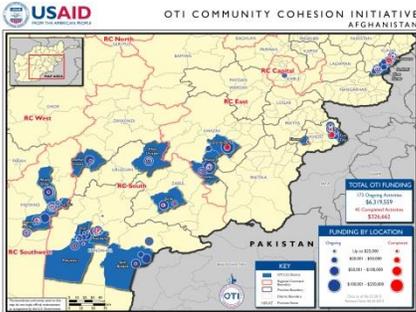




# Office of Transition Initiatives **COMMUNITY COHESION INITIATIVE** **QUARTERLY REPORT APRIL – JUNE 2013**



## **PROGRAM DESCRIPTION**

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 is implemented by Creative Associates International, Inc. (Creative). This quarterly report covers the period of project performance for CCI's activities from April 1, 2013 to June 30, 2013.

## **PROGRAM AREAS**

CCI currently focuses on strategically important districts within Kandahar, Zabul and Uruzgan provinces in the South, Helmand in the Southwest and Ghazni, Khost and Kunar in the East.

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.

In order to direct and improve programming, CCI relies on a robust Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) system in addition to a rolling assessment and workplan process. CCI's M&E system gathers information from multiple levels to include atmospherics and data from third parties (from activity outputs to the overall stability of an area), to assess programming success and provide the information necessary to improve activities and inform district assessments. CCI also conducts ongoing assessments that provide situational awareness and a strategic analysis of CCI's areas of operations, in order to inform the development of provincial work plans which guide programming.

### **OTI MISSION STATEMENT**

*To support U.S. foreign policy objectives by helping local partners advance peace and democracy in priority countries in crisis. Seizing critical windows of opportunity, OTI works on the ground to provide fast, flexible, short-term assistance targeted at key political transition and stabilization needs.*

## **COUNTRY SITUATION**

### **Transition**

#### **Security Transition**

In June 2013, the fifth and final stage of the security transition was completed. Afghan forces now have complete ownership and responsibility for their nation's security. In some areas of CCI operations, this transition has impacted staff's ability to travel and operate safely, as security continues to ebb and flow. While some areas have improved or remained the same, others have deteriorated. This has resulted in an increase in Anti Government Element (AGE) and criminal activity.

Attacks in Kabul have also been on the rise. In many of these instances the Taliban claimed responsibility. The latest attack, on June 25, 2013, was a complex attack in the vicinity of the Presidential Palace, U.S. Embassy and the CCI office. Attacks such as these have a direct effect on CCI operations as they undermine staff safety and impact productivity. As a result of this attack, staff were unable to report to work until access to the area was cleared by security forces later in the afternoon. A skeletal staff were able to attend the office for vital tasks, but essentially a full day of business was lost. A similar bombing in the preceding week at the nearby courts of justice also disrupted work for an afternoon. Despite these events occurring in the final, crucial part of the quarter when the program was under immense pressure to meet financial targets, the targets for the month were achieved.

As the drawdown continues, civilian Chief of Mission personnel were removed from Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) and District Support Teams (DSTs) in Kandahar, Zabul, Uruzgan and Ghazni. The drawdown was accelerated in the south following the attack outside the Zabul PRT in April, which resulted in the deaths of several Americans and local nationals. PRT and DST closures continue to limit the ability of CCI staff to interact in person with OTI officials. Travel between provinces is also affected. The reduction in Embassy Air flights in places like Uruzgan has forced the staff to utilize commercial airlines to travel out of the province. As Embassy Air further curtails operations and commercial flights are not an option, staff will have to revert to road travel which is another security risk.

Operations are also affected in other ways. In Khost, for example, AGEs have warned telecommunication companies to restrict their coverage. This further limits the communication and coordination between staff, grantees and community leaders resulting in missed opportunities, delayed start-up and implementation of activities. In places like Ghazni City, suppliers are reluctant to give quotations, invoices and other documents on printed letterhead to CCI staff as they fear that insurgents will use that information to target them. In Uruzgan, the program experienced staff attrition due to security risks. These challenges impact CCI's ability to uphold compliance standards.

#### **Political Transition**

The most significant political event this quarter was the opening of the Taliban office in Qatar. The Taliban's decision to fly its flag at the new office caused considerable friction, leading to strong statements of protest from senior Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) officials. This act also impacted the relationship between the United States and GIROA as the Afghan government remained under the impression that the U.S. Government condoned the act. This in turn led to GIROA suspending negotiations over the Bilateral Security Agreement with the U.S. Government.

The elections scheduled for next spring are moving to the forefront of Afghan public concern. The public expects a political transition to take place. There is marked escalation in political activity and reports of violence are already occurring. These are not limited to the Taliban, but also occurring between political rivals. In response to these trends, CCI is prioritizing new approaches to engage directly with the political transition. This new approach can be seen in the "Supporting Alternatives to Election Violence" concept paper and activity concept for an Electoral Conflict Prevention Adviser submitted to OTI in June.

#### **GIROA Engagement**

Building rapport with government officials continues to be a challenge when turnover rates are so high. For example, since March five district governors in the southern region were replaced with no advance warning. Last quarter, CCI reported on the challenge of overcoming the unwillingness of the Kandahar Governor to allow CCI to

implement programming without prior coordination at the provincial level. This continues to impose programmatic constraints. However, there is some progress due to the strong engagement efforts of the CCI local teams. Recently, as many as 37 activities were approved out of a total of 60 grant concepts submitted in May.

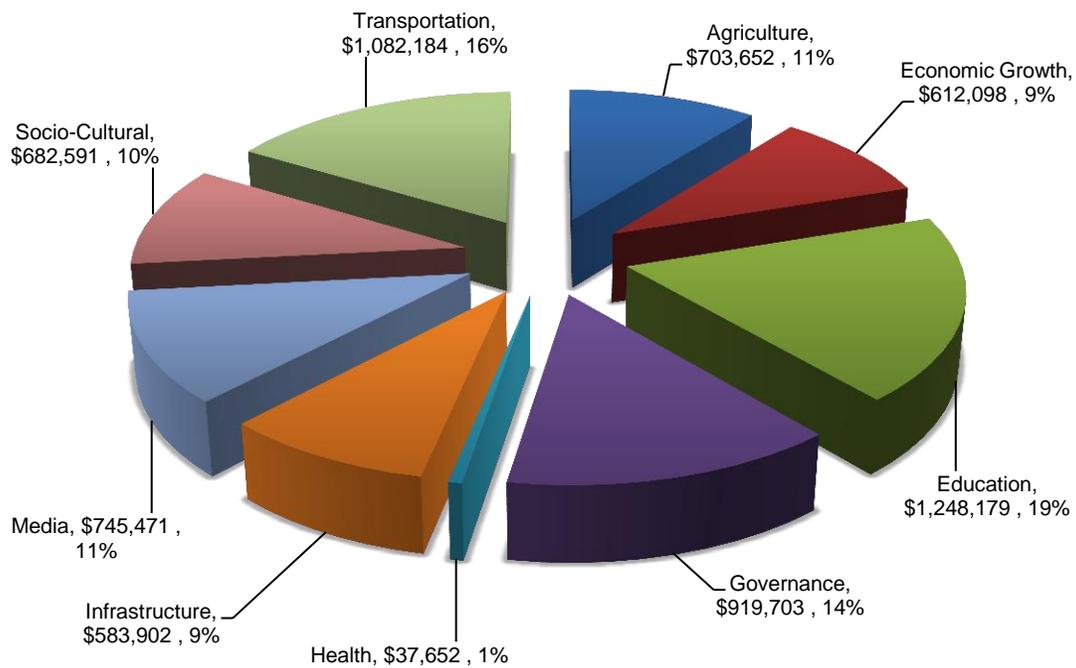
### UPCOMING EVENTS

August 2013	Provincial Work Planning
August 2013	CCI Strategic Planning
September/October 2013	Strategy Review Session

### GRANTS SUMMARY

Since March 2012, CCI has cleared, completed or closed 249 small grants, totaling \$6,615,432. The breakdown by sector is as follows: transportation (16%), agriculture (11%), economic growth (9%), education (19%), governance (14%), health (1%),

**CCI Activities by Sector**



infrastructure (9%), media (11%) and socio-cultural (10%).

Between April and June 2013, CCI:

- Cleared 63 activities, worth \$1,670,370.48
- Disbursed \$620,967.14
- Completed 10 activities
- Closed 5 activities

## ACTIVITIES

### Kankor Exam Preparation Training - An Opportunity for Youth in Ghazni

Higher education in Afghanistan remains out of reach for the majority of youth. One factor that prevents many students from reaching their higher education goals are the difficulties they face in preparing for the Kankor University Entrance Exam (Kankor Exam). The Kankor Exam is a standardized test designed to evaluate a student's knowledge of science, math, language and history. In remote communities, there are few resources to prepare students for this challenging exam.

In Muqur District of Ghazni Province, a weak education system holds many students back and prevents them from graduating. Those who do graduate are ill-prepared to take the Kankor Exam. Students in the district typically have no access to practice exams or the opportunity to develop the time management skills necessary to pass this difficult exam.

Initially, CCI planned to provide the Kankor Exam training to 150 secondary school seniors in Muqur. However, demand for the training quickly grew, causing the local government and community to have to develop creative solutions. They accommodated approximately 800 students in the training in five shifts. By empowering the Muqur Education Manager to effectively meet the demand for Kankor Exam preparation in the district, CCI bolstered the district government's legitimacy and promoted a sense of hope and accomplishment among youth that will make them less susceptible to the pessimistic narrative of anti-government elements.



Students who participate in Kankor Exam trainings are better equipped for gaining admission to universities

### Cricket Ground Rehabilitation Engages Youth in Kunar

Youth represent an important and often overlooked resilience in Afghanistan. Youth are heirs to the future of Afghanistan, yet they are often left out of customary leadership processes. For example, youth in Kunar Province have few opportunities to engage with each other or with their local government. Cricket, by far the most popular sport in Kunar, is one of the few social activities that can bring youth from different backgrounds together on a level playing field – an important first step in building mutual understanding and respect between communities.

In Kunar's eastern district of Sarkani, CCI is working to support the Sarkani Youth Association as it works to strengthen these social bonds among local youth. Knowing the central role that cricket plays in the social life of youth in the district, the youth association decided to renovate a central cricket pitch – an activity that would both engage youth in its implementation and serve as a lasting venue to draw youth from different backgrounds together in healthy, social activities. With CCI's support, the youth association engaged local leaders, including government officials, to form a project monitoring committee, which regularly met at the project site to monitor progress. Youth association members also volunteered their time to contribute 30% of the unskilled labor needed for the activity.



The Sarkani Cricket Team prepares to play their first match on the newly rehabilitated cricket field.

In addition to leveling an impressive 18,000 square meters of playing field and renovating the seating area for fans, the project successfully engaged youth from different villages and tribal groups. The relationships created between

these communities as they worked side-by-side to complete this project will be strengthened, albeit in more competitive fashion, on the cricket pitch. Many of the youth have expressed positive feedback about the results of these activities. A member of the Sarkani Youth Association, speaking during the project's completion ceremony on April 9th noted, *"We are happy to have a playing field where we can host cricket teams from other communities. We will continue our cooperation with the local government to address other youth priorities. We believe that through education and healthy outlets, youth can better serve their communities."*

### **Vocational Training in Helmand Helps a Woman Begin a New Life**

Takeena is a resident of Tajikan Village of Nahri Sarraj District. Her husband and eldest son died in a bomb explosion leaving her and four young children to rely on the charity of family, friends and neighbors. Takeena started working as a laundress to support her family. She unwillingly pulled out her 11 year old son from school and sent him to work as a waiter. The family's income was meager, not providing for even two meals a day.

Seeing her plight, the District governor's Office offered Takeena the opportunity to attend a Tailoring Training for women. CCI funded the advanced 35-day tailoring skills training course for 50 participants from different areas of the district. At the end of the training Takeena and the other participants were provided with a tailoring toolkit which included a sewing machine. With her newly acquired tailoring skill and the new equipment, Takeena left the course full of hope. *"This project has changed our lives completely. I am able to earn a respectable living and provide sufficiently for my children,"* she said. Takeena set up a small shop in her backyard and with increasing numbers of clients, she expects to re-enroll her son in school, *"where he belongs,"* according to his beaming mother.

Nahri Sarraj is considered Helmand's bellwether district. Lack of employment and poverty are among the drivers of instability in the area. The community perceives the local government as responsible for solutions, but incapable of providing them. CCI's financial and technical assistance supporting a number of vocational trainings for both men and women have provided them with enduring skills that can help generate self-employment. On a broader scale, this assistance has helped improve the government's responsiveness by ensuring that the district leadership is fully involved in supporting and maintaining each activity. This, in turn, has strengthened community perceptions that the local government is capable of improving their situation.



**The training has turned Takeena, into an emerging entrepreneur.**

## PROGRAM EVALUATION

The main focus of the program throughout this quarter remained the successful and timely implementation of projects. Building on the momentum of the previous quarter, CCI further solidified systems and processes to enhance performance. Following the March SRS, the program came under intense scrutiny and demands to demonstrate progress, which was primarily measured against the bottom line disbursement numbers. In April, the disbursement number was low at only \$51,011. That rose in May to \$245,131. As the targets for disbursement rates continued to be raised, the program made a concerted effort in May and June to increase the rate of programming and achieve projections with the help of improved systems and lessons learned. In June, the target was set for \$300,000. For the first time, CCI surpassed its target with a final disbursement of \$324,824. This quarter, the total disbursement was nearly twice the cumulative disbursements for the previous 12 months; with \$620,967 being disbursed in this quarter in contrast to the \$333,646 spent in the first 12 months.

This quarter CCI reporting improved with a more consistent and thorough weekly summary implementation progress report. These reports reflect a holistic picture of the status of implementation by reporting progress against disbursements and other achievements, such as cleared activities, Request for Proposals (RFP) issued and Purchase Orders (POs) signed each week.

At the end of the second quarter, procurement remained the single largest inhibitor to implementation progress. This was mainly due to limited competency of the procurement staff during that period. CCI took all necessary steps to resolve this situation and get back on track with smooth implementation. In the beginning of this quarter, the management of the procurement unit was once more brought under Deputy Chief of Party (DCOP), Programs for a period of one month. The strengthened management, oversight and harmonization between program needs and procurement response improved systems and overall performance. In addition, staff were hired and the unit started functioning at its full capacity with 10 team members. A new DCOP Operations, with a blend of operational and programmatic experience took over the management of the procurement unit. In addition, an expatriate Short Term Technical Assistance (STTA) Procurement Director was brought on board to provide direct supervision of the procurement unit. These efforts have resulted in substantially improving CCI's implementation capability.

The M&E and Strategic Communications units have also grown significantly in sophistication and scope with arrival of the new directors. New approaches to strengthen approaches to M&E and Strategic Communications have been set in motion and are expected to be implemented in the coming quarter to yield tangible activities, as well as support CCI's programmatic goals, and enable better coordination with USAID partners.

Robust systems of fraud prevention and compliance are fully functional, and proving to be successful. Despite the constant stream of allegations that are evaluated and dealt with on a weekly basis, there have been no significant instances of corruption to-date.

Recognizing that the rapidly growing grants portfolio requires more robust and integrated tools to ensure it has a high impact, Creative Associates invested in deploying the Senior Director of Field Administration and Senior Manager for Grants and Administration to further develop CCI's grant management system: the Integrated Database Management System (IDMS). The first manifestation of these efforts will be seen in a procurement manual to be completed and rolled out in July.

Simultaneously, a concerted effort was made to diversify CCI's programmatic portfolio. With growing confidence and ability to implement, complemented by increased human resource capacity, CCI is prepared to respond to the rapidly changing environment by venturing into new programming areas for greater impact. Some of these new concepts include: preventing electoral violence, supporting traditional dispute resolution bodies, supporting independent media, assessing the role of women in rural transitional settings, empowering youth leaders for peace building, and assessing the youth labor market to inform more relevant activity design.

Security concerns remain an everyday reality for CCI as it continues to prioritize the safety and security of its staff. The program is fortunate to report that no major security incidents took place during the quarter which is a testament to CCI's strong commitment to staff security.

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