COMMUNITY COHESION INITIATIVE (CCI)

MID-TERM PERFORMANCE EVALUATION REPORT

MARCH 2012 – DECEMBER 2013

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Measuring Impact of Stabilization Initiatives (MISTI)

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ACRONYMS AND OTHER ABBREVIATIONS

AGE	Antigovernment element
ASI	Afghanistan Stabilization Initiative
CCI	Community Cohesion Initiative
CDC	Community Development Council
COIN	counterinsurgency
DDA	District Development Assembly
DOWA	Department of Women's Affairs
DG	District Governor
DGO	District Governor's Office
FY	Fiscal Year
FER	Final Evaluation Report
GIRoA	Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
GL	green light
IP	implementing partner
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MISTI	Measuring Impacts of Stabilization Initiatives
MSI	Management Systems International
OPPD	Office of Program and Project Development
OTI	Office of Transition Initiatives
OTIA	OTI Anywhere
PG	Provincial Governor
PGO	Provincial Governor's Office
PDU	Program Development Unit
SOW	scope of work
SP	service provider
SRS	Strategy Review Session
SWIFT	Support Which Implements Fast Transitions
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
YL	yellow light

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The evaluation team would like to thank the Afghans interviewed across the county for their work to support their communities and governance – as well as for their openness to discussing difficult subjects like community relations and engagement with government officials with the field researchers.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) awarded the OTI Afghanistan Program, later named the Community Cohesion Initiative (CCI), to Creative Associates International, Inc. (Creative) under the Support Which Implements Fast Transitions III (SWIFT III) mechanism. The Task Order started on March 1, 2012 and is planned to continue through February 28, 2015. Intended as a follow-on to OTI's Afghanistan Stabilization Initiative (ASI), which was designed to support the expanded International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) effort to stabilize key terrain districts viewed as a priority in countering the insurgency, CCI was developed through the lens of 'resilience', defined in *USAID's Policy and Program Guidance: Building Resilience to Recurrent Crisis* as, "the ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth."

Since 2012, the program has been reviewed several times internally by OTI through regular Strategy Review Sessions (SRS) and Program Performance Review (PPR) processes. To augment these processes, the scope of work (SOW) for this evaluation specifies that the mid-term performance evaluation should focus on a set of questions about how CCI has been implemented in the field - and not reassess issues that have already been reviewed multiple times through OTI's internal processes.

This mid-term evaluation is an opportunity to gather and use independently collected field information to document CCI's successes, challenges, and lessons learned in implementation to influence the remaining period of the program. The evaluation only examines CCI activities implemented by Creative; subsequent OTI awards to the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and International Organization for Migration (IOM) under the rubric of CCI were excluded by the SOW and are not examined in this report. CCI's more recent national-level programming and the work of the National Program Development Unit (PDU) also fall outside of the SOW. The scope of work focuses the fieldwork on community-based grants over a specific time period: CCI grants and processes from Fiscal Year (FY) 2013 and a few months following that period, September 2012 to December 2013. Over most of this period, the program had two objectives:

Objective 1. Strengthening ties between local actors, customary governance structures, and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA); and

Objective 2. Increasing cohesion among and between communities by bringing communities together through projects to address common needs.

The Creative CCI project revised its objectives in early FY 2014; performance towards these new objectives is not examined in this evaluation.

The MISTI team conducted fieldwork in all five provinces where CCI is focused (Ghazni, Kandahar, Helmand, Khost, and Kunar), and selected eight districts for fieldwork (Moqur, Qarabagh, Shamal, Marawara, Sarkani, Spin Boldak, Kandahar City, and Nahri Sarraj). Within these districts, interviews focused on a sample of CCI grants selected to capture variation in the timing of grant implementation, types of grants, and geographic locations.

The team focused its fieldwork on gathering data to answer seven evaluation questions specified in the SOW:

1. What role has the project *shura* mechanism played in the implementation of CCI projects, and what lessons can CCI learn from the *shura* process thus far?

2. Did implementation support the project's objective of strengthening ties between local actors, customary governance structures, and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA)?

3. Did CCI implementation support the project's objective of increasing cohesion among and between communities?

4. Do participants in CCI vocational training activities feel that they have, as a result of training provided by CCI, an increased potential to *improve their opportunities* for lawful employment?

5. Are public outreach efforts effective in communicating CCI activities to the communities where CCI is active? How is this communication perceived within the communities?

6. In activities where CCI has specified a target number of female beneficiaries, how successful have those activities been at meeting that target, and why is this the case?

7. What lessons can be drawn from CCI's implementation that are relevant to its continued implementation?

The evaluation team consisted of one MSI sub-contractor, Caerus Associates, expatriate monitoring and evaluation (M&E) Specialist, three Afghan MISTI M&E Advisors, based in Kabul, and five locally-hired Qualitative Evaluator consultants to conduct interviews in communities with CCI projects.

The Kabul-based team M&E Specialist analyzed project documents and conducted interviews with OTI and CCI management in Kabul and with their staff in Washington D.C. over the telephone. MISTI M&E Advisors travelled to all five provinces where CCI implements community-focused grants, and local Qualitative Evaluator consultants travelled to eight selected districts to view activities projects and interview stakeholders, beneficiaries, and community members. The evaluation team conducted the fieldwork in February and March 2014. MISTI M&E Advisors and Qualitative Evaluator consultants conducted 303 interviews with provincial and district CCI staff, provincial and district Afghan government officials, members of representative bodies, community elders, project beneficiaries, and other members of communities where CCI works.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Project *Shura*s

Project *shuras* are the main CCI method for involving communities in the implementation of in-kind grants. These project *shuras* should continue to be used for CCI in-kind grants that originate from community processes like Cohesion *Jirgas* and for projects that need substantial coordination in within and between communities, have potential security issues that can be addressed by community elders, have lengthy implementation that requires project monitoring and additional communications within the community, or has substantial contributions from the community that should be managed by the *shura*.

Some CCI projects have successfully had women members of project *shuras*. In some districts, project *shuras* were not used as much due to pervasive security concerns and provincial and district CCI staff being unfamiliar with the roles of *shuras* in CCI. Other projects did not use *shuras* in implementation. These activities were of short duration (e.g. International Women's Day) or were generated by Kabul CCI staff, implemented by service providers, and required less community engagement. CCI should continue to involve women in project *shura*s to fulfill the gender programming requirement in areas where project

*shura*s occur. In areas where they don't or in areas where these *shura*s are of a short duration, a stronger focus needs to be placed on involving women as their participation has been a successful result so far.

Strengthening Ties Between Local Actors, Customary Governance Structures, and GIRoA

CCI staff and GIRoA officials suggested that there were numerous cases where the implementation of CCI projects worked to bring district GIRoA officials closer to communities. These grants led to increased petitions from citizens to government as well as enabled district government officials to travel to what had been insecure areas. CCI should continue to link provincial and district-level GIRoA officials to CCI community grants as a successful method of strengthening ties between local actors, customary governance structures, and GIRoA officials.

Increasing Cohesion Among and Between Communities

CCI staff, GIRoA officials, stakeholders, beneficiaries, and community members were able to articulate a shared understanding of cohesion and connect this concept to the activities targeted by CCI grants. CCI staff and community members differentiated between grants targeting cohesion and those supporting strengthened ties between communities and GIRoA based on the origins of the ideas behind these grants; Cohesion grants were seen as the ones that came from community input through Cohesion *Jirga*s rather than originating with district government officials or CCI in Kabul. Implementation supported bringing communities together through projects to address common, shared needs of communities such as better transportation of goods and services through road rehabilitation or water via *karez* repair that connected communities and supported resilience.

CCI should continue to use Cohesion *Jirga*s, lauded as useful mechanisms by GIRoA officials and community members alike, to generate ideas and prioritize them through community-driven processes. CCI should consider repeating *jirgas* after implementing several projects in communities following initial Cohesion *Jirga*s to allow community-based mechanisms to assess priorities and how these have changed in the wake of CCI engagement and the implementation of several grants in the community.

CCI Vocational Training

Participants in CCI vocational training activities interviewed felt the trainings were useful and valuable, and a believed they improved potential opportunities for lawful employment. CCI staff, GIRoA officials, *shura* members, beneficiaries, and community members did not expect there to be a simple relationship where vocational training led to actual employment in a straightforward way. This was due to the limited prospects for employment in rural areas and district centers. Most CCI vocational training projects were selected by GIRoA line departments rather than the communities themselves; the selection of participants was also driven by these departments, which sometimes chose participants based on need - selecting households with greater needs for income, for example, for tailoring training for women - and at other times on their qualifications, such as for Kankor (college entry) exam training.

CCI should evaluate whether vocational training and provision of necessary materials as is done by CCI has enduring effects on communities that support continued grants in this area. If substantial effects on strengthened ties or increased cohesion are not found and plausibly connected to vocational training a year or more after the conclusion of these grants, CCI should consider no longer supporting these kinds of grants. MISTI conducts impact evaluations of CCI programming and substantial data concerning the effects of programming can be derived from successive waves of data collection and MISTI's analysis, particularly as more surveys are conducted over a longer time period. CCI should use MISTI's data and analyses to understand programming and geographic impact.

Direct implementation is preferred to service providers/implementing partners

Interviews frequently found criticism of CCI projects that were implemented by CCI partners through contracts. Staff, GIRoA officials, project *shura* members, and beneficiary criticisms centered on the performance of these service providers, who were often perceived as not really invested in the success of these projects or the community in which they were working. They were often accused of poor performance or criticized for low quality work.

CCI should consider using fewer service providers and conduct more direct implementation to achieve stronger performance and improve community perceptions of the work conducted – a process which is well underway in CCI implementation.

CCI Public Outreach Efforts

CCI public outreach efforts were effective in communicating CCI activities to the communities where CCI is active and this communication is on the whole perceived positively within communities. The visibility of project opening and closing ceremonies plays a large role in the perceived effectiveness of public outreach. CCI staff asserted that project communications were effective when many people attended CCI activities. Public outreach was seen to stimulate more demand for projects – both ones to support strengthening ties and for cohesion. Public outreach was also asserted to generate additional requests to GIRoA for assistance with community needs, which was viewed as successfully strengthening ties between communities and district government officials.

CCI should continue to insist that a robust public outreach effort be an integral part of all grant activities.

CCI should often use direct implementation for public outreach, as service providers that are not public relations firms do not have the same incentives to promote the activity as widely as CCI does and have in general not proven effective at producing and implementing outreach campaigns around their awards.

Meeting Female Beneficiary Targets

In activities where CCI has specified a target number of female beneficiaries, grant implementation has successfully met targets because there is a demand for training for women. This is the case in the districts where women's projects have been selected by line departments. Other communities have not had grants that target women because communities have not requested them; this can be the case even when CCI staff encourage projects that target women.

CCI should also continue to implement projects that target female beneficiaries when requested by district government officials or communities, when these activities clearly support project objectives, and when these grants can be implemented in culturally-appropriate ways. CCI staff should continue to explicitly ask community leaders about whether their priorities include projects that target women and girls to encourage communities to consider activities in this area. CCI should evaluate the effects of grants that have targeted female beneficiaries on strengthening ties between communities and district-level GIRoA officials and on community cohesion to understand and support any broader effects of these grants.

Starting at the District Center can Build Support for Reaching Further

CCI has often started to work at the district center, but implementing grants in more permissive areas can build support for reaching further through a step by step approach in a district that moves gradually to outlying villages, similar to the ink spot approach used in counterinsurgency.

CCI should work on expanding its reach to areas further away from the district center as there is enough momentum now to build support for reaching further out. Nahr Sarraj, for example, may be a district where CCI implementation shows this pattern and may now be ready to expand geographically.

Monitoring and Evaluation

CCI's systems for monitoring and evaluation lag and the project has not developed ways to regularly use lessons learned from grants in grant implementation. One key example is the processes CCI has to implement awards and close out existing grants. These tax current staff, especially M&E staff who are responsible for final evaluation report (FER) completion. OTI/CCI should better utilize its MVM&E contract to identify lessons learned to inform and improve future CCI grant programming.

OTI and Creative should also consider simplifying processes for reporting on community grants to ease CCI staff's work in this area and increase the use of information from grant implementation by CCI in other grants. CCI should also develop and use additional monitoring and evaluation capacity and methods to move more grants from completed to closed through Final Evaluation Reports and to develop methods to report on progress towards objectives through more than aggregate grant information. This could include more M&E staff, additional training for staff in CCI processes, and having some management staff tasked to institutionalize using lessons learned from implementation in the development and implementation of all new CCI grants.

It has also been challenging for OTI and Creative to anchor the program in a theory of change. Changing USG strategies and policies have made it difficult to develop a framework for the project, make it harder to implement the project, and have impeded linking CCI to broader development initiatives. CCI should be appropriately nested within the wider USAID and USG efforts across Afghanistan.

GIRoA Staff Turnover Demands Additional Information Sharing

There is rapid and extensive turnover of GIRoA staff in many parts of Afghanistan, perhaps especially in less secure districts such as the ones where Creative implements CCI. Rapid turnover makes it imperative for CCI staff to continuously communicate and coordinate with provincial and district government officials to support strengthening ties with communities and incorporate them into cohesion projects.

Challenged OTI/Creative Relationship

Relationships between OTI and Creative staff suffer from low levels of confidence and trust based on past experience, performance, and interaction. From the OTI side, staff were critical of Creative for the slow start of the program, which had very few community-based grants in implementation by September 2013, more than six months into the contract. From the Creative side, interviewees asserted that conflicting or not useful guidance and direction from OTI had led to what they agreed was an unacceptably slow start to CCI programming. This start has left OTI/Creative relationships challenged. Problems with trust and confidence - between Creative and OTI staff in Afghanistan and between Creative staff within CCI – have not been successfully addressed. Furthermore, continuity is important. CCI has had substantial staff turnover. High rates of staff turnover have been seen as negatively affecting the management of the project, making it difficult to build relationships with OTI, and adding to challenges in working with GIRoA authorities and Afghan communities.

It is important for program success going forward that these issues be resolved expeditiously as a strained relationship hinders performance.

Communities Seek More Infrastructure Activities

Insecure, remote areas of Afghanistan are some of the least developed areas on earth in terms of infrastructure. Participants in community-driven CCI processes in these districts and communities often sought infrastructure projects through CCI – both for new construction and rehabilitation. Communities prefer "hard" activities but USAID restrictions on support for new construction and CCI limitations on the size and composition of grants were frustrating to many stakeholders. The legislation that enables and authorizes USAID to expend resources is not going to change to enable small-scale community-based new construction. CCI's thresholds for grant size (including types of approvals required) and the

preference seen in some areas for "soft" process projects within the program are within OTI's managerial control.

CCI needs to ensure that field staff are able to brief GIRoA stakeholders and communities in clear, matter-of-fact language that the project will not support new construction – and move on to what can be done in rehabilitating infrastructure and support processes that bring communities and their government together and/or build cohesion. CCI should consider implementing more and larger community infrastructure projects in the areas where communities focused on and sought this kind of grant support to rehabilitate their infrastructure.

Conclusions

OTI developed CCI in a difficult period when USG strategies and partnerships with GIRoA were evolving. OTI and Creative have adapted and changed critical assumptions used in the program's design - from supporting ISAF to supporting the transition to Afghan governance. The findings of this evaluation suggest that CCI has been able to implement community-based grants in selected insecure and key districts of the country. While a number of activities met OTI's objectives, CCI has much room to improve its processes and effectiveness. Working in difficult, insecure districts, challenged OTI/CCI relationships, high staff turnover, and project processes that have not developed ways to use M&E and lessons learned systematically in implementation have, all combined, made implementation of this program particularly challenging.

INTRODUCTION

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) resumed work in Afghanistan in 2001 after the fall of the Taliban government. Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) staff deployed to Kabul in early January 2002 to support the post-Taliban transition. After four years, OTI's initial phase of programming in Afghanistan ended in 2005. With increased attention to Afghanistan and the military and civilian surge that deployed more U.S. government (USG) resources to the country in 2009, OTI returned to Afghanistan as part of USAID's support for this effort. OTI developed and contracted the Afghanistan Stabilization Initiative (ASI) to support the expanded International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) effort to stabilize key terrain districts that were a priority in the international community's efforts to counter the insurgency across the country. As the program drew to a close, OTI developed and contracted a follow-on OTI Afghanistan program, later named the Community Cohesion Initiative (CCI), through the Support Which Implements Fast Transitions III (SWIFT III) indefinite quality contract mechanism. CCI was launched in March 2012 through a contract to Creative Associates International, Inc. (Creative).

Project Description

The project description, drawn from its most recent Creative CCI quarterly report to USAID provided to the team (April-June 2013), briefly describes the goals, objectives, and methods of CCI as follows.

> Through the Community Cohesion Initiative (CCI), USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) seeks to increase resilience in areas vulnerable to insurgent exploitation by (1) Strengthening ties between local actors, customary governance structures, and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) and (2) Increasing cohesion among and between communities. CCI operates in the east, south, and southwest regions of Afghanistan. …

> CCI implements clusters of community-focused small grants through a process-oriented approach with Afghan ownership of decisions and results. In CCI programming, the project processes are as important as project outputs in contributing to the program's strategic goal of stabilization. CCI utilizes both "soft" (Community Cohesion *Jirgas*, outreach visits by district government) and "hard" (small-scale infrastructure) activities to strengthen community resiliencies and linkages between vulnerable communities and customary leadership – increasing community cohesion in the process. (USAID 22 July 2013, 1)

CCI now focuses community-based programming on selected districts in five provinces: Kandahar in the South; Helmand in the Southwest; and Ghazni, Khost and Kunar in the East. Some of these remote districts have few or no other active USAID programs. Their locations in insecure areas that are difficult for GIRoA to staff and manage add to the implementation challenges for CCI.

The CCI project has evolved with time and the ongoing transition in Afghanistan. This type of evolution is expected in OTI programming in any country. This evolution has included geographic changes and the development of additional new objectives and programming. Creative had earlier worked to implement CCI projects in Zabul and Uruzgan but has consolidated its focus and ceased programming in these two provinces which are not considered in the evaluation fieldwork. OTI has also developed nationwide programming to support the transition and electoral processes. As stated in the scope of work for the evaluation, the non-community-based grants aspects of CCI and the strategy and objectives developed at the end of Fiscal Year (FY) 2013/adopted in early FY 2014 have not been evaluated by the MISTI team in this performance evaluation.

As with OTI projects around the world, OTI staff work closely with their implementing partner (IP) in the management and operations of CCI. OTI began the project with 22 expatriate staff in the country, many co-located with ISAF forces in provincial bases. At the time of the evaluation fieldwork, OTI/Afghanistan had reduced its presence in consonance with the ISAF drawdown of forces and bases to four staff members, three at USAID in Kabul and one in Kandahar.

The methodologies of providing support to communities used by CCI is also used in other countries by OTI implementers. Community grants are almost exclusively “in-kind” grants. To ensure the accountability of U.S. government funds, rather than award funds directly to local authorities or civil society groups in countries in transition, OTI contractors manage and execute the procurement of the goods and services needed to implement community projects. OTI implementers also are charged with monitoring and evaluating the performance of local governments, civil society organizations, and private companies in the execution of these in-kind small grants. CCI in-kind grants and contracts are awarded to a range of Afghan government, civil society, and private companies which are managed by Creative staff.

OTI worked with USAID, the U.S. Embassy, and ISAF at the inception of the project to determine the provinces and districts where CCI would focus its work. For planning, CCI staff and OTI developed analyses of the key issues in the provinces and districts selected for programming, the kinds of programming that could be brought to bear on these challenges, and general guidance on what progress towards addressing these issues would look like and its implications for when OTI could consider withdrawing based on progress towards meeting CCI objectives. These analyses are called workplans under the project.

OTI and Creative have developed and use an activity cycle to manage the program and their interactions. Creative reports to OTI at many stages in the cycle through an on-line activity database for the Afghanistan program on OTI’s online knowledge management platform, OTI Anywhere (OTIA).

The *Activity Cycle Guide* (dated 1 July 2013) outlines and describes the phases and sets of processes to be used by OTI and Creative to implement CCI community programming in Afghanistan. The focus in the document is on the sequence of steps and approvals needed to develop, implement, and close in-kind grants, as well as how to report and track project processes. The first phase of developing programming is "community engagement", in which CCI staff - based on guidance from OTI, enter provinces, districts, and communities within them to learn about these communities and start building relationships that can be used for subsequent programming. As enumerated in the *Activity Cycle Guide*, engagement has three steps:

1. Initial engagement and information gathering – no promises or formal assessment is made
2. District and community dialogue
3. Community selection, resilience identification and expansion areas (articulated in the Provincial Workplans)

No other information is provided on these processes in the activity cycle guide. In Phase 2, "concept development", ideas are generated for community-based projects which are discussed by Creative staff with OTI; this was expected to be done primarily at the field level. Phase 3, "concept approval (getting to yellow light)", outlines the locations and formatting to be used in the database OTI Anywhere by CCI and the ways OTI/Afghanistan will respond to clear or not clear the full development of a concept. Clearance at this stage is a "yellow light" (YL) from OTI which authorizes CCI to fully develop a prospective grant for potential approval by OTI. This next approval, OTI agreement that CCI should execute a project in development, is referred to as a "green light" (GL). This approval completes phase 4, "activity development and clearance (from YL to GL)". Phase 5A, "activity implementation", follows. The scope of work (SOW) for the evaluations focuses the performance evaluation on this stage.

CCI executes projects through three types of in-kind implementation, as stated in the *Activity Cycle* Guide:

> Via Direct Implementation – all the work will be completed by CCI team members or by oversight of local laborers. This will involve mostly the procurement of materials, at as local-level as possible, but adhering to CCIs procurement approval thresholds.
> Via Service Providers - most or all the work will be completed by sub-contract for training, construction, media/communication services etc. In these instances, CCI will only contract out the technical work, but retain the community engagement and facilitation. Practically, this means that one stream of procurement will be for the sub-contract, and one for local materials and travel reimbursements.
> Mixed – (usually for infrastructure) in locations where CCI cannot easily procure items or make payments, and where service providers are not a good option, CCI will use a combination.

Implementation is expected to have a kickoff meeting to launch grant implementation in the community. Phase 5B, "activity reporting", proscribes regular visiting of project sites by Creative staff and weekly updating of project implementation in OTIA. Detailed guidance is provided on how to report on the stages of grant implementation - from the signing of the award with the grantee to the generation of the Final Evaluation Report (FER) by CCI staff, approval of which by OTI leads to characterizing the project as "closed".

TABLE 1: KEY EVENTS FOR PROGRAMS AND GRANTS TO TRACK, BASED ON ACTIVITY WORK PLAN

a) Grant agreement signed / kickoff with grantee & community
b) Kickoff with supplier (if needed)
c) Implementation started on site
d) Project Milestones reached: 25%, 50%, 75%, 100%
e) Reasons for delays or implementation issues
f) Project *shura* meetings (multiple, biweekly)
g) Site visits (multiple)
h) Implementation confirmed completed on site
i) Grantee final report & completion certificate submitted
j) Final payment made
k) FER submission/approval
l) Activity closed

Source: CCI Activity Cycle, 1 July 2013, 6.

Phase 6, "closeout and evaluation", outlines the processes and reporting needed to move the characterization of a grant from "completed" – when the work has been finished on the ground – to "closed" – when all the financial and programmatic reporting on the project has been approved by OTI. The activity cycle also describes how to manage rejections and cancellations of grants as well as the processes needed if modifications are needed to grants.

Purpose of the Evaluation

The USAID/Afghanistan Mission and OTI arranged through Management Systems International (MSI) via the Measuring the Impact of Stabilization Initiatives (MISTI) project for a performance evaluation of CCI in January 2014. As noted in the scope of work, OTI/Afghanistan sought a neutral, comprehensive

evaluation of project performance, issues in design and implementation, and solutions that the CCI team has deployed to address these issues focused around seven questions on Creative's implementation of community-based grants CCI agreed upon by OTI, CCI, and Office of Program and Project Development (OPPD). The seven specific questions from the SOW are:

1. What role has the project *shura* mechanism played in the implementation of CCI projects, and what lessons can CCI learn from the *shura* process thus far?

2. Did implementation support the project's objective of strengthening ties between local actors, customary governance structures, and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA)?

3. Did CCI implementation support the project's objective of increasing cohesion among and between communities?

4. Do participants in CCI vocational training activities feel that they have, as a result of training provided by CCI, an increased potential to *improve their opportunities* for lawful employment?

5. Are public outreach efforts effective in communicating CCI activities to the communities where CCI is active? How is this communication perceived within the communities?

6. In activities where CCI has specified a target number of female beneficiaries, how successful have those activities been at meeting that target, and why is this the case?

7. What lessons can be drawn from CCI's implementation that are relevant to its continued implementation?

The evaluation is intended to help OTI and Creative in the management of the program going forward. The goals of the evaluation are to clarify lessons learned and make it possible for the management of OTI and Creative to potentially apply findings, conclusions, and recommendations to improve the implementation of the project.

CCI is a broad, wide-ranging program that has evolved over time. Per the SOW, the mid-term evaluation focused on program performance towards the initial objectives of CCI in the first period of CCI implementation. CCI's initial objectives were to increase community resilience in areas vulnerable to insurgent exploitation, with resilience defined by *USAID's Policy and Program Guidance: Building Resilience to Recurrent Crisis* as "the ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth." The Evaluation Report describes the findings from the mid-term performance evaluation of CCI's implementation of activities and community-focused grants through a focus on the period September 2012 through December 2013 when the project coalesced around two objectives:

1. Strengthening ties between local actors, customary governance structures, and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA); and

2. Increasing cohesion among and between communities.

Through the end fiscal year (FY) 2013, CCI had designed and started implementation on 364 discrete activities across seven provinces. These included 336 community-focused grants that are the focus of the performance evaluation.

Creative implements CCI through developing and implementing clusters of in-kind grants for discrete projects in communities in selected districts of Afghanistan. CCI emphasizes that many grants address specific requests of local communities; other grants are requests of government officials or based on OTI's and Creative's analyses of challenges and opportunities to build connections between communities and GIRoA or to support community cohesion. Both OTI and Creative emphasize that project processes are as important as project outputs in contributing to the program's objectives. Program objectives are not met solely by refurbishing a school or a clinic ("hard" grants) but are to be met through an inclusive locally-led process (a "soft" activity) that brings the community (including GIRoA) together to realize its goals and foster linkages and cohesion.

CCI's objectives were redefined near the end of FY 2013 to adjust to the shifting U.S. Government Strategy in Afghanistan, the reduction in U.S. security forces and command personnel, and revised GIRoA national priorities. Per the evaluation SOW, performance towards these revised objectives will not be examined in the mid-term evaluation. The evaluation will focus only on the first one and a half years of implementation. The focus on implementation also results from prior assessments of the program by OTI. The CCI program has been reviewed multiple times by OTI through regular OTI practices such as Strategy Review Sessions (SRS) as well as a Program Performance Review done by OTI. SRSs are conducted periodically, quarterly or biannually, to review and assess objectives and strategies and make modifications to awards by OTI. The Program Performance Review was an additional review conducted in 2013 to add another evaluation of how Creative and OTI/Afghanistan were managing the program at a period when there was great concern about the slow pace of start-up and the limited number of CCI grants being implemented in the field.

Methodology

The performance evaluation, conducted through MISTI, was carried out by an expatriate monitoring and evaluation (M&E) specialist/evaluation team leader, MISTI's Afghan M&E Advisors, and Afghan Qualitative Evaluator consultants hired by MISTI from selected provinces and districts that have been the focus of CCI and were chosen as the focus of the evaluation. The evaluation has sampled from all grants in these districts to choose particular grants from the five provinces where Creative continues to operate in 2014 to understand CCI performance.

The Evaluation team has focused fieldwork on one to two districts in each of five provinces where CCI currently implements community-focused grants: Kunar, Khost, Ghazni, Kandahar, and Helmand. CCI typically works in three districts in each of these provinces. The evaluation team used an Excel spreadsheet version of the OTI Anywhere database generated by OTI/Afghanistan populated with data from many of the fields of the access database to sample eight districts for fieldwork and then another, more detailed Excel spreadsheet derived from OTIA to sample grants from within these districts. These sampled districts have substantial variation in background attributes (of all kinds, such as GIRoA leaders, USG/ISAF engagement, tribal makeup, and physical and cultural geography) and were selected based on four kinds of attributes of CCI implementation inferred from the information in the database:

- Objectives and length of time of CCI implementation – the objectives and Creative/OTI procedures at the time CCI first comes to a district;
- Extent of subsequent grants – how fast and how much does CCI spread out with more grants;
- Type of grant trajectory – whether CCI moves into infrastructure and more costly projects quickly or more slowly (or even starts with infrastructure); and
- Types of grantees –from district governor's offices (DGOs) to village *shuras*.

The provinces and districts the team has chosen are listed in Table 2 below.

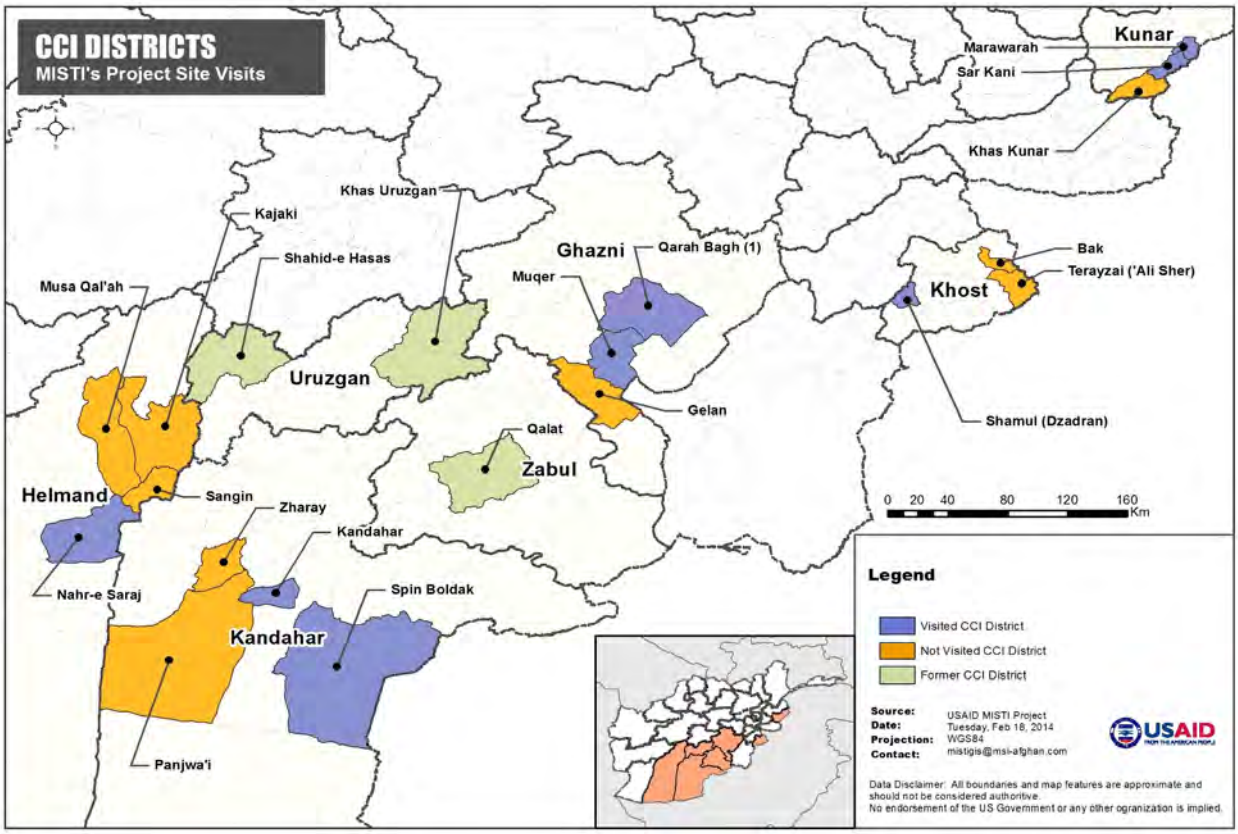
TABLE 2: MISTI SAMPLED DISTRICTS FOR CCI EVALUATION

Province	Districts
Ghazni	Moqur and Qarabagh
Kandahar	Spin Boldak and Kandahar City
Helmand	Nahri Sarraj
Khost	Shamal
Kunar	Marawara and Sarkani

These districts are a subset of all the districts from Afghan provinces where CCI has worked. Figure 1 graphically displays the districts within the context of all of CCI's work.

OTI has made management decisions to withdraw CCI from two provinces. These two are Uruzgan, where the project had operated in the districts of Khas Uruzgan and Shahidi Hassas, as well as Zabul, where CCI had worked in the district of Qalat. In addition, CCI ceased operations in the district of Spin Boldak in Kandahar; Spin Boldak was never the less selected as a district for fieldwork as the evaluation could examine closed and completed grants to understand CCI operations and performance in a district where implementation had proven particularly challenging for Creative and OTI.

FIGURE 1: MAP OF CCI DISTRICTS AND PROVINCES AND THE EVALUATION SAMPLE



The M&E Specialist conducted the desk review and informational/key informant interviews with OTI staff and Creative management in Washington, OTI/Afghanistan and Creative CCI management in Kabul, and regional managers at the CCI head office in Kabul. The local national MISTI M&E Advisors conducted site visits and interviewed CCI provincial and district staff, provincial and district GIRoA officials, and some local stakeholders, beneficiaries, and community members from selected CCI districts and grants. MISTI also hired five local national Qualitative Evaluators from these districts who were able to interview additional district-level GIRoA officials, stakeholders, beneficiaries, and community members in communities in some areas of more insecure districts where cultural norms and security constraints inhibited Kabul-based staff from conducting interviews.

The team has selected grants from these districts as the focus of fieldwork. The team sampled from the full universe of grants in these districts which included cancelled awards. Fieldwork examined some of these cancelled grants as long as the projects were substantially implemented before being cancelled. The selection was based on several criteria from the list of all projects for these eight districts. The limited information on these grants used for sampling was: grant number, grant title, awardee, sector (training, socio-cultural, infrastructure, media), estimated grant amount, amount disbursed, status, region (province), district, village (or urban district), latitude, longitude, start date, and the end date (actual or anticipated). This data provided sufficient information to select a set of grants for fieldwork that would cover the diversity of the CCI project as well as target some types of grants for additional emphasis as needed to address specific questions from the SOW. Selection particularly focused on vocational training and women's projects which have their own questions in the SOW.

The sampling, by project number as used by CCI in OTIA with standardized district abbreviation as well as number sampled compared to the total number of CCI grants in implementation or completed and closed in these districts as of February 2014, was:

Moqur – 9 of 24 CCI grants (MQR001, MQR002, MQR004, MQR006, MQR007, MQR010, MQR011, MQR017, MQR020);

Qarabagh - 8 of 24 CCI grants (QBG002, QBG003, QBG006, QBG008, QBG011, QBG013, QBG014);

Kandahar City - 11 of 43 CCI grants (KAN001, KAN003, KAN006, KAN021, KAN023, KAN035, KAN047, KAN050, KAN060);

Spin Boldak - 3 of 5 CCI grants (SPI002, SPI004, SPI005);

Nahri Sarraj - 7 of 23 CCI grants (NRS005, NRS007, NRS009, NRS013, NRS017, NRS020, NRS021);

Shamal – 10 of 14 CCI grants (KST0002, KST0003, SHM001, SHM002, SHM004, SHM005, SHM006, SHM007, SHM008, SHM010);

Marawara - 6 of 25 CCI grants (MRW001, MRW002, MRW004, MRW013, MRW015, MRW021); and

Sarkani – 7 of 26 CCI grants (SAR002, SAR004, SAR009, SAR013, SAR014, SAR018, SAR025).[1]

Sampling is a robust proportion of grants from these eight districts. Sampling included some cancelled awards, such as "Enhancing Stability Through Community Cohesion *Jirgas* in Sub-District 7" in Kandahar as a good deal of grant implementation occurred prior to cancellation.

The evaluation team generated, tested, and revised questions and questionnaires for the fieldwork. Generation and testing focused on the validity of these questions and the instrument – that is whether the questions were correctly understood by different interviewees and generated information about their perceptions and experience with CCI and CCI grants as expected. The questions, and their use for CCI staff, GIRoA officials, stakeholders and project *shura* members, beneficiaries, and community members are included in Annex 4 of the report. The same interview protocols, questions, and questionnaires were used across the country to ensure the collection of reliable data through the use of these instruments by different team members across Afghan districts and CCI grants. Data are reliable when generated and collected in the same way, which makes it possible to compare observations.

One procedure was used to test data quality collected through interviews. The questionnaire included questions to check on the knowledge of respondents and their willingness to answer negatively. The questionnaire examined acquiescence bias - the willingness of informants to provide information that they may not think the interviewers want to hear. A quick question, "How have project *shuras* affected the selection of projects?" was asked mid-way through the questions on project *shuras*. All but a few respondents said that these project *shuras* had no role in project selection. This is consistent with CCI's methodology for grants which tasks project *shuras* with project implementation roles. This suggests interviewees, including community members with little to no engagement with the CCI project and

[1] Grant numbers are generated for awards when a project is given a YL by OTI; the grant list used to sample from is thus non-consecutive as it does not include grants YL that were not later given the GL and begun.

project *shura* members with perhaps incentives overestimate their roles, were willing to reply negatively and appropriately to the evaluation team.

The evaluation team has used the processes specified in the scope of work and prepared all of the deliverables in the SOW leading up to this Draft Evaluation Report:

- Submission of detailed initial work plan to USAID/Afghanistan's OPPD M&E unit and OTI (January 30, 2014);
- In-briefing (February 3, 2014) with OPPD and OTI for discussion of the initial work plan;
- Submission and approval of the final Evaluation Work Plan (February 6, 2014);
- Mid-term Briefing and Interim Meeting (February 13, 2014) with OTI; and
- PowerPoint Final Exit Presentation (February 20, 2014).

Due to delays in conducting interviews in the field and in processing the data from field interviews, MISTI staff and the lead evaluator discussed revising project deliverable dates with OPPD and OTI. After gaining OTI/Afghanistan's concurrence, OPPD approved this request in writing and revised the dates for delivery of the draft and final report. In addition to the specified deliverables, the Team Leader also prepared and presented over the telephone a detailed PowerPoint brief at OPPD and OTI request on findings and recommendations after data collected had been completed.

The evaluation has used the following methods to collect valid and reliable data on CCI performance:

- Reviewed relevant project documentation: Request for Task Order Proposals (RFTOP), award, modifications, OTI project database and selected grant files, project quarterly and annual reports, and other project analyses/reviews;
- Conducted key informant interviews: with OTI and Creative headquarters and country/project staff, GIRoA stakeholders in selected areas of CCI implementation, and project *shura* members for selected projects;
- Conducted semi-structured interviews with activity participants and community members (particularly, when feasible, with women); and
- Direct observation: of project activities and processes (when possible).

MISTI's M&E Advisors traveled to the five selected provinces and districts to conduct key informant interviews. In addition, local Qualitative Evaluator consultants were be hired and trained by the MISTI M&E Advisors to conduct stakeholder, beneficiary and community member interviews in selected districts for sampled projects in locations that were not accessible to MISTI's local staff.

In addition to interviews in Kabul, the team conducted 303 interviews for the fieldwork across the five provinces where CCI currently implements grants. The breakdown of interviews, by type of respondent, is given below.

TABLE 3: FIELD INTERVIEWS FOR CCI EVALUATION

Province/ District	CCI staff	GIRoA Officials	*Shura* members	Beneficiaries	Community Members	Service providers	**Total**
Ghazni							
Moqur	4	1	0	18	18	5	46
Qarabagh	4	1	4	16	16	6	47
Ghazni city	5	4	1				10
Kandahar							
Kandahar City	7	5	5	36	4		57
Spin Boldak		2	2	6	4		14
Helmand							
Nahri Sarraj	3	3	3	35	5		49
Khost							
Shamal	4	3	5	7	7		26
Kunar							
Asadabad	3	3					6
Marawara	2	3	7	10	5	1	28
Sarkani	2	3	4	8	3		20
Total	34	28	31	136	62	12	303

Limitations

OTI and Creative recognize and acknowledge that the CCI project has faced many challenges in start-up and its operations to date. As OTI and Creative have already reviewed the project's strategies and performance multiple times through regular OTI SRS meetings and a management review, the performance evaluation was instructed not to address these larger management challenges and issues. This direction from OTI and the specificity of the SOW parameters and evaluation questions drove the evaluation processes to focus on Creative's implementation of CCI grants in the field where MISTI's independent fieldwork has value-added for OTI/Afghanistan's management.

These broad management issues that have hampered relationships between OTI and Creative were observed by the evaluation team. The lack of trust and confidence between OTI/Afghanistan and Creative staff contributed to a climate in which it was difficult to gather information on CCI processes, performance, and perspectives.

The MISTI team was able to manage the challenges of conducting evaluation fieldwork across the country in winter in less secure districts. However, fieldwork took longer than anticipated. CCI staff in some provinces and districts was surprised by the presence of the evaluation team, despite having been alerted to their arrival by Creative, which requested that they provide the MISTI team the support and information they needed to conduct the fieldwork.

Having an all-male team was a manageable constraint. Although gender is an important aspect of the CCI project and this mid-term performance evaluation, few CCI projects focused on women and the SOW question that focused targeted grants that focused on women was only one of seven overall questions. Despite the difficult challenges of talking directly to women in conservative areas of the country, MISTI

evaluators were able to talk with two women project *shura* members from some of the activities that targeted women.

The mobility of Afghans posed unknown limitations; some stakeholders and beneficiaries of projects may not have been present in these districts and thus not included in the sampling frame of people for potential interviews.

FINDINGS

Although designed as a single project through a single implementer, the project has operated somewhat differently in the East and the South, across provinces, by districts, and in different types of grants. OTI and CCI management noted that while CCI is one program, its implementation has varied based on characteristics of regions, the communities within them, and GIRoA officials in these districts - as well as based on CCI staff knowledge and engagement. Creative staff in Kabul asserted that this evolution in provinces and districts had happened "fairly independently." They noted that this differentiation was in the types of grants and the risks taken by staff in implementing them. This diversity makes generalizing about CCI projects challenging.

The findings below are thus both general and differentiated by types of grants and geographic locations; specific places are identified when findings are more notable in this area or a specific quotation from fieldwork in a particular province or district is used in the text to support findings. Each specific question is answered in summary form first, with more detailed information then included from the fieldwork in subsequent paragraphs.

1. What role has the project *shura* mechanism played in the implementation of CCI projects, and what lessons can CCI learn from the *shura* process thus far?

Project *shuras* are the main CCI method for involving communities in the implementation of in-kind grants. Project *shuras* are incorporated into most community-level programming. CCI use of *shuras* varies substantially across provinces, districts, and grants within districts. Where used, project *shuras* are usually composed of two to four or five to seven respected members of the communities where CCI grants are implemented. *Shuras* are used to help manage infrastructure projects with lengthy implementation and substantial community contribution, to address any social conflicts that arise in project implementation, to deter threats to projects by anti-government elements during implementation, and to monitor implementation. Some CCI projects have successfully had women members of project *shuras*. In some districts, project *shuras* have not been used as much due to pervasive security concerns and provincial and district CCI staff that were unfamiliar with roles of *shuras* in CCI. Other short-duration grants or projects that work directly with GIRoA staff have not used *shuras* in implementation.

OTI projects around the world emphasize the primacy of process; the theory behind the use of community engagement and small in-kind grants is that using these processes in developing and implementing activities contributes to changing how communities in transition govern themselves and engage with others. Project *shuras* (councils) should be seen in this light the main mechanisms for CCI to engage with Afghan communities in project implementation.

Project *shura*s have been incorporated into most community-level programming implemented by CCI. Fieldwork demonstrated that the roles of project *shura*s in the implementation of CCI projects varied substantially across provinces, districts, and grants within districts. OTI and OTI/Afghanistan interviews

emphasized the primacy of community engagement for OTI and CCI and the central role of project *shuras* within the engagement process for CCI grants. CCI staff in provinces and districts articulated many way that project *shuras* were useful in implementing in-kind grants, but also noted that project *shuras* were not universally used. *Shura*s were not a part of grants that originated from CCI in Kabul, were not used for some activities that focused on GIRoA beneficiaries (such as strategic communications for district governor's offices), and were not created for grants that focused on brief events (such as celebrating International Women's Day). Under current conditions, staff in some districts felt that participating in *shuras* was too dangerous for participants and thus did not use them as a protection issue. In some districts, staff used *shuras* for projects that needed more community engagement and participation while other projects that were directly implemented by the CCI team or an outside service provider did not use a project *shura* as staff felt that a project *shura* was unnecessary for project implementation.

Project *shuras* have been used more flexibly by Creative in grant implementation than the OTI Anywhere database information on CCI suggests. In the sample of all grants from these eight districts from the database examined for the evaluation, project *shuras* are all but universally asserted to exist and have 10 members. Interviews with CCI staff, GIRoA officials, *shura* members, and beneficiaries instead presented a variegated picture, with project *shuras* in some provinces composed of two to four respected community members while other provinces used five to seven people. However, for Moqur and Qarabagh, CCI staff reported that they had project *shuras* for only four of their grants (two in each district). Staff reported not creating project *shuras* due to the pervasive insecurity in these districts, which they felt would threaten the lives and families of prospective project *shura* members. CCI staff also noted that they lacked familiarity with *shuras* and their roles in CCI. GIRoA officials in some districts in the South noted that project *shuras* were not required for short-term, soft activities such as celebrating International Women's Day, music festivals, and sports events. CCI management in Kabul noted that *shura*s were not created when projects were implemented by a service provider (SP); in these cases CCI staff instead of a project *shura* were responsible for managing and supervising the contract to the service provider to implement the grant.

CCI staff, GIRoA officials, and project *shura* members noted that these bodies were composed of influential elders from the communities where the projects were being carried out who were tasked with monitoring project implementation. Some CCI staff noted that they often included a district-level GIRoA official on the project *shura* (Marawara). Service providers and community members in areas that incorporated the District Governor (DG) in the selection of *shura* members recognized that the DG had had a role in who served on the project *shura*. In some other areas where the government had limited control and was not able to put any representatives from GIRoA on *shura*s, GIRoA officials appreciated the ways that project *shuras* helped inform them about these communities (GIRoA officials, Khost). These government officials sought to have a member of the district government on project *shura*s when feasible (Khost).

Some staff and *shura* members outlined the roles of project *shuras* in CCI in a comprehensive way.

"*Shura* responsibilities are:

- Coordinating activities in the community and between the community, District authorities, and implementing partner (CCI or SP);
- Managing security at the projects site and in the community;
- Monitoring the quality and activities of projects; and

- Managing the contribution of community such as labor, water, and some kinds of materials" (CCI staff, Sarkani).

Project *shura* members were not part of the design of these projects, although many projects came out of a larger community engagement process of CCI, the Cohesion *Jirga* (discussed further below). The influential elders that serve on project *shuras* also have been or are members of other *shuras*, such as Community Development Councils (CDC). CCI staff asserted that *shura* members did not need training on their roles as elders have experience with *shuras*; *Shura* members noted there was no training for them for these roles. They did not mean this critique as a criticism and asserted that they were comfortable and experienced in deliberative processes and monitoring roles in their communities through their work on CDC and other ad-hoc *shuras*. However, some *shura* members asserted that the project should provide incentives to *shura* members to help them to perform their duties. By incentives they meant the project should provide funds for transportation and refreshments to enable them to do their work. *Shura* members did not suggest that they should be paid for their roles on *shuras*, as had been done by some USAID stabilization programs in some provinces in the past. The *shura* roles most noted by CCI staff, GIRoA officials, project *shura* members, beneficiaries, and community members were identifying labor for the project and monitoring implementation. CCI staff, some GIRoA officials, and some *shura* members also noted that *shuras had* roles addressing any social conflicts over implementation of the project, including protecting the project by deterring any antigovernment element (AGE) threats to implementation. GIRoA officials in some districts (Marawara, Nahri Sarraj) reported that they also received information on project implementation from *shura* members. Some service providers reported that project *shuras* had interfered, for example by insisting that materials for implementing projects should come from particular suppliers. And some beneficiaries asserted that project *shuras* were too influential in who was hired as labor on particular projects.

Some *shura* members interviewed complained of examples where they felt that their roles as *shura* members were not used by CCI. These members noted that information that they passed on to project staff was sometimes not used. For some projects, *shura* members complained that CCI did not – or was not seen to - follow up on issues identified by their monitoring. In these cases when, as part of conducting their monitoring duties, *shura* members felt that the work conducted by service providers was not of sufficient quality and they raised this problem with CCI staff, *shura* interviewees felt that CCI was not responsive and did not act upon their reports.

Community members interviewed in most provinces were informed about project *shuras*. While many knew *shuras* existed, they had few details on what the roles of *shuras* were. Community members in many communities noted that their main source of information about projects was oral – from community elders, who often were the members of project *shuras*. In some other provinces, many community members interviewed did not know about the roles of *shuras* in CCI project implementation (Ghazni). In this province, *shuras* were less commonly used in current CCI activities due to the concerns of CCI staff about the safety and security of their staff and participants – including project *shura* members.

Some GIRoA officials in Kandahar city volunteered that the use of project *shuras* was a technique that they should consider emulating in the government's own projects.

In some cases, *shuras* were able to engage women in the management of projects. In one example, active women in Kandahar city were able to work with the Department of Women's Affairs (DOWA) to understand the capacity of CCI, enlist Provincial Governor (PG) support for the idea they sought to pursue with CCI (tailoring for women), and then get CCI support to implement this project, including though a female head of the project *shura*.

2. Did implementation support the project's objective of strengthening ties between local actors, customary governance structures, and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA)?

CCI implementation has supported the project's objective of strengthening ties between local actors, customary governance structures, and GIRoA. Understanding and working towards Objective 1 of CCI was straightforward conceptually and practically for Creative staff, provincial and district government officials, and Afghans from the communities where CCI has been implemented. CCI has used two main mechanisms to support this objective. The first, CCI implementation of in-kind grants through community-driven processes, has helped bring GIRoA closer to communities through the use of GIRoA offices as grantees as well as incorporating these GIRoA officials into the opening and closing ceremonies for projects that benefit communities. Fieldwork suggested that when attached to a CCI grant, the increased presence of GIRoA officials in communities increased their influence within these communities as it increased appreciation within communities for what GIRoA officials could help provide their communities.

The second method has been to provide CCI in-kind grants to GIRoA actors to increase government capacity and communications through awards that provide trainings and strategic communications support, typically through service providers. Implementation has helped acculturate district governors and other officials to outreach as a key part of their responsibilities and helped get officials out of their offices and into communities. The implementation of CCI in-kind grants has also made GIRoA ties more attractive to communities. CCI staff, GIRoA officials, and community leaders report that in the wake of grant implementation, there is increased demand for government services as noted by the fact that there are more people – coming from more communities – petitioning DGs after grant implementation in these districts.

CCI staff interviewed noted that supporting Objective 1, strengthening ties between local actors, customary governance structures, and the Government, was seen as a straightforward objective for implementation. Their sentiment was that this was the top priority objective for many CCI projects. Many staff were familiar with this objective from working on other projects that had supported this objective, a staple of counterinsurgency (COIN) and other U.S. government programming, over the past several years.

CCI had two ways to support this objective: by bringing GIRoA officials into processes that connected them with communities in grant development and implementation, such as the discussion of issues or the opening and closing ceremonies for CCI grants that focus on community priorities, as well as through grants that focused on increasing government capacity, communications, and credibility. CCI grants focused on strengthening ties by bringing GIRoA officials and their influence to bear to communities and by supporting ways for community leaders to raise issues with appointed GIRoA leaders in their districts and provinces. Some grants focused on this area through strategic communications to spread information about local governments, to increase the visibility of local GIRoA officials, and to demonstrate the links between government officials and CCI projects and how they benefit communities.

CCI staff interviewed noted how the project began to work on this objective upon first coming to any province or district. CCI immediately approached working with the government through staff processes of sharing information on the project with the Provincial Governor's Office (PGO) and DGOs when the project first begins to work in any province or district. Their tasks were to explain project capabilities and processes to GIRoA leaders and then following a CJ with communities across the district, to reach agreement with DGOs (and sometimes PGOs where they have been more or over-involved like in Kandahar) on what the priorities for CCI are in these communities and particular small-grants and projects for implementation.

In some provinces, GIRoA officials noted that project *shuras* had roles in strengthening ties. They noted ways that project *shura*s spread information to government. Some GIRoA interviews in Khost noted the ways that project *shuras* keep officials connected with the communities "to which we do not have access or where the government cannot go."

CCI staff noted ways that they monitored and evaluated how ties were now stronger. M&E for this objective focused on the extent of access for and to government officials – whether people in the district sought access to GIRoA officials and whether GIRoA officials travelled outside the district center. For example:

> Before CCI implementation few people were coming to district government, now a lot of people are coming everyday requesting projects and for solving their problems which are government related (CCI staff, Marawara).

Some local GIRoA officials also noted results and attributed these to CCI.

> Interaction between government and communities has been increased. Now the district government knows better what is going on in the communities and communities know what services are provided by district government (district GIRoA official, Marawara).

Staff and project *shura* members in some districts also noted how projects contributed to the extension of the influence of district governance further from the district center.

> Before only people of certain areas of the district were coming to the district center and very few people from far away part of the district were coming. When people from far away parts of the district were coming to the district center to try to address their problems, they were fearful and were hiding that they were raising issues with the government from other people, because when they were going back to their villages, the Taliban were interrogated them and accusing them of spying. Now everyone knows that there are projects and every day a lot of people from each part of the district come to the district center without any fear. They come to request projects, take part in the election campaign, and address other problems (*shura* member, Marawara).

Interviews suggested that CCI implementation at present in some districts focused on DGOs; interviews with other GIRoA officials in these cases found them sometimes poorly informed about CCI and these grants. Interviews with GIRoA officials in Ghazni (in Ghazni city, Moqur, and Qarabagh) found CCI largely unknown outside the District Governor's office, with even the PGO citing unhappiness with the extent of information sharing and communication by CCI staff at this time. In these cases, officials other than DGOs saw the lack of information sharing and outreach by CCI staff as an impediment to the flow of information. CCI staff in Ghazni felt that with the level of insecurity in the area, the project should be hesitant to publicize CCI activities in these communities. Staff felt that limiting the flow of information was seen as an important way to improve implementation, protect staff, and reduce risks to beneficiaries and community leaders given the difficult security situation in the Ghazni districts were CCI operates. CCI staff noted that DGOs were not coordinating GIRoA actors successfully in these cases, which is supposed to be one of their roles in districts.

Some CCI staff reported challenges in working with DGs that were it seemed not particularly interested in working closer with communities in their districts and collaborating with CCI. District CCI staff worked with CCI provincial staff in these instances to enlist Provincial Governors to use their authority with DGs so that they would collaborate with CCI in project implementation.

3. Did CCI implementation support the project's objective of increasing cohesion among and between communities?

CCI implementation has supported the project's objective of increasing cohesion among and between communities. Objective 2 was seen as conceptually and practically more difficult by CCI staff and GIRoA officials compared to connecting people with GIRoA. CCI staff, government officials, and community members saw grants that originated from community processes, were implemented in communities with community members as beneficiaries, or granted to community actors as supporting cohesion. Cohesion *Jirga*s, the CCI mechanism used to generate discussion, ideas for activities, and priorities when CCI first comes to communities, were lauded and seen as useful consultative processes in these communities that led to CCI grants to address their needs. Communities articulated their preferences for larger grants to rehabilitate infrastructure, which they saw as benefitting larger number of people. Other ideas from communities that were supported by CCI which were seen as supportive of cohesion in these communities were grants that connected people across communities. Community *jirga*s were praised by GIRoA officials as a mechanism for bringing different communities together and building cohesion.

CCI staff emphasized that supporting Objective 2 of increased cohesion was more difficult to understand and act on than increasing ties between communities and GIRoA officials. Staff sometimes drew distinctions about the influence of projects on cohesion that were based on the sources of projects. They viewed cohesion projects as ones that were coming from the community while projects that drew people closer to GIRoA came from government officials or CCI in Kabul. Other CCI staff saw cohesion projects as determined by the types of outputs and outcomes of grants. They viewed cohesion grants as the ones that had larger benefits for people or connected people across communities. Cohesion projects were:

> Some of the projects that make more benefit for people like schools, roads, protection walls, and cultural events can make more connections between people and different communities (CCI staff, Nahri Sarraj).

Some CCI staff argued that because of the ways projects were selected and implemented using *jirgas* and *shuras*, all grants supported cohesion:

> All the project that are implemented by CCI are good in term of cohesion because people together set and recognize their problems and decide to select projects that are most important for the community and district (CCI staff, Nahri Sarraj).

DGs and other GIRoA officials interviewed understood cohesion in a variety of ways consistent with the use of the concept by CCI: as having different tribes come together, having people with different political views work together, and linking communities within the district together. Some GIRoA officials noted projects were cohesion-driven (and could be measured as such) when they came from community members that asserted these projects were needed to address common, shared needs of the community. CJs were praised by GIRoA officials as a mechanism for bringing different communities together and building cohesion, as were the projects that came out of CJ processes.

Some project *shura* members were able to articulate how their projects had supported cohesion. For example, in MRW007, *shura* members asserted that CCI repair of the Jabahi *Karez* had both increased water availability and built cohesion by addressing a conflict between two communities over water in the Jabghi area of Marawara. Some other project beneficiaries and community members volunteered examples where disputes had been resolved after CCI training and attributed these solutions to CCI's work.

A minority of interviewees asserted that instead of supporting cohesion, some CCI activities had increased divisions. These minority views asserted that community grants in some cases had increased divisions in different ways – either through the basic direction of the project or from how the project was implemented. Two cited examples were:

> Cricket competition through teams based on communities, which put communities in competition with other communities (Marawara);
>
> Selection of labor from projects from outside the community or "unfairly" within the community (Sarkani, Nahri Sarraj).

However, these critics were not able to provide any concrete evidence that these grants had led to tensions or increased divisions. Interviews in these eight districts did not find examples where CCI grants had created notable tensions in these communities or evidence that grants had increased divisions.

4. Do participants in CCI vocational training activities feel that they have, as a result of training provided by CCI, an increased potential to *improve their opportunities* for lawful employment?

Participants in CCI vocational training activities interviewed did feel that they have, as a result of training provided by CCI, an increased potential to improve their opportunities for lawful employment. Beneficiaries saw trainings as useful and valuable. CCI staff, GIRoA officials, *shura* members, beneficiaries, and community members did not expect there to be a simple relationship where vocational training led to actual employment in a straightforward way. This was due to the limited prospects for employment in rural areas and district centers in Afghanistan. Most CCI vocational training projects were selected by GIRoA line departments rather than the communities themselves; the selection of participants was also driven by these departments, which chose participants sometimes based on need - selecting households with greater needs for income, for example, for tailoring training for women - and at other times on their qualifications, such as for Kankor (college entry) exam training.

MISTI M&E Advisors and Qualitative Evaluator consultants were able to work with local CCI staff across some districts to interview GIRoA and other stakeholders and identify and interview a sample of beneficiaries from some of the Creative CCI grants that focused on vocational education. Interviews were also conducted with members of their communities that were not direct beneficiaries of these grants.

Vocational training projects were for men and women, who were reached separately through different grants in most cases. *Kankor* university entrance examination training was the exception - where one grant was used for both genders (who were then trained separately as necessary in Afghan culture in these areas). Some districts, such as Shamal and Qarabagh, did not have CCI projects in vocational education. Other districts had limited ones in this area, such as Muqer, which focused on tailoring training for women.

CCI staff interviewed did not expect there to be a simple relationship between vocational training and actual employment using these skills. When asked about the sources of vocational education grants, CCI staff in the South noted that vocational training ideas and plans came from the line departments in their provinces and districts, which asserted that based on their experience and knowledge, these were the needs of these particular communities. In the South, CCI staff reported doing needs assessments prior to endorsing these trainings and assessments of trainee skills at the end to measure achievements. In Muqer, CCI staff noted that the idea for tailoring training for women in the district came from the community and DG; they had not done a needs analysis to examine their ideas. CCI staff in Kandahar city were confident that not only had training improved their opportunities for lawful improvement, but also many

beneficiaries were already using these skills working out of their homes (particularly women beneficiaries). CCI staff in some districts noted that it was not their responsibility to follow-up after the training to gather empirical information on whether beneficiaries were employed in these areas following the trainings.

Provincial and district officials shared this general perspective and agreed with the framing of the question in the SOW - which was used in the fieldwork as one question about vocational education. The question suggests that given the social and economic conditions in insecure Afghan provinces and districts, vocational training should not be expected to lead to lawful employment in a simple or direct way. GIRoA interviewees noted that finding positions was difficult and viewed vocational training as successful if beneficiaries took up the occupation anywhere – not necessarily in their district – in the wake of the training. Some GIRoA officials asserted that while the trainers for vocational education activities had been good, participants had reported to them that the use of substandard materials degraded the benefits of their training (e.g. beautician training in Kandahar city). These officials criticized the service provider and project management rather than project *shura* monitoring, which they noted had found but not addressed issues with the quality of these materials. Line department staff interviewed were confident that the training had already led to lawful employment for some beneficiaries, based on their work to select the most qualified participants for the trainings, knowledge of community needs, and involvement in the design of the training.

In Ghazni, one service provider particularly noted the lack of follow-up on beneficiaries after vocational education. In their view, projects on vocational education had important responsibilities for a longer term than is done by CCI, where vocational education is one of several mechanisms for supporting community cohesion through grants.

> It was good for participants learn the basics but there is need for follow up and practice to learn more and learn to do business. CCI did not follow up after graduation which is a problem because most of the participants do not have enough resources to establish a shop or to find enough tools for themselves. CCI should have a follow up system and provide them with basic tools and also follow them for up to one year for them to become stable participants (service provider, Muqer).

CCI is not a vocational training project so should not be expected to have this long-term focus.

CCI staff noted Project *shura* members and beneficiaries interviewed in most cases also had realistic expectations for the prospects for employment following vocational training. Both noted, for example in Muqer, that women trained by the project would be working out of their homes as was culturally appropriate in the area. These methods however impede community knowledge of vocational training that focused on women, as employed women would work within their compounds and not seen by the rest of the community.

Community members, as in other areas of CCI's work, were on the whole less well informed about project processes and outcomes. Some community members interviewed and asked about vocational training knew that there had been trainings in which some members of their community had benefitted. As with project *shura* members and beneficiaries, community members had modest expectations for any employment to result from training. For example, in Muqer, community members noted that there were not good prospects both in general and for the women trained in tailoring to be employed locally because the *bazar* is small.

5. Are public outreach efforts effective in communicating CCI activities to the communities where CCI is active? How is this communication perceived within the communities?

CCI's public outreach efforts appear to be effective in communicating CCI activities to the communities where CCI is active and that this communication is on the whole perceived positively within communities. Public outreach is required by all CCI grants and a part of activity implementation. Interviews suggested that the visibility of project opening and closing ceremonies plays a large role in the perceived effectiveness of public outreach. CCI staff asserted that project communications were effective when many people attended CCI activities. Public outreach was seen to stimulate more demand for projects – both ones to support strengthening ties and for cohesion. Public outreach was also asserted to generate additional requests to GIRoA for assistance with community needs, which was viewed as successfully strengthens ties between communities and district officials. Some grants had relatively weak communications and public outreach. This was seen as often the case with outreach from service providers that had little experience with publicity and/or were not interested in publicity. In some districts, CCI staff were reluctant to push public outreach based on security concerns. Staff from other districts were less concerned about security and more aggressively promoted CCI activities in communities.

Public outreach is a component of all CCI community grants. To support increasing connections between communities and GIRoA officials or to enhance community cohesion, information about CCI activities needs to be conveyed to key stakeholders as well as within the communities where CCI works. CCI also supports specific projects on public information that focus on improving the public relations efforts of GIRoA officials. These grants, done in many districts - for example SAR013 for the DG of Sarkani entitled "Enhancing District Governor's Reach through Strategic Communications" or KAN023 with the Sub-District 7 Manager's Office entitled "Strengthening GIRoA through Strategic Communications in Sub-District 7 Kandahar" - provide a communications company as a service provider to work with GIRoA officials in the district to enhance and expand their communications with the residents of the district.[2]

CCI staff interviewed recognized that public communications activities were integral components of all grants and a part of CCI implementation processes. Staff noted that they used local norms on how to communicate to reach the different populations of districts and provinces across Afghanistan. CCI staff interviewed sometimes struggled with answers for how they assess whether communications efforts were successful. CCI staff in the south were not able to articulate how they measured whether communications efforts were effective, beyond having more people come to CCI events. In Kandahar and Nahri Sarraj, staff asserted that people in the communities in which they work knew about the projects – some because the projects came from the communities themselves and some from other community processes. CCI staff in Ghazni asserted that the poor security situation meant that the project was not able to responsibly promote CCI activities widely. They felt that promotion prior to implementation would impede their ability to carry out these projects, and outreach after project completion would pose security risks to project beneficiaries. CCI staff in provinces and districts were less enthusiastic about strategic communications projects for DGOs or Kandahar sub-district officers as projects driven by CCI in Kabul rather than communities and projects implemented by service providers rather than under direct implementation. Questions to local staff about communications elicited little information about these on-going strategic communications projects. CCI staff were also critical of grants that were executed by implementing partners for not being as attentive to public information on the projects that they execute for

[2] Neither of these grants has been completed. Strategic communications grants in Marawara, Nahri Sarraj, Shamal, and other sub-districts in Kandahar have also not yet been completed.

CCI. CCI staff changed procedures to add specificity to the contracts with service providers to ensure that the preparation and distribution of promotional materials was included in awards to firms. The capabilities of service providers however were often seen as weak in this area; construction companies hired to rehabilitate roads, for example, were not seen to be as interested in building a public relations campaign around the project or even informing government officials about progress towards completion. Direct implementation, which left these responsibilities to CCI staff, was viewed as better promote project achievements.

Many GIRoA officials also reported that they were knowledgeable about CCI projects (Kandahar, Nahri Sarraj). On the other hand, communication was seen as weak or absent in many current Ghazni projects. Knowledge came from briefings and updates from CCI staff (although not in Ghazni) as well as from their regular meetings with community elders and *shura* members. Officials however did not have much information on how CCI communications were perceived by communities. In Ghazni, Kandahar and Nahri Sarraj, some GIRoA officials felt that people in communities in their districts were not knowledgeable about the projects. GIRoA officials, *shura* members, beneficiaries, and community members typically shared the opinion that the best forms of communication in their communities was through community *shura*s and elders – whether they were in Kandahar city or in smaller, more rural environments. A minority viewpoint was that local television was a superior mechanism for promoting CCI projects (GIRoA official, Muqer).

When asked how they assess and measure community perceptions of CCI communications, CCI staff and GIRoA officials suggested that they use evidence such as the turnout at CCI events and additional demand for CCI projects from communities and GIRoA officials to demonstrate that project communications activities were effective. One DG answered this question by noting that:

> Every day I receive a lot of petitions from different parts of the district regarding projects; before I did not. It means all of the district knows about CCI activities.

Unsurprisingly, project *shura* members and beneficiaries were well aware of CCI from their direct engagement with the project. Community members interviewed differed; some were aware of CCI's work while others were not. Their knowledge came from the visibility of the opening and closing ceremonies for CCI projects, through *shuras* and community elders, and for some larger projects, from television and radio (as noted in particular in Muqer).

There were some differences of opinion among CCI staff about methods of managing the challenges of outreach in insecure environments. While CCI Ghazni staff noted reticence to push on communications by grantees based on security concerns, staff from some other districts continued to insist on outreach as part of grants. For example, one FER for a in project in Shamal noted: "While CCI recognizes elders' concerns about being in the public eye through media reporting, CCI's field staff still believes that there are distinct benefits and ways of achieving publicity of activities through the media, particularly in terms of community engagement and outreach" (SHM002).

6. In activities where CCI has specified a target number of female beneficiaries, how successful have those activities been at meeting that target, and why is this the case?

In activities where CCI has specified a target number of female beneficiaries, grant implementation has successfully met targets because there is a demand for training for women. This is the case in the districts where women's projects have been selected by line departments. Other communities have not had grants that target women because communities have not requested them; this can be the case even when CCI staff encourage projects that target women.

There are tremendous challenges working with women in Afghanistan, especially in the more conservative areas and districts affected by insecurity where CCI is implemented. Evaluation fieldwork found the following information about women's projects, targets, and beneficiaries in the districts visited by MISTI.

In Kandahar City, CCI staff and GIRoA officials reported that the projects which targeted women were driven by DOWA, based upon a needs analysis of the city by DOWA. Some CCI staff asserted that beneficiary selection was to target the strongest candidates for developing their skills - while some GIRoA officials instead stated that the criteria for the selection of women was to selected women from poor families that had lost working-age family members. The project could thus help the trained women help provide support to their families' livelihoods through their own small businesses as a tailor or beautician. These two areas were seen as good opportunities in Kandahar city by DOWA officials, CCI staff, and other GIRoA officials. In addition, CCI staff, GIRoA officials, project *shura* members, beneficiaries, and community members reported having more demand for training than there were places for women trainees; this was the case for both tailoring and beautician training.

In Nahri Sarraj, District Development Assembly members interviewed asserted that the participation of women in vocational training like tailoring was very effective as they would be able to work and take on additional responsibilities in supporting their families.

The Women Affair's Department in Helmand noted that things were changing in the province; they reported that some of villages like Safian in Lashkar Gah were now requesting projects for women. They viewed this development as an indicator of progress. In the past, DOWA asserted that there had not been enough stability to allow women to take part of community development in the province – but now people understand that they will lose this opportunity unless they seize it now. Therefore the population requested a focus on the women's projects and the participation of women to give them further opportunities.

In other districts such as Shamal, CCI has not had grants that targeted women. CCI staff explained the lack of women's projects by noting that communities had not requested them. CCI staff also noted that they had not thought about grants for women. CCI staff that had worked in Spin Boldak reported that they had asked several times for the DG and communities to propose projects for women, but that no one had brought women's projects to them for consideration despite their encouragement of ideas and solicitation of grant concepts in this area.

7. What lessons can be drawn from CCI's implementation that are relevant to its continued implementation?

Interviews with OTI staff emphasized how OTI programming strives to build dynamic processes into project implementation that can provide useful information on project achievements and what is learned from these processes and results for management. In general, OTI objectives for programming target making quick impact on dynamic transitions. A common mechanism for OTI programming around the world is through community-based in-grants. What varies in much OTI programming around the world is what these grants focus on and how programs are implemented and evolve, based on characteristics of the country and its unique transition. In Afghanistan, a substantial number of lessons emerged through the fieldwork on CCI implementation over FY 2013 and the first quarter of FY 2014.

Pace of CCI Implementation has increased

From a start-up in FY 2012 that was universally seen to be far too slow, Creative has accelerated the pace of community-focused grants. OTI and CCI staff interviewed saw this as dramatic progress, but also

recognized that the pace of implementation and number of grants remained slower than anticipated and desired.

TABLE 4: CCI GRANTS – TOTAL AND BY QUARTER

	FY 2012 Q4	FY 2013 Q1	FY 2013 Q1	FY 2013 Q2	FY 2013 Q2	FY 2013 Q3	FY 2013 Q3	FY 2013 Q4	FY 2013 Q4
Number of Activities		Quarter	Total	Quarter	Total	Quarter	Total	Quarter	Total
Canceled (canceled)	0	0	0	3	3	7	10	3	13
Completed (completed/closed)	5	5	10	24	34	12	46	96	142
All (cleared/completed /closed/canceled)	10	60	70	113	183	46	229	107	**336**
Total Disbursements									
On Canceled Activities (canceled)	$0	0	$0	$0	$0	$6,931	$6,931	$3,284	$10,215
On Completed & Closed Activities (completed/closed)	$25,262	$9,097	$34,359	$230,553	$264,912	$175,020	$439,932	$1,584,764	$2,024,696
On All Projects (cleared/completed /closed/canceled)	$53,023	$59,553	$112,576	$219,031	$331,607	$456,800	$788,407	$2,042,196	**$2,830,603**

Source: CCI Outputs by Quarter Excel Spreadsheet, generated from OTIA.

OTI and CCI management interviewed emphasized how the pace of implementation of community grants and disbursements has continued to increase in each quarter of FY 2014 as well. CCI community grants are of modest sizes, especially those for soft projects. It is difficult to see how the project will be able to expend the $67.8 million obligated to CCI at the end of FY 2012 by the conclusion of the award.

Creative will Soon Move to Close-Out Phase

CCI management emphasized that while the project is due to close at the end of February 2015, they anticipated they would not start new grants after September 2014 to ensure that the project was able to complete all on-going projects and processes in the project. With approximately five months reserved for close-out, CCI then has the period May to September to implement ongoing and start in-process grants that could be completed prior to February 2015. This is a brief period of time to implement projects in the communities where CCI already works and even less time to spread to new communities. CCI grants have taken a long time to execute grants, as all processes from concept development to supplier and beneficiary vetting to procurement and implementation have taken substantial time. CCI has many processes that it needs to accelerate to close out existing grants that will tax current staff, especially M&E staff that are responsible for FER completion.

Direct Implementation Preferred to Service Providers/Implementing Partners

CCI staff, GIRoA officials, project *shura* members, beneficiaries, and community members were most critical of CCI projects that were implemented by CCI partners through contracts; their criticism centered

on the performance of these service providers, who were often perceived as not really invested in the success of these projects or the community in which they were working. Interviewees tended to be skeptical of the commitment of short term contractors tasked to perform a service. Many interviewees criticized the quality of goods and services provided by contract to CCI for particular grants. CCI had adjusted to these criticisms by implementing more grants directly, where management remains with CCI staff rather than a contractor. This method also depends to a greater extend on the project *shura* mechanism.

The most common method of implementation is one of the ways CCI implementation has been different in the South from the East. The South has mostly had projects implemented through contracts to Afghan companies, while the East has largely had projects directly implemented by CCI. CCI management in Kabul suggested that the difference arose because there were few people and firms capable of implementing CCI projects in the districts selected for work in the East, which led to more direct implementation by CCI staff. Security reasons were also seen to limit the firms that were willing to work in these districts. In the South, by contrast, direct implementation had been used less as there were thought to be more capable companies and people able to implement projects for CCI.

GIRoA officials, CCI staff, *shura* members, beneficiaries, and community members across provinces and districts – in both the East and South - in general complained about poor quality projects implemented by service providers or implementing partners under contract to CCI. Issues centered on what was often seen to be poor quality provision by IPs. These issues were noted when projects were in training, such as low quality sewing machines for women's tailoring, or in infrastructure, like the quality of cement for school refurbishment.

Local staff also criticized projects implemented by service providers which they saw as driven by Kabul rather than the communities in which they work. CCI reacted to these common issues and complaints by changing the balance of implementation mechanisms, and taking on larger roles for staff through direct implementation. One interview summed this up well - noting that for all of the projects implemented:

> by IPs, all the ideas come from Kabul. At the provincial level, we are only monitoring those projects. The grant that were implemented by IP in the past were more than 80% of all grants - but due to low quality of work, CCI decreased the proportion of grants implemented by IPs to 20-25% of all grants in the province (CCI staff, Helmand).

While there were also critics of CCI implementation, interviewees from CCI and the communities in which the project operates preferred CCI implementation to bringing in implementing partners for grant execution. Direct implementation was seen as preferable as leading to higher quality projects and greater management control by CCI and communities alike.

Cohesion *Jirga*s Seen as Valuable

The initial engagement of CCI with districts began with cohesion *jirgas* – larger *shuras* than the CCI project *shuras*. Cohesion *jirgas* bring together key local stakeholders and government officials around a dialogue on community priorities, bringing people closer to their government, and cohesion. These multi-day meetings drew praise in interviews with community elders and community leaders across districts, who valued having processes for engaging with GIRoA officials and project support to implement agreed-upon priorities from cohesion *jirga*s. Beneficiaries of particular projects also appreciated their community's engagement in what some communities saw as valuable processes of prioritization. Elders, CCI beneficiaries, and other community members from some districts drew a distinction between CCI projects that they viewed as having come from the community compared to other CCI projects that were seen as having come from outside the community – from the PGO, DGO, Kabul, or CCI staff. Interviews across districts found elders and other community leaders more positive about CCI projects when these

projects came out of the CJ process. CCI staff, government officials, and community elders asserted that some districts had not used the CJ process for the selection of projects. This was the case for example in Moqur and Qarabagh, where project selection was seen by interviewees to have been driven by the DGO. Project *shura* members for particular CCI projects had often been CJ participants.

Community members and project *shura* participants (who are local community leaders) particularly appreciated these CJ processes. For example, an interview in Nahri Sarraj noted: "with Cohesion *Jirga*, startup was a good because all the community representative including women participated in this big meeting. It was the first time that people together discussed about their problems and some sources for addressing for these problems."

In Kandahar city, CCI began district-based CJs in selected districts of the city to good effect, according to Creative staff that had worked on the project. However, the Provincial Governor halted these *jirga*s, as part of the PGs overall change in approach to demanding approval of all development projects and as a general check on international engagement in the Province, which thus included all of CCI's work. The PG approved other CCI grants but did not approve the district CJs for reasons that were not explained. Without GIRoA approval, CCI had to close these *jirgas* although their processes had not been brought to completion.

Project Ideas Can Come Through Other *Shura*s

Cohesion *Jirgas* were not the only community-based sources for grant ideas. In Nahri Sarraj, CCI staff reported that project ideas for direct implementation come through the district *shura* and direct involvement of communities. In the district, ideas for CCI projects came from the community through the *shura* and through the *shura* to the district governor and sector services director.

Starting at the District Center can Build Support for Reaching Further

CCI staff noted virtues in beginning work with GIRoA at the district center and after building trust and credibility through a few projects in the district, then extending CCI implementation to villages a few kilometers out from the center or to more remote areas. Project field staff, GIRoA partners, and *shura* members noted that with a limited number of CCI awards to date, the geographic spread from these district centers has been modest so far. The OTIA data generated for the evaluation consisted of 23-26 awards for 5 of the sampled districts, with substantially fewer grants in Shamal and Spin Boldak, although more in Kandahar city. Exploring the coordinates for these grants via Google Earth and discussion with CCI staff and GIRoA officials noted that grants often appear concentrated in or near district centers. In some districts where implementation has been going on for a shorter time or faced challenges, CCI may now be expanding, based on the results of an initial few grants outside of district centers (e.g. Nahri Sarraj).

Some community members interviewed criticized what they saw as the concentration of CCI activities and sought more attention to communities outside of the district center. Some community members from communities that had not benefitted from CCI or had fewer benefits from CCI grants shared this perspective with MISTI interviewers. One example noted: "They have everything inside the district center, I wish if they could have these *Jirga*s or coordination with the people who are outside of the district center" (Shamal).

CCI staff pointed to important effects of this initial concentration of grants. Community leaders from other villages that were not direct beneficiaries of CCI grants could see the benefits of project activities on the district center or nearby villages. These leaders and the populations of their communities, jealous of the benefits flowing to initial recipients, would approach the DG and project to seek grants for their communities. The geographic effects of this attraction have been felt in two ways within CCI: by

expanding project grants to additional villages within districts and by extending CCI to additional districts, such as Kajaki, within provinces.

Important to Continue to Inform GIRoA Officials

GIRoA officials are key partners for development efforts in the country. This is the case by definition when CCI projects targeted objective 1, building ties between GIRoA, customary leaders, and communities. In most of these grants, the awardees are GIRoA officials. Grants that focused on cohesion have been to government and non-government awardees. Although the presence of GIRoA is limited in many districts, where there are not many departments of line ministries, or even at the provincial level, communications among and between government officials may not be strong. Connections depend on many factors, including the leadership of the DG (or PG). Plus Afghan government stakeholders are frequently changed at the provincial and district level across Afghanistan.

Interviews with provincial and district-level GIRoA officials generally found them knowledgeable about CCI projects in their areas of responsibility. In Ghazni, however, GIRoA officials outside of the DGs were not found to be well informed; many of these officials were critical of CCI and felt that CCI staff had for not adequately informed them about project plans, activities, and potential. DGs in Ghazni were well informed, but did not share information with other officials. CCI did not seem to have briefed many officials in Ghazni outside of DGs. In Ghazni, GIRoA officials criticized CCI for not taking the opportunity to present on their activities through district forums run by district governors to publicize activities and opportunities (Ghazni).

Entry Package Solutions Useful

As CCI has accumulated experience with district entry and in grant implementation, CCI managers have developed a package of grants that have been common requests from communities and GIRoA stakeholders across provinces and districts. CCI provincial and Kabul managers suggested that starting with a mix of hard and soft projects builds CCI's credibility in communities and accelerates the pace of project implementation. CCI managers suggested this development came from accumulated experience with programming across the country, where communities and GIRoA stakeholders tend to have similar issues and suggest similar projects to CCI. CCI strategies note that the project is considering formalizing the developing an entry bundle of activities to gage programming potential in a district. For example, the Helmand Oct 2013 – Jan 2014 strategy notes:

> The entry bundle would include a Cohesion *Jirga*, an administration and management training course for the district government, vocational training courses, and one small scale infrastructure projects to build relationships. If these activities were to be implemented successfully, CCI would consider full roll out into the areas.

CCI managers felt that with a CJ as a component of this package, the first set of projects could be followed quickly by others selected by the *jirga*.

Communities Prefer "Hard" Activities

OTI emphasizes the importance of processes to support transition through grants and community-based activities around the world. Insecure, remote areas of Afghanistan are some of the least developed areas on earth in terms of infrastructure. CCI staff report that participants in community-driven processes in these districts and communities in Afghanistan systematically seek infrastructure projects – both for new construction and rehabilitation - to meet the needs of people in their villages and towns. GIRoA officials, project *shura* members, and beneficiaries of CCI projects also emphasized the value of small infrastructure rehabilitation through CCI grants for them. CCI staff, GIRoA officials, and community members also systematically preferred larger projects that they felt had the potential to provide more

benefits to themselves and their communities. USAID restrictions on new construction and CCI limitations on the size and composition of grants were thus frustrating to many key stakeholders of CCI.

Limiting Kankor Training to Most Appropriate Cohort

The *Kankor* exam is the test to determine qualification for University admission in Afghanistan. The exam is given annually for current high school graduates that want to attend public universities in the next term. In Marawara for example, *Kankor* training was designed to be for 400 people. CCI staffs were not clear on the reason for this target. CCI staff reported that the district had only 80 high school graduates that could immediately use this preparation for the test for University admission. They asserted that they "did not know where the other people for the training were coming from."

Small Stipends May Be Useful

Some CCI projects ran into challenges in implementation when project beneficiaries argued they needed stipends that were not provided by CCI to participate. One example was government staff requesting funding by CCI to cover their transportation expenses to attend capacity development training. Government staff expected a stipend of 150 to 200 Afghanis to cover daily transportation to the training site. In this grant, the absence of this stipend, participation waned and CCI stopped the project. Modest support, differentiated by the distance and cost of travel, was seen by beneficiaries and some government officials as a sensible as part of a project. CCI does not pay project *shura* members for their participation; this was seen as justifiable by CCI staff, GIRoA officials, beneficiaries, and most *shura* members themselves. However *Shura* members also suggested that stipends for transportation to cover their costs of *shura* activities would support stronger performance.

Additional key findings

Theory of change

It has been a challenge to anchor the program in a theory of change. Changing USG strategies and policies made it difficult to develop a framework for the project, make it harder to implement the project, and impede linking CCI to broader initiatives. When procured as the OTI Afghanistan program, the unnamed program was expected to be linked to the U.S. COIN strategy and policies and ISAF action. However, with the plans for a drawdown of US and ISAF forces and the transition to Afghan leadership in security, these links fell by the wayside. The OTI/Afghanistan program then had to articulate new goals and objectives to guide implementation without a focus on COIN theories of change. The objectives of CCI are not clearly linked to a single theory of change to help drive the implementation. Strengthening ties between local actors, customary governance structures, and GIRoA (Objective 1) comes out of COIN theory and the experience of implementing the strategy in Afghanistan. The development of community cohesion as Objective 2, an understanding of what cohesion is and how to support it, and activities that support cohesion is more innovative and took substantial time and effort for the program to develop. Although CCI has developed provincial and district plans that incorporate aspects of COIN and resilience theories, as well as metrics connected to them, the language of these theories appears to be used more for reporting than for grant development and implementation.

Critical Assumptions Used in Design

As with the theory of change, the assumptions behind the OTI Afghanistan program have also changed. The most critical assumption when the program was conceived as supporting the U.S. and ISAF surge was that OTI would be able to work effectively in communities following the increase in international military efforts. When the trajectory instead evolved to transition and Afghan security, the assumptions changed: to the existence of Afghan forces that would be able to provide adequate security for the

program to operate in relatively insecure districts and that there was adequate GIRoA governance to partner with CCI in grant development and implementation.

While security has been an issue for CCI staff and the transition to Afghan-led security has changed the number and roles of OTI staff in provinces across Afghanistan, Creative has been able to develop and implement grants through Afghan staff. AGE intimidation and influence has been managed, in part through community leaders that seek CCI support. The strategy of starting in district centers where security is better has also helped mitigate these issues. GIRoA government partners have proven acceptable – or even good in some cases – for most districts where CCI has been rolled out. In Spin Boldak, the inability of some key GIRoA officials to pass the U.S. government vetting that is required to be a beneficiary of any U.S. program contributed to the decision to no longer implement CCI in the district. In some other districts with problematic DGs, CCI staff reported having success in working with PGs to go over their DGs heads – which then enabled CCI staff to enlist DG acquiesce or support for developing and implementing CCI activities in their districts.

Continuity Counts

CCI has had substantial staff turnover. This has been the case for expatriate and Afghan staff alike. This has also involved substantial changes both in Kabul and in provinces and districts where CCI projects have been implemented. This high turnover was noted by CCI staff as negatively affected the management of the project, making it difficult to build relationships with OTI, and adding to challenges in working with GIRoA authorities and communities.

While individual staff have changed, operations have continued. CCI staff have often been promoted from within to replace those that move on. CCI staff have been able to maintain working relationships and have engaged in project implementation which has built credibility. For example, one government official contrasted CCI's permanent presence and delivery favorably compared to those of other organizations.

> Some organizations are coming here and just on the first day informing us that they want to implement projects. After that, I have not seen them again. But CCI is coordinating everything from the first day up to the end of the project with the Government to show to the people that it is from the government's side (GIRoA Official, Shamal)

Challenged OTI/Creative Relationships

While the start of up the project was not a focus of the evaluation, OTI and Creative recognize that the CCI program got off to a rocky beginning. OTI and Creative staff noted how CCI has been difficult to implement throughout – as well as asserted that implementation had been picking up and approaching the level anticipated under the program. The slow start of the program and what Creative interviewees report to have been conflicting or not useful guidance and direction from OTI on the main parameters of the CCI program has contributed to creating weak relationships where there is little trust and confidence between Creative and OTI staff in Afghanistan and between Creative staff within CCI.

Effects of Long Implementation Processes and Delays Unknown

In almost all aspects of the project, implementation has been slow. CCI and OTI interviewees report that the slow pace of implementation has been determined by many factors, including the length of time it has taken to develop an overall framework for the project, different guidance about priorities in the project, limited numbers of staff under the project, and capacity challenges with these staff. Since the evaluation SOW focused on CCI implementation in the field, the examination of timing only considers this aspect in the evaluation. Findings in terms of the length of time project processes take thus focus on implementation of grants. In implementation, some CCI staff felt reporting and project procedures lengthened implementation. OTI and CCI staff also noted the additional time required to vet beneficiaries

through USG procedures. Some CCI interviewees stressed how requirements for vetting had expanded for all USG projects, up to requiring vetting cement providers to purchase a bag of cement, and that implementation had slowed due to the extent of vetting and time it took for vetting – both of which had increased over the period of CCI under evaluation.

The fieldwork did not ask direct questions about the length of time for project development and implementation to CCI staff in provinces and districts, GIRoA officials, project *shura* members, beneficiaries, or community members. However these informants had many opportunities to raise the length of time it takes to develop and implement a CCI project if they had chosen to as major factors that have influenced CCI implementation. Some CCI field staff were critical of what they saw as "some unnecessary paper work" and multiple approval stages which they felt caused delays in the implementation of projects (Sarkani) and of the amount of time it took to get projects approved (Kunar). On the whole, GIRoA officials, community leaders, *shura* members, beneficiaries, and community members were not critical of the time it took to implement projects with MISTI evaluators in interviews. Despite the length of time it has taken to implement CCI and particular grants in these challenging districts, project partners, beneficiaries, and community members did not focus on delays as a problem.

CCI's Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Lags

OTI and CCI management note that throughout the project, M&E has been challenging. This was seen as an attribute of decentralized implementation of community based grants, especially in insecure provinces, as well as an issue that project management had not been able to address successfully.

The project has four levels of M&E: stakeholder and community M&E by project *shuras*, CCI M&E through dedicated Creative M&E staff and department, independent monitoring for OTI by RSI, and Impact Assessments by MISTI. The evaluation addresses the first mechanism through question one on the roles of *shuras*. OTI has addressed the need for independent M&E through an additional channel, contracting with RSI to be an independent monitoring unit for CCI. The discussion that follows thus focuses on Creative's internal project-based M&E.

In an effort to encourage the independence of M&E, CCI has established a system of CCI M&E officers stationed in the field that report to the M&E department in Kabul. However, CCI staff interviewed noted that working together closely in provinces and districts with implementing staff and the fact that Creative needed to hire from the limited pool of qualified staff from these districts and provinces make independence difficult. M&E staff report pressure to focus on finishing Final Evaluation Reports. An approved FER is the final requirement for any grant to be closed; the project has recognized that since many projects have been completed and await only FERs. CCI has thus pushed the M&E staff to complete as many projects as possible. FERs are joint responsibilities of the grants team and M&E team. FERs are challenging for local staff to write well, and well written text is seen as a requirement for FER approval.

The new OTI CCI M&E Strategy, approved in January 2014, notes that OTI and CCI have now developed multiple mechanisms for M&E and learning.

> CCI [has] established several mechanisms to allow the program to re-calibrate based on information from M&E. First, OTI staff facilitate Lessons Learned Workshops on a monthly or bi-monthly basis for IP staff. These workshops take findings from the IMU and IP level M&E as a starting point to examine certain strategic underpinnings of programming in an effort to understand their efficacy and to discuss how they can be used more effectively. Second, using information and conversations from the SRS and from other M&E resources, CCI program staff write bi-annual work plans that include detailed analysis at the provincial and district levels, as well as a work plan of projects

> for the upcoming six-months. Finally, the program holds regular Strategic Review Sessions, during which senior staff examine new political and security realities in Afghanistan and progress on earlier CCI activities in order to define upcoming projects (2).

Senior OTI and Creative management held the first lessons learned workshop in November 2013. No staff mentioned that CCI had yet conducted Lessons Learned Workshops for field staff or had other mechanisms that focused on learning from implementation besides FERs for staff. M&E staff noted that their team captures a lot of findings through sharing their site visit findings on weekly basis and the FERs. But CCI M&E staff felt that CCI did not adequately use the lessons learned, successes, and challenges sections from the completed grants that are included all in FERs. Their sense was that program teams did not read their FERs, did not "own" this process of completion for grants, and did not use FERs from other districts, provinces, and regions to influence their work. M&E staff noted how some of the same weaknesses that have already been identified in some grants recur in other grants and attributed this problem to CCI on the whole not using FERs beyond generating them as a requirement for to completing grants.

Provincial and district work plans have been generated and revised, with substantial information about the provinces and districts where CCI has focused its work. It was not clear to the evaluation team how these products were used by CCI or influenced decision making. Project processes focused on in-kind grant implementation which was difficult to link to the broader objectives that could lead to a successful withdrawal of CCI from a district or project.

Limited Innovation in CCI

For most of the period under evaluation, CCI did not develop processes that stimulated innovation in the development and implementation of community grants in Afghanistan. The ideas behind CCI grants and the grants themselves, including the names and grantees, are repeated across many of the provinces and districts where CCI works. CCI interviews suggested that the initially slow pace of developing ideas and turning them into grants in the early period of CCI led to innovative ideas, but that most of these concepts – if they made it to a Yellow Light, then stalled in the process of moving to a Green Light, award, and implementation. Particular proposed grants raised as examples of these types of issues were several proposed projects on cultural heritage and preservation in the South. The need to speed up the implementation of community grants encouraged CCI staff to propose and develop ideas that OTI was seen as more likely to quickly approve; Creative staff interviewed noted that ideas that had already been accepted by OTI were more likely to be approved quickly and thus attractive to CCI staff. CCI staff and GIRoA officials, while asserting that their districts and provinces were unique, recognized also that Afghans in these relatively insecure districts and provinces faced some common problems that they could begin to address through with relatively similar project solutions. The challenges of innovation and evidence for similar problems and issues across communities encouraged CCI teams to revert to existing programs, including an entry package and plans for successor grants, based on activities that have been successfully implemented elsewhere.

OTI and CCI have made adjustments to the structure of the program that may help address this set of issues in project development. The Program Development Unit (PDU), which was not included in the SOW and thus outside of the frame for the evaluation's fieldwork, was created in the first quarter of FY 2014 to confront the lack of innovation in CCI by serving as an incubator for new ideas.

CONCLUSIONS

The mid-term performance evaluation has examined the performance of OTI and Creative towards meeting the objectives of CCI and their evolution through FY 2013. The evaluation has objectively evaluated what has worked well in the project over this period, what has worked less well, and why this is the case with a focus on the seven specific questions from the SOW for the mid-term evaluation. The performance evaluation has in addition also examined the theory of change and other aspects of project implementation as additional findings.

Conclusions are based on the findings above, and organized by seven specific questions enumerated in the SOW, plus additional conclusions from the additional findings.

1. Roles of the project *shura* mechanism in implementation

Project *shuras* play a variety of important roles in CCI implementation. *Shura*s have roles in coordinating activities in communities, managing security, monitoring project implementation, and managing community contributions. CCI uses *shuras* more flexibly than project materials suggest. Projects that are of short duration, implemented by a service provider, or were not community focused do not have project *shuras*. Insecurity and a lack of staff knowledge about project *shuras* have led to less use of *shuras* in some districts. Where used, project *shuras* are appreciated by GIRoA officials, beneficiaries, and community members and associated by them with greater community engagement in CCI projects. CCI staff also value the work of project *shura*s in implementation in securing project sites, facilitating community contributions, coordinating with GIRoA and other stakeholders, and overseeing implementation. *Shura*s in some cases were too involved in implementation in ways that reflected their members' private interests rather than community interests. Some *shura*s were frustrated with what they felt was CCI's lack of responsiveness to issues they identified in grant implementation, such as the quality of project inputs.

2. Strengthening ties between local actors, customary governance structures, and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) through implementation

CCI focused implementation on supporting two objectives through FY 2013. Objective 1 was "Strengthening ties between local actors, customary governance structures, and GIRoA." CCI supported strengthening ties through grants that focused on this objective through strategic communications and public relations, as well as by including GIRoA officials in outreach and promotion of CCI projects with different foci. CCI staff and GIRoA officials pointed to numerous cases where the engagement of CCI in projects which worked to bring GIRoA closer to the people led to increased petitions from citizens to government as well as shaped the local environment so that the DG would be able to physically travel to what had been insecure areas. The expansion of access for officials and demand for government services was seen as evidence for stronger ties.

3. Support for increasing cohesion among and between communities through implementation

Community cohesion was developed as a concept and second objective for the project as it became clear that the U.S. military and ISAF were not going to continue to increase the international commitment to

Afghan security - instead the international community was moving to support the transition to Afghan leadership and control of their own security. It was conceptually difficult for CCI to develop this objective and to implement it. But once developed, CCI staff, GIRoA officials, stakeholders, beneficiaries, and community members were able to articulate a shared understanding of cohesion broad enough to support the implementation of community-focused grants in Afghan conditions. Cohesion grants were seen as the ones that came from community input through Cohesion *Jirga*s rather than district officials or CCI in Kabul. Some CCI, GIRoA, and *shura* interviewees were able to explain how mechanisms for bringing communities together, such as projects to address common, shared needs of communities for better transportation of goods and services through road rehabilitation or water via *karez* repair, connected communities and supported resilience.

4. CCI vocational training

When GIRoA stakeholders or cohesion *jirga*s identified vocational training as a priority for a district, interviews suggested that they had modest expectations for employment out of this training. The challenging security and economic conditions in the districts and provinces where CCI works were recognized as obvious impediments to employment creation. CCI staff, GIRoA officials, project *shura* members, beneficiaries, and community members shared this perspective and affirmed their opinions that beneficiaries had increased potential for employment as a result of learning these new skills. Professionals that support vocational education were more critical, noting the absence of longer-term follow up for trained young people, lack of market analysis, and absence of a sustainability plan or future funding.

5. CCI public outreach

CCI projects promote public information about grants and activities as a part of almost all awards. CCI has also implemented targeted interventions to encourage better communications from GIRoA officials through media activities. In some districts, security concerns has sometimes led staff to not promote projects widely. CCI staff varied in their communications with GIRoA officials in their districts, in some districts communicating regularly and widely while in other districts, many officials knew little about these projects –because both DGs and the project did not spread information widely, often in part due to security concerns. Project *shura* members and beneficiaries were knowledgeable, and served to promote projects through word of mouth in their communities. In addition, staff work to promote projects attracted television and radio coverage which was also noted to be informative by some community members.

6. Meeting female beneficiary targets

There are tremendous challenges working with women in Afghanistan, especially in more conservative areas and district affected by insecurity. Fieldwork for the evaluation suggested that CCI has been able to successfully implement projects that target female beneficiaries in the districts where CCI has developed grants that focus on women. Implementing these grants depends on having GIRoA officials, including ones from the DOWA as the common awardee for in-kind grants for women for CCI, or the communities themselves advocate for projects that target women. Conditions conducive to culturally appropriate vocational training for women, such as beautician or tailor, exist in many districts where CCI works. CCI, implementation of these projects has been successful in these district; the fieldwork suggested that these women's projects were able to meet the numerical targets set for participation. In some other provinces, security concerns or a lack of knowledge by staff of women's projects have led to staff not promoting women's projects and a lack of projects that focus on women and girls.

7. Lessons learned from CCI implementation

Pace of CCI Implementation has Increased

Creative has been able to accelerate the development and implementation of in-kind grants in communities sharply over FY 2013. From a handful of grants that were approved at the end of FY 2012, CCI completed the year with 336 grants approved for development or implementation, closed, completed, or cancelled.

Creative will Soon Move to Close-Out Phase

CCI managers noted that the project would soon be in close-out mode, with Creative planning to not start new grants after September 2014 to allow time to complete and close all awards. This leaves little time for adjusting CCI implementation between May and September 2014.

Direct Implementation Preferred to Service Providers/Implementing Partners

CCI has moved away from service providers for many grants in favor of direct implementation. This is one of the main lessons learned from the perspective of many CCI staff, who were critical of the poor quality of goods and services provided by IPs and failure of service providers to share information on project implementation.

Cohesion *Jirgas* Seen as Valuable

CCI processes that bring communities and GIRoA officials together to discuss issues and community priorities that could be addressed with CCI's help were appreciated by staff, officials, traditional leaders, beneficiaries, and community members. Cohesion *Jirgas* were seen as helpful for the identification of projects as well as to build ties with government and cohesion between communities. Not all provinces, districts, and sub-districts were able to complete CJs; government officials that sought greater control over international development projects their area halted these processes in Kandahar and did not permit their conclusion. CCI staff were able to generate project ideas and enlist community support from incomplete *jirgas*. CJ processes were lauded for bringing communities into project selection, which was seen to produce projects that communities were really behind and were thus better implemented by these communities.

Project Ideas Can Come Through Other *Shuras*

Afghan communities have district and other *shuras* that bring together community leaders for discussion; these *shuras* can and have been used to generate demand for CCI projects and ideas for particular awards based on community input.

Starting at the District Center can Build Support for Reaching Further

CCI has started implementation from district centers where security is strongest and GIRoA partners more present. Building trust and credibility through a few projects in the district center is expected to create opportunities to then extend CCI implementation villages a few kilometers out from the center before moving eventually to more remote areas. CCI has to date had limited numbers of grants in any district, (excluding Kandahar City); this has limited the geographic spread of CCI grants. CCI staff and GIRoA officials note that the successful implementation of grants in the center attract community leaders from more remote villages that are jealous of the benefits associated with CCI projects that flow to these initial communities.

GIRoA Staff Turnover Demands Additional Information Sharing

Because local officials in Afghanistan often resign or are replaced, CCI staff need to continue to brief GIRoA officials at the district and provincial level on past performance, current grants, and future plans. CCI staff should use GIRoA fora to spread information across government departments that may not coordinate well.

Entry Package Solutions Useful

CCI managers suggested that implementing a set of four or five grants upon first coming to a district sped the building of relationships between CCI and the people of the district that accelerated the pace of later programming. The projects CCI has implemented to date across communities have been similar; CCI staff suggested that these similarities came from the fact that communities and GIRoA stakeholders tend to have similar issues and suggest similar projects to CCI.

Additional Conclusions

Theory of change

CCI has had clear objectives over FY 2013 which are linked to two different theories of change. However, the theories are used more in reporting than in-kind community grant implementation.

Continuity Counts

Substantial staff turnover of both Creative expatriate and Afghan staff has made it difficult for CCI to build and maintain relationships and implement the project. This lack of continuity has hampered relationships with GIRoA officials and with OTI. Promotion from within has helped CCI manage these problems.

Challenged OTI/Creative Relationships

Other reviews of the program have emphasized the problems of the start-up and early implementation of CCI. Relationships between OTI and Creative staff still appear to suffer from low levels of confidence and trust – in both the ability of OTI to provide the strategic direction and guidance for the program and the capacity of Creative to implement community-based grants based on this strategy. The lack of trust and confidence impedes implementation by creating additional demand for information and guidance. These issues also hamper the development of innovative ideas for community grants.

Effects of Long Implementation Processes and Delays Unknown

While the implementation of CCI has been slow in almost all aspects of the project, GIRoA officials, project *shura* members, beneficiaries, and community members were not critical of the pace of grant implementation. Despite the length of time it has taken to implement CCI and particular grants in these challenging districts, project partners, beneficiaries, and community members did not focus on delays as a problem.

CCI's Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Lags

CCI has four levels of M&E as needed to ensure OTI's and Creative's fiduciary responsibilities for expending USG funds. These M&E processes require substantial time and effort – but have not had significant staff devoted to these tasks in CCI Kabul. This has delayed the closure of grants, as the final step is the approval of the Final Evaluation Report written by M&E staff. The emphasis on completing grants has contributed to CCI not developing mechanisms that are seen by staff to spread lessons learned in ways that are used by Creative staff in the development and implementation of additional grants. The provincial and district work plans that had been developed do not appear to be used in CCI to influence

decision making on the development or implementation of grants. The new PDU may help in the spread of lessons learned going forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations are based on the conclusions above, focus on the overall project, and follow the seven questions from the SOW. The relevance of these recommendations depends in part on larger questions about the future of OTI in Afghanistan and the importance of supporting transition through community-based in-kind grants for the U.S. government in these five provinces, which range from relatively remote, insecure areas like Kunar and Khost with few other development activities to large, key cities like Kandahar that are a focus of international and GIRoA assistance.

1. Roles of the project *shura* mechanism in implementation

CCI has evolved to use project *shuras* for some but not all grants.

Project *shuras* should continue to be used for CCI in-kind grants that originate from community processes like Cohesion *Jirgas* and for projects that need substantial coordination within and between communities, have potential security issues that can be addressed by community elders, have lengthy implementation that requires substantial project monitoring and additional communications within the community, or has substantial contributions from the community to the project that can usefully be managed by the *shura*.

CCI M&E processes should be used to gather and disseminate detailed information about best practices from CCI project *shuras* to improve their use throughout the project. An IMU case study on *shura* use from November 2013 developed for CCI's use could be used to kickstart this process for CCI's M&E, provincial, and district staff.

2. Strengthening ties between local actors, customary governance structures, and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) through implementation

CCI implements many grants that are requested by GIRoA officials, are implemented with these departments and offices, and strengthen GIRoA capacity and communications in the districts where CCI works. These grants do strengthen ties between communities and GIRoA.

CCI should continue to link provincial and district-level GIRoA officials to CCI community grants as a successful method of strengthening ties between local actors, customary governance structures, and GIRoA officials.

3. Support for increasing cohesion among and between communities through implementation

Many of the CCI grants that originate from communities through Cohesion *Jirga*s or other mechanism, in contrast to those that come from than district GIRoA officials or CCI staff in Kabul that were viewed as supporting strengthened ties, are seen by CCI staff, GIRoA officials, and beneficiaries as supporting cohesion. These grants focus on providing more substantial benefits directly to communities or across more than one community.

CCI should continue to use Cohesion *Jirgas*, lauded as useful mechanisms by GIRoA officials and community members alike, to generate ideas and prioritize them through community-driven processes. CCI should consider repeating *jirgas* after implementing several projects in communities following initial Cohesion *Jirgas* to allow community-based mechanisms to assess priorities and how these have changed in the wake of CCI engagement and the implementation of several grants in the community.

4. CCI vocational training

CCI has been able to implement vocational training programs when requested by GIRoA officials and communities where CCI works.

As a community cohesion program, CCI does not provide the long-term training and mentoring or follow-up that are best practices in development programs that focus on vocational training or the business education and start-up material provided by activities that support entrepreneurship and new business development. CCI should evaluate whether vocational training and provision of necessary materials as is done by CCI has enduring effects on communities that support continuing to develop grants in this area. If substantial effects on strengthened ties or increased cohesion are not found and plausibly connected to vocational training after the conclusion of these grants, CCI should consider no longer supporting these kinds of grants. This type of evaluation may be challenging for OTI and CCI, as any effects on cohesion may not be noted in the short or medium term, but may be evident over a longer period such as a year. CCI M&E staff and management should assess outcomes of vocational training over a longer time period, as long as is possible based on the period of performance of the contract.

5. CCI public outreach

To support strengthening ties between communities and GIRoA officials or to enhance community cohesion, information about CCI activities, the roles and responsibilities of district-level GIRoA officials, and the ways benefits flow within and between communities to support cohesion need to be conveyed to key stakeholders as well as within the communities where CCI works.

CCI should continue to insist that a robust public outreach effort be an integral part of all grant activities. Public outreach should combine word of mouth through community elders and project *shura*s with broader methods like local radio and television to spread information about existing projects, expand the demand for GIRoA governance, and widen knowledge about ways to increase community cohesion. CCI should often use direct implementation for public outreach, as service providers that are not public relations firms do not have the same incentives to promote an activity widely that CCI does and have in general not proven effective at producing and implementing outreach campaigns around implementing their grants.

6. Meeting female beneficiary targets

CCI has successfully implemented grants that target female beneficiaries in many districts when requested by GIRoA officials, often the DOWA, or by communities through Cohesion *Jirgas*. CCI has not implemented these types of grants in districts were officials and communities have not requested activities that target women and girls.

CCI should continue to implement projects that target female beneficiaries when requested by district officials or communities, when these activities clearly support project objectives, and when these grants can be implemented in culturally-appropriate ways. CCI staff should continue to explicitly ask community leaders about whether their priorities include projects that target women and girls to encourage communities to consider activities in this area. CCI should evaluate the effects of grants that

have targeted female beneficiaries on strengthening ties between communities and district-level GIRoA officials and on community cohesion to understand and support any broader effects of these grants.

7. Lessons learned from CCI implementation

Consider Implementing More Community Infrastructure Activities

CCI methodologies use community engagement and consultative processes to help communities decide on their priorities, develop ideas for in-kind community-focused grants that can help address these priorities, and implement grants to address these areas. Field research suggested that CCI staff, GIRoA officials, and community leaders share a preference that is widely found across communities all over Afghanistan for larger, "hard" projects that rehabilitate infrastructure that is seen as critical to the future of their communities. For CCI to address the priorities raised by communities and have a larger legacy in the remaining period of implementation, the project should consider supporting larger numbers of community infrastructure projects implemented through both direct implementation and service providers. Infrastructure rehabilitation does raise issues of unfunded mandates for GIRoA institutions that often lack the capacity and resources to maintain community infrastructure developed or rehabilitated through international assistance. To expand, CCI should develop inclusive processes to increase the prospects for GIRoA and community maintenance of small-scale infrastructure. One of the legacies of CCI would then not only be the infrastructure itself and the experience of working together with project staff and GIRoA officials through project *shuras* to contribute to and monitor "their" projects, but also local processes to help district officials and communities manage maintenance challenges. CCI could consider working with stakeholders to develop processes that link GIRoA officials and communities where these projects are implemented around ways to share operating and maintenance responsibilities. These responsibilities might be an additional way that the project *shura* concept could be extended. Stronger processes of management and ways to report on broader outcomes can be developed to strengthen the impact of project *shuras* as well as measure whether and how these processes of community participation have more enduring effects than infrastructure activities that have been implemented without community structures through other projects and implementers.

Consider Simplifying Processes for Reporting

The fieldwork suggested that OTI and Creative CCI staff focus extensively on processes of reporting on individual grant development and implementation to OTI through OTI Anywhere. This focus on reporting and getting the reporting right is demanding. Creative staff needs to be able to focus on managing for results and impact rather than reporting. CCI and OTI staff should consider ways to adapt reporting requirements and modify some of the OTI/Afghanistan fields of the database to ease the time spent on reporting and make this information more useful for management as well as reporting on achievements beyond individual grants. OTI and CCI managers should consider a retreat-based process to evaluate use and value of each of the reporting steps in the activity cycle and activity database guide – jettisoning steps that are agreed to be less useful for management and learning. The outcome could be a leaner set of processes that leave more time for management, better information, and more learning.

Develop and Use Additional Monitoring & Evaluation

Additional staff and training are needed for Creative to be able to effectively evaluate its current set of grants. The limited number of staff at present has led to a backlog in the drafting and finalization of Final Evaluation Reports, which are needed to close grants. CCI should also develop methods to understand, influence, measure, and report on progress towards the two objectives of CCI examined in this evaluation. Grant-based measurement of outcomes of strengthened ties and increased cohesion – or the aggregation of the current set of largely output-based indicators across CCI grants – do not allow Creative or OTI to adequately tell the story of CCI's effects on districts or provinces, which remains unknown. The work

already done to develop the provincial and district workplans should be revisited to develop ways to articulate broader effects of CCI programming. CCI processes that evaluate grants should be used to disseminate lessons learned from community-focused grants across communities, districts, and provinces and positively influence the next set of CCI activities. Support for using lessons learned should be a part of M&E – but also a core task of CCI's management staff at the central, provincial, and district level.

Address Trust and Confidence Issues

OTI's methodologies for implementing programming in transition around the world envision a close partnership between OTI and its implementing partners. Relationships between OTI and Creative in the implementation of CCI have been negatively affected by the initial period of program development and the slow start to grant implementation, which has had weakened trust and confidence in each other. OTI and Creative should develop some ways to work together to build good working relationships, trust, and confidence that can lead to more efficient grant implementation and stronger collaboration in support of community cohesion. The evaluation fieldwork did not directly solicit ideas for how to increase mutual trust and confidence. However some of the findings and conclusions can be used to develop initiatives in this area. Facilitated mini-retreats that set up intensive, productive collaborative work by the staff of OTI and Creative can be used to build trust and confidence between OTI and Creative CCI. Some areas where these mechanisms could be successful are:

- Working together to streamline project reporting and make grant reporting more useful for CCI Kabul staff, selected CCI field staff, and OTI management. This could include developing simplified evaluation processes for FERs which would accelerate the pace of grant closure.
- Holding lessons learned sessions that encourage the use of field experience and information learned from the implementation of grants in communities, districts, and provinces with other areas where CCI is implemented. Lessons learned should not only focus on ones for Creative but also for OTI, and ideas and evidence should be solicited across organizations, from Kabul and from the field, to build a stronger community of practice in implementing CCI.
- Collaborating to analyze and report on broader district-level processes to assess progress towards the objectives of CCI, which would again be a joint endeavor of field staff and Kabul based staff from CCI and OTI management.

These possible activities should be led by a facilitator that is not from OTI or Creative but seen as neutral. The point of facilitation is to manage the processes for OTI staff and CCI staff to work together intensively in ways that overcome these trust and confidence issues as much as produce results in simplifying reporting, gathering and using lessons learned, and understanding broader impact. Designing mini-retreats that can successfully address these trust and confidence issues will require substantial work by the facilitator(s) in information gathering in order to establish ways to hold productive mini-retreats.

Conduct Additional Training for CCI Staff

The rapid pace of personnel change in the project have made it difficult to implement community grants and contributed to challenges in communications with communities and OTI in the project. Creative should develop and implement a training program to ensure that staff understand key processes of CCI and convey these accurately and in a comprehensive way in the communities where CCI is implemented. Training can in addition take advantage of a more robust M&E system to act on detailed lessons learned for implementation (such as lessons from project *shuras* on information sharing with government and communities).