving the lives of 10,000 people with disabilities through awareness campaigns and supply projects. CAGs have participated in the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, the International Day of the Disabled, and led a week of activities commemorating children with hearing problems. Advocacy and sensitization campaigns have taught communities the struggles of PWDs, while reducing harassment and violence. Finally, A CAG was formed to specifically address the needs of PWDS in Basra Governorate.

Transportation

Due to the extensive marshlands in Southern Iraq, many villages are cut off from the main road and as a result, are unable to access to health and educational services and employment opportunities. Mercy Corps has addressed these challenges, and those of communities who lack paved roads, with over 58 road and bridge construction projects which have benefitted over 300,000 people. These projects have reduced the vulnerability of these populations by reducing their reliance on unsafe water and road crossing measures and increasing their access to needed social services.



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Electricity and Water

The incredible heat in Southern Iraq makes access to water and electricity essential. Mercy Corps has worked with communities to increase the availability of potable water and electricity. Over 300,000 people have benefitted from construction and supply projects which have distributed potable water units to schools and families, and rehabilitated and expanded the water network to include new communities. Over 28 communities have received expanded access to electricity through projects which have supplied transformers and expanded the electrical network. The CAP program has also supplied generators to water pumping stations. All of this work has been done in conjunction with the Departments of Electricity and Water to ensure sustainability.



Mrs. Saleema, 35, lives with her husband and two children in Al-Hmood village in Thi Qar governorate. Her village has been affected by a severe shortage of drinking water. She used to collect the water for her family from the area's only river, located one kilometer from her house. "For a woman with two children, access to water once every day was very difficult since no one can take care of my kids," she says. She was excited to learn of a Mercy Corps/USAID project providing potable water and storage tanks, which allows her and her neighbors to save for up to three months. "Finally we will get clean drinking water for my children, and this has created huge advantages for my village and family," she says.

Women's Awareness and Inclusion Program

Around 22,000 women¹ have received literacy training in line with the Ministry of Education's literacy curriculum. In addition, some of the women received additional trainings in democracy, human rights, legal rights, and vocational training/business development. The WAI program, a continuation from CAP II, has built the confidence and willingness of over 37,000 women to engage with their government since 2005

Building on the basic Iraqi Ministry of Education curriculum, additional learning modules focused on democracy, governance and elections; women's and children's rights; and needs identification and prioritization were introduced in WAI centers. The goal of these activities was to provide women with additional skills to participate in the governance process and conversations about community needs and development initiatives. The success of the WAI program as a whole – and these initiatives in particular – were proven by an assessment of WAI activities undertaken during June-September 2010. Among benefits cited by WAI participants from 2005 to the present, key benefits of the program included:



- Increased decision-making skills;
- Greater self-confidence and self-esteem;
- Greater ability to generate income for their families and a greater ability to obtain acceptance of such activities by husbands and family members;
- The ability to learn about and understand key issues such as human rights, democracy and elections, health and hygiene, and the ability to confidently engage in discussions on these issues;
- Increased independent participation in the March 2010 parliamentary elections;
- Improved parenting skills and an increased understanding of the importance of education for their children;
- The adoption of leadership roles in the community.

Additional lessons have supplied WAI students with much needed life and business skills. The USAID Access to Justice program, through their partners CSOs, has provided rights education workshops to the women and information on how to access legal and rights advice. Many of the women produce handicrafts, which they were able to translate into small businesses through small business development training. Finally WAI students attended an International Women's Day Celebration this year sponsored by IOM, where they cherished the opportunity to celebrate with women around the world.

¹ 67,837 women participated in a round of the WAI program. To estimate the number of unique women, we have divided this figure by three, the number of course levels in the WAI program

PROJECT SPOTLIGHT: Needs Identification and Prioritization for Women

As part of Mercy Corps' Women's Awareness and Inclusion (WAI) Program under CAP III, a pilot was conducted during quarter seven to introduce a Needs Identification and Prioritization training module for illiterate women. Piloted in five WAI program centers in each governorate, groups of 15 women participated in a training identifying and prioritizing community needs and engaged in a group discussion and prioritization exercise. Following the training sessions, several women from each group were selected to act as representatives. Mercy Corps team members assisted them in attending meetings with CAG and local council members in their areas to share the results of the exercise and include the voices of the women's community in conversations about community needs. CAG members were encouraged to secure support for a project to meet one of the needs identified by the women. Through this exercise, illiterate women who are often excluded from discussions about community development were given the opportunity to share their needs and opinions. They obtained vital skills in engagement with local leadership and gained confidence in their ability to participate in the governance process. At a meeting in Al-Warka'a sub-district of Muthanna, the Mayor attended the meeting to listen to the needs of women in the community.



Women at a WAI Program center in Thi Qar participate in the Needs Identification and Prioritization training. Using pictures to represent community needs, women used paperclips as a simple tool for voting on the most urgent needs facing their community.

Trainings for Local Council, Technical Directorates and CAGs

Mercy Corps has provided training for Local Council, Technical Directorate and CAG members in each of the 52 Districts and Sub-districts in the South AoR. CAG members, received technical training in budgeting, participatory assessments, project prioritization and design, project implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and procurement. They also received substantial hands-on training and experience in engaging local government officials. Local Council members also received advocacy and lobbying training, and as many are also members of the CAG, they benefitted from the technical trainings as well. The intensive training and hands-on coaching culminated in the creation of joint-action plans (JAPs) prepared by the government and the CAG. These JAPs lay the groundwork for project selection and budgeting over the next few years. On average 71 local councils, and inner-city governmental bodies (hayys) produced joint-action plans each year of the program, and have incorporated this into their yearly planning activities.

Oil Company Partnerships

CAGs and LCs received training and support in mobilizing resources outside of their community, particularly with the growing private sector. Through the program, CAGs and LCs have begun developing the resources and connections to locate and manage external funding projects, as well as learn the basics of public-private partnerships and begin to engage the third element of a functioning civil society – the business community. They also obtain experience with a broader variety of international donors and exposure to a skill-set that will have long-term, sustainable results. Many CAGs have developed sub-committees to address problems of youth employment and to work with oil companies on further corporate social responsibility projects. Mercy Corps has managed four projects, prioritized by CAGs and funded by oil companies; the BP Women’s Sewing Co-operative in Al Zubair, a school rehabilitation project funded by Schlumberger, and family park and school rehabilitation projects in Al Nashwa, funded by Shell. In addition, during year two, CAGs and LCs in Basra’s Al-Fao and Al-Zubier districts completed two community-identified projects with a total of \$1 million in funds secured from the Qatar Foundation/Reach Out To Asia.



An outreach meeting in Eiz Al-Deen Saleem Sub-district in Basra where participants discussed improving job opportunities for youth and lobbying oil companies.

Assessment of Performance in Accomplishing Objectives

Progress Toward Intermediate Results

		Life of Project to date
CAP projects		
	USAID funding for CAP projects	\$32,974,127 ²
	Community cost share	\$763,108
	GOI cost share	\$25,379,705 ³
	# CAP projects	759
	# beneficiaries	2,735,256
CAP trainings		
	# CAGs trained	161
	# CAG members trained	856
	# LG councils trained	52
	# LG members trained	740
CAGs		
	# of CAGs	161
	# CAG members	1280
Marla projects		
	USAID funding for Marla projects	\$2,252,132
	# Marla projects (TOTAL)	111
	- Income Generation	100
	- Medical	3
	- Property repair	0
	- Community project	8
	# beneficiaries	19,221
Marla training		
	List partners NGOs by name	
	Describe NGOs role each quarter in	
	# projects implemented through partner	108

² This figure, as well as USAID funding for MARLA figure, comes from the final financial report. All other financial amounts are estimates from the Sub-activity report.

³ The total audited and reported cost share is \$18,389,696. The remainder of the cost share is awaiting audit confirmation

VULNERABLE GROUPS⁴

CAP projects		Life of Project to date
	USAID funding for CAP projects	\$13,061,521
	- IDPs	\$1,016,862
	- Vulnerable minorities	0
	- Female-HH	\$209,541
	- Youth (aged 15-24)	\$11,835,118
	# CAP projects	653
	- IDPs	44
	- Vulnerable minorities	0
	- Female-HH	29
	- Youth (aged 15-24)	580
	# beneficiaries	892,101
	- IDPs	15,166
	- Vulnerable minorities	0
	- Female-HH	13,782
	- Youth (aged 15-24)	863,153
CAGs		
	# of CAGs with a member who is:	
	- IDPs	62
	- Vulnerable minorities	0
	- Female-HH	0
	- Youth (aged 15-24)	142
	# CAG members who are:	
	- IDPs	101
	- Vulnerable minorities	0
	- Female-HH	0
	- Youth (aged 15-24)	603
Marla projects		
	USAID funding for Marla projects	\$806,235
	- IDPs	\$20,913
	- Vulnerable minorities	0
	- Female-HH	\$396,336
	- Youth (aged 15-24)	\$388,986
	# Marla projects (TOTAL)	86
	- IDPs	10
	- Vulnerable minorities	0
	- Female-HH	43
	- Youth (aged 15-24)	33
	# beneficiaries	227
	- IDPs	10
	- Vulnerable minorities	0
	- Female-HH	143
	- Youth (aged 15-24)	74

⁴ Mercy Corps gathers information on vulnerable groups from local district councils, sub-district councils, community leaders and Mukhtars

Objective 1: Communities better articulate their needs and mobilize resources within and outside the community to solve common problems

Sub IR 9.3.1: Communities better articulate their needs

Activity # 9.3.1.1: Mobilization of communities to select priority projects

CAGs developed skills in needs identification and prioritization, and project selection and design to develop project proposals to meet key community needs. During the program, CAGs identified and completed 759 projects. These were split among infrastructure or rehabilitation projects, supply projects, and the Women’s Awareness and Inclusion Literacy program. Examples of projects completed include: construction of bridges and schools, supplying of youth centers and schools, promotion of arts education through a music festival for children, PWD sensitization programs, and extension of electricity and water networks. The number of beneficiaries reached was 2,735,256. This included 15,166 IDPs and 863,153 youth. Overall, the USAID/Iraq Community Action Program spent \$13,061,521 on CAP projects targeted at vulnerable beneficiaries. 204 members of vulnerable groups belong to 143 different CAGs.

Mercy Corps worked to ensure that CAGs were inclusive and representative of communities as a whole. CAGs that continued to exist from CAP II were restructured to fully reflect the diversity of communities, including minority groups like women, youth, persons with disabilities, and internally displaced persons and refugees. Mercy Corps also reached out to smaller, remote and inner-city communities whose access to provincial and federal funds is lacking compared to their larger counterparts.

Mohammed's Story

Mohammed Shaker is a community leader in Sabkhat Arab neighborhood of Basra City Center. He has been an active member of his community for many years, and has regularly been involved in working with fellow residents to submit proposals for community projects to the Basra Provincial Council. In recent years, he said, their efforts to secure funding commitments from the Provincial Council were unsuccessful.

In March 2009, Mohammed was elected by members of the community to serve on their local Community Action Group. As part of the CAG, he received training on participatory needs identification and prioritization, project development and implementation, budgeting and identifying cost-share, and monitoring and evaluation. Most useful, Mohammed said, was the training module focused on engaging government officials and soliciting support for community-led projects.

“What we learned in this session changed our style of communicating with

government officials,” he said. “Previously, we faced challenges in our interactions with members of the Provincial Council and other key decision makers. After the training, we were able to unify ourselves and provide consistent messages from everyone in the community about our needs.”

According to Mohammed, this new level of community organization and improved communication skills paid off. “We have learned new, modern methods of advocacy. We have techniques and motivation to follow up our projects, and we are able to engage the Provincial Council for approval of projects that meet our community’s urgent needs.” Working cooperatively with their elected officials, the Sabkhat Arab CAG members were able to secure approvals for four community-led projects to be included in the Basra Provincial Council’s annual plan for 2010. Thanks to Mohammed’s new skills, he says he is proud to have been instrumental in bringing the promise of a new school, a microcredit project for widows, rehabilitation of neighborhood roads, and the establishment of a new sewage system to his community in the coming years.



Activity # 9.3.1.2: Training of CAGs

Mercy Corps provided intensive training to 286 CAG ⁵members from all 161 CAGs. The training provided the CAGs with needed skills to identify and prioritize projects, lobby for additional funding, and oversee implementation. These skills will be essential for the sustainability of the program as the CAGs mobilize resources from the government and external sources.

Mercy Corps provided hands-on training in identifying and selecting projects including: assessment, ranking, identifying cost share, project prioritization, engaging local government and conducting site visits. These hands-on trainings usually took the form of coaching and mentoring by Mercy Corps mobilizers during community assessment, identification, prioritization and selection of project, documenting cost share, preparing the budget and bills of quantity (BoQs).

Training topics included:

1. Participatory assessment, inclusion and identification of common problems;
2. Project prioritization and design; Budgeting and identification of cost-share;
4. Project implementation, monitoring, and evaluation, procurement;
5. Skills for engagement with local government: participation in elections, advocacy and lobbying for community priorities, and impact of the PPA on community – government relations.
6. Joint-Action Plan development

Surveys conducted one month after training found that on average, **62%** of CAG members reported using their training skills to meet community needs, and were able to give examples on how they utilized their new skills. Examples included forming a joint taskforce with sub-district councils to prepare plans for 2010; prepare project proposals and send to donors such as IOM and UNOP; forming committees to monitor projects; advocating with groups of community leaders to amend the retiring and pension system; pressuring the directorate of electricity to supply transformers to a village in Thi Qar governorate; CAG and community leaders lobbying the municipality of Al Warka district to allocate land to construct a new primary school, a land which was originally assigned to build an upscale shopping market; creating a group of notables and community leaders to communicate with the provincial council with the aim of drafting legislation to allocate monthly financial assistance to widows and other vulnerable minorities; and CAG of Garbat Bani Saed convincing their provincial council to include construction of a health centre in their sub district in the FY013 budget plan.

⁵ The total number of CAG participants in trainings was 856. To derive the number of unique CAG participants, we have divided this number by 3, as we can estimate that each CAG member attended three trainings.

CAG members, along with engineers from Mercy Corps and the Department of Transportation in Muthanna, inspect progress on the construction of a pedestrian bridge in Al-Barbara village of Al-Warka'a sub-district. CAG members obtain experience in project implementation and monitoring and evaluation of municipal projects, building their skills as community leaders.



Due to the high levels of poverty at the hayy level within the city centers of Basra, Amara, Samawa and Nassiriya—combined with the fact that hayy-level governance members have no access to monies coming from the Provincial levels (unlike nahiya and qadda members)—Mercy Corps added an additional training objective under the CAP III modified workplan to offer an additional series of hayy action planning training to 350 CAG members representing 100 hayys, enabling them to prioritize their community needs and develop proposals for funding based on those needs. Since these hayys do not fall within the jurisdiction of any of the officially recognized qaddas and nahiyas, Mercy Corps invited officials from local directorates and provincial government representatives for local affairs to participate in the trainings. These trainings offered assistance and direction to CAG members from the targeted hayys on project selection, design and budgeting.

CAGs also learned from each other, through exchange visits focused on sharing best practices in advocacy and project identification, design and implementation. For example, the Al Siba GAG and LC from Basra visited the Kumait CAG and LC in Maysan, and CAG and LC members from Al-Bat Haa Sub-district in Thi Qar were visited by their counterparts in Al-Sewer Sub-district in Muthanna.

Sub-IR 9.2.1. Communities better able to mobilize resources within the community to meet their articulated needs

CAGs were able to secure match or written pledges for \$763,108 in community cost share, and \$25,379,705 in local government share, continuing promising trends in community and government project investment. Match contributions were in the form of land, materials and equipment, and the provision of general labor and technical staff for project activities. This cost share ensures community and government ownership of the projects, as well as a commitment to both sustaining existing projects and continuing to work together on future projects. Government matches in the form of equipment and technical expertise came from the electricity, water resources, transportation, education, youth and sport, and health Technical Directorates, as well as Sub-district councils.

Objective 2: Local executive and representative government in CAP communities better meet the articulated needs of the community

Sub-IR 9.2.2. Nahiya officials better able to mobilize resources outside the community to meet needs

247 local government officials⁶, including Local Council and Technical Directorate members, received training that will allow them to successfully advocate for funding at the provincial and federal level, as well as with external sources. These trainings focused on advocacy skills and the development of Joint-Action Plans along with communities. Skills gained included needs identification and prioritization, project development and implementation, and budgeting among others. Sixty-four percent of the local government members who received training reported that they used their new skills to meet community needs, and could give examples.



At the the Teachers' College in Nassiriya, more than 700 teachers will receive valuable training through a new phonetics lab. Local council officials and CAG members successfully secured the contribution of a generator valued at \$20,000 from the Thi Qar Department of Education to provide the lab with reliable power.

⁶ There was a total of 740 Local Council participants in trainings. To derive the number of unique LC participants we have divided this number by 3, as we can estimate that each LC member attended, on average, 3 trainings

In addition, the majority of CAGs contain representatives from local government. This ensures that the council members are getting hands on training in identifying and selecting projects including assessment, ranking, identifying cost share, project prioritization, engaging local government and conducting site visits. In addition, they are learning about community engagement and through the CAG, are working directly with members of their communities.

Training topics were identified through a capacity building needs survey conducted with 52 Districts and Sub-districts so that training could be tailored to individual council's needs. Findings indicated that most of the LCs lacked capacity in areas such as project planning, design, budget preparation, mechanisms for engaging higher level government, and monitoring and evaluation.

In coordination with Partners-Jordan, an Amman-based NGO, the advocacy workshops brought together CAG, local council, and technical directorate representatives to learn about advocacy and networking. The trainings then focused on practical application. The participants worked in groups to generate advocacy workplans that were implemented with support from Mercy Corps



Mercy Corps staff was trained to provide these technical workshops through Train the Trainer events conducted during Year 1. Kay Spearman from International City Managers Association ("ICMA") led a ToT with 21 Mercy Corps staff and six ICMA staff, along with six Iraqi academics from Basra University. The training covered training techniques for interactive workshops that use methods conducive to adult learning. These techniques, guided discussions, ice breakers, brainstorming, small group activities, case studies, role play, games and simulations and the use of written exercises were used by the participants when they conducted training for local districts and sub-districts. In addition, a capacity building workshop was held with U.S. expert trainer Susan Glassford to teach Mercy Corps staff the content of the capacity building training they later delivered to local sub-district councils and CAGs. Twenty-seven Mercy Corps staff from all four governorates were joined by two Iraqi academics from Basra University at the 3 day training held in Basra. This training of trainers was focused on project content, budgeting, project planning and design, and monitoring and evaluation and advocacy. Participants learned the content of the trainings, and were instructed on best methods by which to pass the information on to local sub-district councils and CAGs.

The Joint-Action Plan trainings laid the groundwork for all project identification and implementation. At the end of the trainings, each district and sub-district had an action plan and had developed project proposals. The action plans included short-term community goals, a

summary list of proposals, and a list of follow-up activities and responsibilities assigned to specific members to secure funding such as: organizing a community meeting, match identification, mobilizing local resources, finalizing the proposal, obtaining necessary approvals and authorizations, submitting proposals to the directorates, provincial councils and other donors, and following up on submitted proposals. Project proposals were then presented by local government officials in their communities for feedback and approval through open meetings and discussions with other community leaders and members. Final proposals were the result of communication and consultation between CAG members and their communities.

Local government officials also showed marked improvement in their advocacy skills with higher levels of provincial government funding following participation in trainings. During the last quarter local councils brought a total of 290 community-identified projects to the Provincial Councils for approval. 157 (54%) of those projects received approvals from the PCs as part of the 2011 provincial budgets. In addition, Joint-Planning Sessions have become a part of the annual budgetary process for many Local Councils, including both the CAG and community leaders in budget preparatory processes.



Kareem Kateh is 44 years old, and has lived in Al Sewer sub-district for his entire life. He couldn't complete his primary school education because the nearest school was about 5 kilometers away. He has since worked as a farmer, making a good living, and was able to buy a large plot of land for his family. However, he also has five daughters who, like him, cannot attend school regularly. He has appealed to the local government to construct a school in the area, but none has been built. When his sub-district formed a CAG in 2009, he was nominated because of his dedication to education.

This quarter, a project was approved to construct a 3-classroom annex and restroom facilities of the existing Jabir Al Ansary Primary School, to be located near where Kareem Kateh lives. He donated the land for the project, saying: "Nothing equals education."

Significant successes of the improved local government advocacy include a substantial government match for a \$2.8 million mobile electric unit which serves the Medaina and Eiz El-Saleem Marshes areas of Basra. The match was provided by the local Directorate of Electricity, as part of a project initiated by a CAG to upgrade the electricity network in Al Medaina district to extend services to poor neighborhoods in the Marshes areas. Local government were also able to have improved and effective coordination with the Basra Provincial Council and other NGOs to ameliorate the water crisis in 2009. The BPC was able to directly secure funding from the Prime Minister's office in Baghdad for the installation of four water treatment plants in Basra governorate.

Central to the process of successfully securing funds from PCs for locally promoted projects has been the partnership between Mercy Corps and the other USAID implementing partners in South Iraq, RTI/LGP III and MSI/Tatweer. Through regular coordination meetings and working sessions, partners coordinated to assist their local beneficiaries in effectively performing their role in the USAID governance framework and achieving tangible results, as demonstrated by the inclusion of community projects in the 2011 PC budgets in Basra, Muthanna and Thi Qar. This would not likely have been achieved if not for the coordination among the implementing partners and the oversight and support of the regional USAID representatives.

CAGs and LCs have not just been successful at securing contributions from community and government sources, but have also had the opportunity to begin securing funds from external donors. Building off productive meetings held in Year Two with Community Liaison Officers from Shell Oil Company, the community of Al Nashwa worked to develop a project constructing a family park. There was a great deal of coordination among the local council, CAG, and other community leaders with Shell representatives to successfully implement the project, using skills developed through the USAID/Iraq Community Action Program. Through this process, community leaders and local government officials learn the basics of public-private partnerships and begin to engage the third element of a functioning civil society – the business community. They also obtain experience with and exposure to a broader variety of international donors, a skill-set that will have long-term, sustainable results. Additional projects prioritized by CAGs and funded by oil companies include a women's sewing co-op in Al Zubair, Basra Governorate funded by BP, and school rehabilitations in Al Nashwa and Abu Ghareeb funded by Shell and Schlumberger.



Representatives from Shell Oil Company and Al Nashwa community preside over the opening ceremony for the family park and solar lighting installation.

Sub-IR 9.3.2. Nahiyas better articulate needs

Mercy Corps continues to engage local government in all aspects of project prioritization, planning, and implementation as well as conducting regular meetings with local government officials to introduce and obtain support for local CAGs. Through quarterly outreach meetings between local councils and community members, government officials are better equipped to relay community needs to higher levels of government and are more in touch with their constituents. Throughout the program, Mercy Corps **facilitated 223 community outreach meetings** in Districts and Sub-districts throughout the USAID/Iraq Community Action Program AoR. Community members have expressed appreciation for the opportunity to better understand councils' operations, priorities and challenges, and to voice concerns and needs to elected officials. Council members have cited the benefits of increased understanding of community needs through this information-sharing process, as it enables them to better convey community priorities to Provincial Councils. Community outreach meetings were typically attended by an average of 35 persons, and frequently included PC members, mayors, representatives of technical directorates, and CAG and community members. Through these meetings, both LCs and ordinary citizens put the concepts of accountability and transparency into practice.



Outreach meetings throughout the four southern governorates continue to be an effective way to engage communities and encourage communication between local governments and their constituents. The meetings are organized with coordination between Community Action Groups and local councils, and provide a platform for area residents to ask questions, discuss challenges, and learn about progress in their communities.



In Quarter 7, 213 local council officials, and 200 representatives of technical directorates/departments at the district and sub-district level, participated in a two-day training session on Participatory Planning, Project Design and Budgeting, where they completed modules on: participatory planning and budgeting; strategies for communities, sub-districts, districts and local directorates to work together to plan and design projects and develop budgets that reflect the needs and demands of the community; the role of citizen participation in the preparation of budgets; and the relationship between strategic planning and budgeting. Suggestions that came from the training and were later put into practice included:

- Establish channels for citizens to share opinions, provide officials with input, and make officials accountable for prior promises in a safe and comfortable manner. Outreach meetings and the sub-district portals are two examples of these safe, participatory channels.
- Activate citizens and professional unions, associations, and organizations to ensure that citizens' rights are ensured, with awareness campaigns as a primary mechanism
- Hold regular and more frequent coordination meetings for local council and directorates to review issues and community needs, and identify opportunities for coordination. Coordination meetings between Technical Directorates and local elected officials are now held monthly
- Ensure that local council and directorate officials perform initial coordination before joint activities and that approvals are exchanged between entities before project implementation begins.
- Strive to work cooperatively on all projects in an open, democratic manner with respect for opinions, priorities and limitations of both sides. Rely on the Iraqi Constitution and law in resolving problems and legal matters.
- Seek and/or coordinate additional trainings for local councils and heads of technical departments.
- Lobby Provincial Council to give appropriate authority to local councils as stipulated in Law 21. Promote the concept of constituent representation and the importance of meeting community needs to higher levels of government.
- Be proactive in inviting Provincial Council members to coordination meetings and trainings to obtain their support and assistance in establishing solutions. Change the typical culture of local councils sharing problems in a non-solutions-focused way. Following this suggestion, Provincial Council members were invited to subsequent trainings.

As one means of facilitating information-sharing, Mercy Corps and Lebanese-based NGO IJMA3 worked with a small group of local councils from Nashwa, Safwan and Um Qasr sub-districts in Basra to pilot a web-based online portal providing information about local councils' operations and priority projects for citizens. The pilot also included training for local council officials in basic ICT skills to help facilitate better documentation and information management. Following the pilot, the initiative was expanded to include six districts and eight sub-districts in Basra during quarter eight.



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Through this process, local councils built basic skills and learned innovative ways to share information with constituents and increase transparency and accountability. The trained LC members are responsible for creating and maintaining websites for their sub-district or district.

The sites improve communication and information sharing among the local councils, as well as with constituents.

Objective 3: Civilian victims of conflict are assisted by the Marla Ruzicka Innocent Victims of War Fund

Mercy Corps identified and assisted civilian victims of conflict through support to persons with disability centers, and individual medical and income grants. Overall over **19,000** beneficiaries received support, including **100** income assistance grants and **6** medical assistance grants. Income assistance grants primarily provided economic opportunities through small business kick-start grants for minimarts, furniture stores, and repair shops, etc.

Materials and equipment were donated to the Basra Orthotics and Prosthetics Center, and 100 civilian victims of war were identified and encouraged to utilize the center. 100 wheelchairs were donated to a PWD center and Basra, and a wheelchair fit education session was funded.

The Psychological Service Center at the Basra Primary Health Care Directorate was also reconstructed. Damaged during 2008 conflict, the new facility provides mental health services for an estimated 15,000 Basra-area youth.



One of the 100 PWDs in Basra that received wheelchairs through the Marla Fund



Dar Al-Hikma building at Basra University (left), which was damaged during Iraqi military-militia fighting in 2003, was reconstructed and renamed the new Marla Ruzicka Memorial Hall. The building is one of Basra University's premier conference facilities, hosting a variety of academic and community events. It also provides office space for faculty in the college of humanities, as well as research facilities for postgraduate students.

Mercy Corps commissioned an assessment of local NGOs with the purpose of identifying Iraqi organizations who demonstrated sufficient potential to serve as Marla Fund partners, to carry out functions including identification of Marla Fund recipients, awarding Marla Funds for qualified

individuals, implementation of Marla Fund projects, and monitoring of awards. The assessment report provided results of the organizational capacity assessment undertaken with five selected local NGOs; identified the highest rated organization that could potentially serve as a Marla Fund partner; gave a synopsis of strengths and weaknesses of the other four lower rated organizations; and highlighted areas still requiring capacity development for the highest rated organization. Bahjat Al-Fouad, a local NGO, was identified as most suitable to be a partner for Marla activities, and led implementation of the program. Bahjat Al-Fouad assisted in identifying and screening cases, collecting necessary documents, conducting monitoring visits and keeping records of individuals assisted by the Marla fund.

Kifaya's Story

Life for 36-year-old Kifaya Sabri has never been easy, as far as she can remember. The second-oldest of six children, Kifaya's father died when she was eleven years old. Her mother was required to take up work on nearby farms to support the family, forcing Kifaya to drop out of primary school to help manage the household. The little education she had received was soon forgotten, as she had no opportunity to exercise her developing skills in reading, writing and arithmetic. In a short time, Kifaya had become one of many of Iraq's illiterate women.



Since then, Kifaya has been married and divorced, and now lives at home with her mother and sisters again. Her entire life, she says, has been nothing but housework. When she learned about the literacy program, she was eager to join – she longed for a change of routine, and for the opportunity to build new relationships. Her brothers objected. They said she was too old to attend school, that she wouldn't be able to keep up or understand the lessons. She managed to convince them to let her begin the program. As they saw her learning to read and write, they finally supported her and encouraged her to continue with her studies.

The program's curriculum on human rights made an impression on Kifaya. "Now I know that education is my right, and that I have a lot of rights. In the future, if someone prevents me from my rights, I will not be silent." She trusts herself more than she did in the past, she says, with the confidence of a literate woman. She participates in political and social discussions, because she feels educated. "My children will not be illiterate like me. They will be educated, and will be good citizens. My children will be something – lawyers, or doctors, or teachers. From their positions, they will do something good for Iraq."

Significance of these Activities and Findings

The CAP III program has had a tangible effect both through the countless infrastructure and advocacy projects implemented, and the increased levels of trust and accountability between communities and government at the local level. An external evaluation of the program was conducted in May 2012 by Mercy Corps, and the results are summarized below. This evaluation showed that the CAP III program has had an impact on many of the communities in which it has operated, and that stakeholders attest to the fact that the program has created a stronger perception of connection between the community and the local government. Additionally, when looked at from a different lens, one can see that the program has been successful in bringing development projects to communities and areas that might not have been reached if another approach or method had been employed. The establishment of the CAG, and the inclusion of the community, allowed Mercy Corps to more easily identify the development needs of the communities saving them time, energy, and money.

Communities Involved in Development Prioritization

The prioritization of development projects was said to have mostly occurred at CAG meetings or meetings held by the local council. Most of the community members noted that these decisions were usually made by community leaders, albeit most often after having consulted with community members. While most CAG members testified that the community was involved in this process, only half of the community members interviewed said that they had indeed participated in the establishment of such a plan. Despite evidence of the non-inclusive nature of CAP III in CAP targeted areas, community members did say that they believed that they were more involved in deciding development projects in their community than they had been in the past.



In coordination with CAGs and local government, Mercy Corps continued to build much needed infrastructure projects. The 63 approved this quarter included youth centers, water wells, bridges and schools. The community of Al Resala will benefit from this new pedestrian bridge (Photo, above) which received significant positive public attention and reduced traffic fatalities.

CAGs Mostly Seen Positively

The CAG was seen by the stakeholders as, first and foremost, a link between the community and the local government. Mercy Corps staff estimated that about 50% of the CAGs were performing these functions well, with the other 50% said not to be functioning well.

Mixed Views of the Relationship between the CAG and the Community

More than two thirds of the CAGs said that they had a strong or very strong working relationship with the community. The community members, however, were slightly less positive about their relationship with the CAG, including those who had no information about the CAG's existence or purpose. Only about half of the community members reported that they participated in CAG meetings. Those who did attend, however, felt as though they were generally able to actively contribute and participate in the meetings.

Relationship between the CAG and the Local Government Evaluated by Most as Strong

In terms of the relationship that has been established between the CAG and the local government, the CAGs are quite positive about it, with over 80% of them labeling the relationship as a "strong" or "very strong" one. This was echoed by 90% of the local council members. However, community members did not feel entirely the same, with only half indicating that they thought the CAG and local government worked well together.

Relationship between the Local Government and the Community Improves

The relationship between the local government and the community was evaluated by the local council members to be positive, with just over 80% of the local council member FGD groups finding the relationship to be either a "very strong" or "strong" working relationship. Community members generally supported this evaluation. Almost two thirds of the community FGD groups indicated that the relationship they had with the local councils had gotten "much better" or "somewhat better" than prior to the implementation of the program, with most of the remaining groups saying that it had "stayed the same." Aside from approving and helping to fund some development projects prioritized by the communities, the local government was also viewed positively because it was perceived by the community members as being more open to, and interested in, their needs.



Jabbar Esmael, 48, is the Deputy Local Council Head in Al-Najmi Sub-district. Esmael attended a CAP advocacy training and used these skills to identify stakeholders and form a coalition to push for a higher budget. His results were successful and the 2012 allocated budget for the Sub-district was tripled.

CAGs Mostly Chosen by the Community, but not Always Representative

The establishment of CAGs was generally agreed to have been conducted by the community either electing or selecting CAG members to represent them. A small percentage, one third of the CAGs, were said to have been selected without the participation of the community. The inclusiveness does not appear to have been all-encompassing with only 29 of the 354 CAG members in the evaluation sample being female, and only 26 being youth. In half of the CAGs, not a single woman was listed as a member, much less an active member. Local council members were, however, well represented on the CAGs, with 48% of all CAG members serving this dual role.

IDP and Vulnerable Populations

The Community Action Program sought to promote inclusiveness of all community members regardless of religion, age, and/or IDP status. CAGs were formed in smaller neighborhoods, either remote or in city centers, that had previously been neglected by the government.

Twenty-four projects were targeted specifically at improving the lives of 10,000 people with disabilities through awareness campaigns and supply projects. CAGs participated in the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, the International Day of the Disabled, and led a week of activities commemorating children with hearing problems. Advocacy and sensitization campaigns taught communities the struggles of PWDs, while reducing harassment and violence. Finally, A CAG was formed to specifically address the needs of PWDS in Basra Governorate.

Over the course of CAP III, \$13 million dollars of USAID funds have been used for programs targeted at vulnerable groups. This includes \$1 million for IDP targeted programs, \$200,000 for female head of household targeted programs, and almost \$12 million for youth targeted projects. In total, 653 projects reached almost 900,000 vulnerable beneficiaries.

Over \$800,000 in USAID funds have been given to vulnerable Marla beneficiaries. This includes almost \$400,000 for civilian victim of war families with a female head of household.

Mercy Corps did not track religion or other differentiating characteristics, so we have no data on minority populations served by the program. However anecdotal evidence from minority religious CAG members suggests that by being part of the CAG, they were accepted more as members of the community.



The Persons with Disabilities CAG in Al Jazaer, Basra Governorate meet to discuss priorities for PWD and community integration

Comments and Recommendations

It was evident that the projects that were implemented through the program did help to create a stronger perception of connection between the community members and their local government. While not all of their proposed development projects were implemented, on the whole, those that were implemented appear to have increased the community members' belief that the government was able to have a positive impact on their lives, and that they were interested in serving their constituents. The projects implemented were also seen as creating legitimacy for the CAG and helping establish trust in Mercy Corps as an NGO that was able to deliver development projects.

Many of the CAGs sampled in the external evaluation were seen as helping to link the government and the communities, as was evidenced by the implemented projects. The generally positive relationships between the CAG members and the government, supported by an overlap in members, helped to create channels of communication, which allowed for community development priorities to be heard and taken into consideration. While some communities were able to directly relate to their local government, this was not always the case and, therefore, the CAGs helped to serve many communities and was probably necessary in this transitional phase in Iraq. Whether their existence will persist or needs to persist is, however, not entirely clear. The communities, the CAGs, and the local councils were mostly positive about the idea of the CAGs continuing to work, but not all were sure that the CAGs would be sustainable after the program completion in September 2012.

Shaikh Younis spent fifty years dreaming of a paved road to his village. "I was very concerned that destiny would call me before seeing my road changed for the better," he said. At 65 years old, Shaikh Younis of AL-Ashchan village has spent many years suffering



due to the horrific condition of his village road. No cars could drive on it, so he spent two hours walking on the rutted, slippery road to access health care, schools, and the market. Shaikh Younis has watched as his community has suffered from their limited access to the outside world. Villagers cannot easily transport their agricultural crops to the market, and most have very low incomes. But it is not just the lack of access to social services and economic opportunities that has depressed Shaikh Younis's community. His tribe has a long tradition of engaging with neighboring communities, something

that has become almost impossible as Al-Ashchan village became more and more isolated. "The road helped us in everything. We were like dead people before the road was paved. Despite my many years gone, I have now come back to life. We regard the new road as a new life we have gotten. Now our products, children, and workers are all able to reach their work, schools, and markets."

Prior to the fall of the Saddam regime, local communities had little say in development or in governance in general. There was a wide gap that existed between the people and their government representatives, even at the local level. CAP III utilized the CAG to bridge this gap, and its success in some communities indicates that the CAG can be a useful tool to create such a connection in this kind of setting. However, as local government officials begin to feel a greater sense of responsibility towards the people, and the people feel more empowered to make demands of their government, it appears as though for some communities the CAG was an intermediary necessity that does not need to become a permanent fixture, as community members are directly addressing their concerns with the local government. That being said, functioning CAGs do serve an important function in that they help gather the community together to discuss their problems and prioritize them. If CAGs are going to be seen as temporary, then permanent means of development prioritization need to be established within the community to ensure that this vital function is still being carried out once the CAGs have disappeared. Otherwise, it is quite likely that the priorities of only certain segments of the community will be relayed to the appropriate local authorities.



Sadiq, 45, is a local council member in Muthanna. His community's school was located across a main road from the residences, leading to the loss of ten children over the past few years, including Sadiq's nephew. Sadiq rallied his village to donate land for a school annex, but the project was repeatedly delayed by the Directorate of Education. Recently he attended an advocacy skills workshop for local council members offered by the CAP program. He used those skills to lobby with the DoE, and now the new school annex is under construction. Sadiq comes to the construction site every week to ensure that the project, his dream, is progressing smoothly.

The Mercy Corps Mobilizers were able to point out that CAP has brought new infrastructure and other development to projects that they believe could not have happened without the project. One of them succinctly stated, "Without the CAP and [the] CAG lots of projects that we see would not have been seen today in these communities."⁷ The establishment of CAGs allowed not only the government, but also Mercy Corps to more easily identify the development needs of the communities in which the program was implemented, saving them time, energy, and money.

⁷ Mobilizer KII conducted in Dhi Qar May 10, 2012.

Productive relationships between communities and elected leaders:

CAP III has been able to help build productive relationships between many CAGs and locally elected government officials—though some of the credit for the positive relationships that have been built should be given to the overlap of members between the two groups. **The trainings conducted for both of these stakeholders were evaluated positively by the CAG members and the local government officials in the external evaluation.** They felt that Mercy Corps, through CAP III, provided them with new information and news ways of working, including reinforcing the need to include the opinions of the people the government is supposed to serve. This can be evidenced by the perception amongst all of the CAP III stakeholders – community members, CAG members, and local government officials – that a greater number of development projects that were prioritized by the community were implemented in the time during which CAP III was implemented. The joint trainings provided by MC also allowed these two stakeholders to better understand one another and to build trust. Their joint meetings further assisted in establishing good working relations between many of the CAGs and the local government.

Active engagement of communities by local authorities:

By utilizing their relationship with the CAG, many local government officials were able to actively consider the needs and desires of the communities they represented. Communities that were involved in the prioritization of the development projects they wanted implemented were therefore able to influence decisions and activities that affected their lives. Communities were also generally involved in the selection or election of the CAG members, which means that they were actively making decisions about the individuals who would represent them and their needs to the government, which is one form of participation.



20 representatives from local councils in Thi Qar display their certificates after a Tendering and Contracting workshop

There was generally a positive shift seen with how responsive the local council was to community development needs. Local government officials were seen as being more open to listening to community opinions whether they came through the CAGs or directly from the communities themselves. The development subprojects were often discussed as the main way in which the government was showing this greater concern for community needs. Local government trainings and the greater collaboration and sharing of information during CAP III supported meetings were seen as contributing to the government’s increased direct involvement with the problems put forward by the people. Having larger budgets also likely played a role in the ability of the government to respond to community needs, but in general there is the sense that CAP III helped government officials feel that it was important to take community needs into consideration, and also provided them with the means to learn about community needs via the establishment of the CAGs and the setting up of joint meetings.

Effectiveness of community projects in promoting good governance:

Overall, many projects that were implemented during CAP III were strongly related to the needs the communities had prioritized, and many were implemented with financial assistance from the government. For over 90% of subprojects implemented through CAP III, community members indicated that they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the projects. This was supported by their testimony that they provided some kind of contribution to over 80% of the projects.

These projects in turn led the community members to feel more positively about the local government. Many communities said that they felt that their relationship with the government had improved, with only a few indicating that their relationship with the government had not changed. When asked to provide examples to support their belief that their relationship with the government had improved, community members most often provided examples of different projects that the local government helped them to implement either through providing their approval, support, and/or funding. It is possible that knowing the extent of the number of projects that were supported in cash, in labor, in land, or in materials by the government would even further increase the communities’ belief in the government.

USAID/Iraq Community Action Program: Skills in Action

In Thi Qar governorate, the Municipality Directorate of Al Batha’a was implementing a new project paving streets and sidewalks in the city center of the sub-district. While digging up the ground for paving, the main water pipe was accidentally broken by the machinery. This caused a serious water shortage, primarily affecting the northern part of the sub-district. The Al Batha’a CAG took an active role in approaching the Water and Municipality Directorates to discuss how to address this.

Normally, this process takes a long time – first, approval must be acquired to stop the ongoing work, and then the water directorate’s approval is needed to actually fix the problem. Meanwhile, families and households were struggling to meet their water needs. In the end, the quick work of the CAG meant that the approval to stop the project and then fix the pipe took a mere two days. Subsequently, the water network was restored to the northern part of the sub-district, thanks to the cooperation between the CAG and local council authorities.

Recommendations:

CAP implementers and funders need to internalize and plan for the variable nature of participatory development programs. While a participatory approach that includes everyone in a community, even those who are regularly not included in decision-making, might be applicable in one community, it might have little chance of succeeding in another. This variability and the need for a team to remain flexible and cognizant of who is participating in each community are vital. This requires a strong understanding of the Mercy Corps team and of the importance of full inclusion and participation of all community members, along with guidelines illustrating different approaches to creating space for such participation. The inclusive nature of CAP III has been shown to be lacking on several levels. In some communities, there was little awareness of the program or of the CAG that was meant to connect with community members to provide a means for their inclusion in the decision-making process. It is possible that including more time in the program implementation timeframe for mobilizing the community could allow the implementing team to effectively engage more members of the communities. This would of course require working with the donor to rethink the speed with which quantifiable results, such as projects completed, can be expected.

In the majority of CAP III communities women were excluded from participating, based upon customs and traditions. Greater efforts to include women should be made, taking into consideration such customs and traditions. A Mercy Corps Mobilizer told the evaluation team that in one of the communities he works in, the women held separate meetings to discuss development issues. While this is not the ideal way for women to be included, it is better than having them completely excluded.

In general, it is possible that having a more standardized approach to, and monitoring of, the establishment of CAGs and the inclusion of community members could increase the level of participation. This has been done in other participatory programs, and can be as simple as requiring a certain percentage of the population to be involved at different stages of the project. For example, in one participatory development program in Afghanistan, the selection of the community development council must be made by at least 60% of the population to be considered legitimate. This was intended to increase the percentage of women included in the decision-making. While communities have found ways to work around this requirement, it has still managed to raise the issue of gender inclusion right at the start of the project.

The CAGs have played an essential role in increasing citizen engagement with their government, improving community involvement and ownership of their neighborhoods, and increasing trust between government and citizens. Some of these CAGs will continue to play a strong role in advocating for external funding, particularly with oil companies and the burgeoning private sector in Southern Iraq. The rich experience of community members and government officials with CAGs can be utilized to develop and strengthen civil society. The CAGs have created an opening for civil society within the previously closed government, and normalized civic engagement. Civil society organizations now have to build upon their basic organizational development and advocacy skills to ensure that the government listens to the communities, and responds to their needs.