Broadening Participation through Civil Society (BPCS)

Lessons Learned Report 2012 - 2015

Mercy Corps Iraq

Cooperative Agreement No. AID-A-00-12-00001
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Key Words:

Subgrant management, project management, capacity building, team skills, success stories, M&E, qualitative indicators, measuring outcomes, communication, information sharing, knowledge management, team management, planning, complex programs, consortium management, coordination, decision making, partner management, structure, subawards, policy, advocacy, NGO law, structure, partner selection, Fixed Obligation Grant (FOG), partnership, funding decisions, committees, RFA, proposal, participation, surveys, coaching, capacity building, organizational development, leadership, sustainability, community needs, government relationships, civil society, private sector, stakeholders, media, governance
Mercy Corps’ Broadening Participation through Civil Society (BPCS) program was implemented from 2012-2015 across northern, central, and southern Iraq. The $55 million USAID-funded program sought to foster an increasingly professional, interactive, and interconnected Iraqi civil society that offers greater opportunities for citizens to contribute to and benefit from the country’s development. Through five inter-connected intermediate results, BPCS implemented activities designed to: increase citizen engagement; strengthen the institutional capacity of civil society organizations (CSOs); increase the capacity of Iraqi CSOs to advocate to the government for policy change on behalf of their communities; improve the legal enabling environment in which civil society operates through close partnership with the government; and support civilian victims of war and terrorism through livelihood and community projects and continued advocacy through the Marla Ruzicka Iraqi War Victims Fund.

The lessons learned included in this report highlight the changes the BPCS program underwent in response to internal and external factors, as well as observation, feedback and experience during implementation. Examples of the types of changes that the program had to adapt to include:

1. Withdrawal of a consortium partner at the beginning of the program, and later integration of a new one;
2. Request by the donor to take on a significant new set of activities (that was outside Mercy Corps’ traditional area of expertise);
3. Reduction of the budget by approximately 30% about half way into the program;
4. The fall of large territories to the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), ongoing military activity and subsequent mass displacement of the population and related humanitarian crisis.

The purpose of this lessons learned report is to capture how the program adapted to these changes, as well as what it learned along the way in implementing a six-partner, five-pillar, geographically dispersed program, which worked with over 100 subgrantees. It is hoped that these experiences will contribute to the design and implementation of other complex programs, particularly those that work in dynamic settings, with multiple partners, use subgrants, and have a capacity building component.

Lessons documented in this report were initially captured with support from Mercy Corps’ Director of Program Management, Brandy Westerman, who facilitated the BPCS Close-Out Planning and Reflection Meeting in May 2015, using a simple “We believed…, we observed…, from that we learned…, therefore we will…” format. These were built on throughout the remainder of the program.

Key learnings fell into six categories: Team Skills, Subgrant Management, Consortium Management, Program Design and Adaptive Management, Organizational Development and Capacity Building of Local Partners, and Stakeholder Involvement. Lessons in each of these categories will be addressed in greater detail later in the report. Key takeaways include that in order to truly facilitate a strong, professional, and engaged civil society, programs must:

- Strive to be flexible to external and community needs by promoting a culture of adaptation, responsiveness and invest in external communication;
- Designate one point of contact for partners to smooth cross-team communication;
- Provide relevant and ongoing opportunities for staff professional development through cross-training and chances for staff to step beyond their roles;
- Engage government, community leaders (including youth), and the private sector early and often to establish broad-based support;
- Engage civil society organizations in genuine partnerships using diverse communication methods and techniques for engagement, including ensuring enough staff to provide individualized technical consultancies; and
- Provide funding opportunities for concrete, hands-on practice to complement skills gained in trainings whenever possible and in a way that does not distort incentives for participation.

Adaptive Management

Adaptive management has been an ongoing strategy throughout the BPCS program, and remained a theme through to the end of the program. Based on donor requests, BPCS adapted its activities to include election monitoring, and responding to community need and experience, added Sawa Centers for Community Action, and most unexpectedly, a humanitarian response component. However, BPCS staff saw areas for improvement in 1. Involve the community in identifying program priorities, 2. Develop a mechanism for rapid response to changing environments, and 3. Identify multiple pathways to the same objective. Developing these mechanisms would have allowed BPCS to respond faster and more effectively to the needs of Iraqi citizens. Adaptive management requires four key, interconnected elements in order to be successful: an organizational culture that provides the cues, expectations, and incentives to prioritize learning and adaptation; the structuring, recruiting, and equipping of people and skills through careful leadership, planning, and investment; tools and systems to support technical expertise, management, finance, HR, and procurement; and an enabling environment, such as donors and host communities, which provides buy-in and freedom. Following internal discussions, BPCS identified the following aspects of the program that allowed it to adapt.
Stakeholder Involvement and Consortium Management

Additionally, BPCS learned valuable lessons on collaborating effectively with a diverse group of local and international partners and stakeholders, such as 1. **Employ diverse but streamlined communication methods to reach CSO staff**, 2. **Empower local, international, and technical groups to work equitably in consortium**, and 3. **Structure teams to encourage cross-collaboration and communication to ensure wraparound support of local partners**. Committees for communication strategies, proposal review, and strategic planning were used within the consortium to help facilitate decision-making and seek contribution from partners to great effect. These committees allowed for collaborative management of the program, which allowed consortium partners equal weight in decision making as Mercy Corps. Areas for improvement and best practices in communicating with and empowering consortium partners can be found later in the report. Similarly, communication with CSO partners presented some challenges, but the duration of the program allowed BPCS to test multiple approaches. In such a complex program, communication overload was often a greater challenge than under-communication, both within the consortium and with CSO partners, so BPCS has included lessons learned on ensuring clear communication lines when working with a large number of stakeholders and partners.

**Team Skills**

Finally, internal team dynamics are key to successful program implementation. Over the course of the program, staff identified multiple areas for desired professional development and leadership opportunities to better equip them to handle CSO needs. These included 1. **Apply project management best standards as taught by PMD Pro**, 2. **Communicate qualitative data effectively through success stories and narratives**, and 3. ** Adopt coaching as a mechanism for supporting CSOs in their work**. These and other skills were addressed through a deliberate investment in program staff professional development through internal trainings and encouraging staff to take the PMD Pro exam for all levels of staff.

Some of the lessons learned documented in this report will be useful specifically for civil society programs in developing strong relationships with stakeholders such as government, peer local and international NGOs, and communities. Others will be useful for programs with a large number of subgrantees, while still others will be useful programs managed through a consortium of local and international partners. As such, lessons learned are tagged with keywords, as well as linked in the Table of Contents for ease of use.
Mercy Corps believes that having the right team in place is critical to strong program implementation. BPCS has invested heavily in making sure that the team in place has the correct combination of technical and management skills to support civil society organizations implementing a broad array of activities. The team received training on PMD Pro 1 (with senior leaders participating in PMP training, but only towards the end of the program), Monitoring & Evaluation, and many team members who were working directly with partners participated in a series of coaching training to develop communication skills. BPCS also ensured that all Mercy Corps Iraq team members received Interest-Based Negotiation training to improve communication skills. Some team members also participated in time management, leadership and financial management training activities. Following are lessons learned on team skill development.

**Insight Name:**  Staff PMD Pro Skills  
**Date of Learning:**  May 26, 2015

**Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That…..**

PMD Pro was not necessary for the entire team, and only obligatory for project managers

**Step 2: Observation. We Observed….**

Team members who went through the training performed better, regardless of their positions.

**Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...**

PMD Pro training and certification is beneficial to all team members and allowed for useful tools to be taken up more quickly and used more effectively.

**Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...**

Encourage team members at all levels to pursue project management learning and development, and build this early into the project so that tools can be used as soon as possible.

**Key Words:**

Project management, capacity building, team skills

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Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....

Taking a quantitative approach to M&E was sufficient, and that investing in ensuring staff and CSOs could report on quantitative indicators was appropriate. We believed that asking for success stories would be enough to capture examples of success.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

That staff and civil society partners struggled to identify qualitative outcomes and to tell stories that better illustrate results and change than numbers. People find it easier to count than identify ‘so what?’ and consequently the success story section on monthly reports was usually blank (or they included examples of activities that went well, rather than actual change being created). Interestingly, however, some impressive stories could emerge during discussions on unrelated topics that a partner may not have thought of as a success.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

Equal emphasis should be placed on qualitative outcomes as quantitative outputs, but this is a new and challenging approach, and is a skill gap, particularly with partners who have been held accountable to delivery of activities, rather than to the results of those activities.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Provide more training and support for identifying outcomes, presenting success stories and developing succinct and powerful messages. We cannot assume these skills exist. We also invested in an outcomes harvesting evaluation, engaging an international consultant to lead a process to identify outcomes that were not captured by existing indicators, but demonstrate change.

Key Words:

Success stories, M&E, qualitative indicators, measuring outcomes
Insight Name: Staff and CSO Communication & Skill Building  Date of Learning: May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That…..

Communication within the team and with civil society partners could use a similar approach; that all staff had basic time management skills and communication skills; and therefore that information would flow smoothly across teams/components and with partners.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

That a “one size fits all” approach to communication does not work across stakeholders with different capacity levels and habits. We also observed that information did not flow as easily as expected as when everyone is busy, information sharing takes a lower priority, and we are not always aware of what information other BPCS teams already have or may need. This resulted in inefficiency, duplication of effort and sometimes frustration.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

When working in interdependent teams and with multiple partners, it is important to establish a clear communication protocol and information sharing system from the beginning, and to spend time and effort to ensure that all stakeholders have a shared understanding and appropriate capacity. This approach will vary in accordance with different stakeholders’ needs and capacities.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

We have instigated more regular meetings to discuss shared issue and developed an issues log for members of different program teams to contribute to as a way to share cross-team information. A shared google drive also allows for easier information sharing. Strengthened cross-team communication (e.g. meetings, joint site visits etc.) have also helped information flow more smoothly. Most of these things are PM@MC standards, and we learned the hard way the importance of having these things in place.

Key Words:

Communication, information sharing, knowledge management, team management
Managing a project as large, with as many moving parts, as BPCS is undoubtedly a challenge. In order to effectively supervise over 100 civil society organizations in activities ranging from election monitoring to humanitarian assistance, a consortium of diverse partners (both local and international) with broad expertise was created to support civil society activities. Following are lessons learned on consortium management for effective program implementation.

Insight Name: Flexibility in Consortium Management Date of Learning: May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....
The work plan we had needed to be adhered to. Given the size and complexity of the program with its integrated components, too much change would be difficult and costly.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....
The situation on the ground is fluid and we need to be flexible to respond to it.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...
We need a mechanism to rapidly and formally update the work plan and ensure that the donor is on board with changes. Sharing the work plan across all components and consortium members also helped different team members understand inter-connections and other changes.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...
Ensure that all consortium and team members understand that the plan is a tool to help us achieve objectives from a particular context/starting point. If the context/starting point changes, the plan must also adapt. That is, consortium partners need to feel empowered to modify the plan if it no longer represents the most effective pathway to objectives. Steering committee meetings should be used to update plans, and the consortium lead will be responsible for ensuring donor support for changes.

Key Words:
Planning, complex programs
Insight Name: Diversify Consortium Partners  
Date of Learning: May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....
Coordination between diverse partners is challenging. BPCS has a six-member consortium: 4 international and 2 national. 2 of the international members were technical (one provided legal expertise, and the other offered media specialization), while the others carried out many aspects of the program in different geographic areas.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....
Each partner is able to provide a specialized, contextualized perspective if given enough scope and opportunity to offer ideas. However different partners have different understandings of if/how that can be done, and some require more encouragement than others to be forthcoming. National partners also felt at a disadvantage compared to international partners, particularly given their support systems or institutional capacity could be at a more nascent level than the international partners.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...
Having specialized regional knowledge helps steer decision-making and allows for better review and context. However expectations need to be established clearly and early. E.g. some consortium members were waiting to be asked their opinion, while we were expecting them to be forthcoming. The more trust and interpersonal relationships are built, the more synergies could be identified and built upon. In some cases, the best cross-consortium work only emerged in the last year of the program.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...
Ensure diverse, specialized partners serve on the consortium, with clear acknowledgement of the value added and leadership area of each. We will continue to invest in relationship building and empowering national consortium members to strengthen their capacity and seek more ways of contributing to the consortium’s objectives.

Key Words:
Consortium management, coordination
Insight Name: Consortium Coordinator Date of Learning: May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....

Regular interaction between Mercy Corps staff and consortium partners through committees and a robust reporting system would be sufficient to support partners and prevent/resolve issues.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

Some issues that arose fell between the cracks of the committees and it was not clear who was responsible for addressing them. This resulted in some issues dragging out before they were eventually escalated. Most of these issues were resolved informally, and sometimes only after a bit of pain.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

Regular meetings of the steering committee should be maintained, even when there are no apparent issues. Informal check-ins by senior leadership are also important in case there are issues that won’t be raised in meetings. Some consortium partners recommended that a consortium coordinator should have been appointed to help communication flows.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Recommend that future consortiums consider having a consortium coordination point person within Mercy Corps to support partners through weekly phone calls, for example. It is also important from the beginning to establish expectations and understand different organizational cultures and partnership guidelines (e.g. collaborative vs. directional styles), and clear communication lines.

Key Words:

Consortium management, coordination
Insight Name: Committee-based Consortium Coordination   Date of Learning: May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....

Committees are the best way to support clear coordination and decision making between different partners across different technical areas. We created a steering committee, M&E committee, communications committee, organizational development committee and a Hubs committee, which each included a member from each consortium partner. Each committee had a charter that outlined roles and responsibilities, which were reviewed periodically. Temporary committees were established to review subaward applications.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

That committees allowed consortium partners to be involved and feel consulted in key cross-cutting areas affecting the consortium. They facilitated participatory decision-making and consultation and ensured that communication was regular. They could also be time-consuming, and it could be difficult to agree on times that would ensure full participation.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

Thematic committees are a successful coordination, communication and decision-making approach. They are also helpful to build interpersonal relationships across organizations that contributed to building trust and consortium cohesion. However the charters for each committee must be clear and regularly updated to keep them relevant and useful.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Continue to use committees to bring partners together, and will evaluate their usefulness and performance periodically and make adjustments (e.g. meeting frequency) as appropriate for the program’s changing needs.

Key Words:

Consortium management, coordination, decision making
Program Design and Adaptive Management

Adaptive management is one of the pillars of Mercy Corps’ Program Management standards. A program as complex as BPCS provides a unique opportunity to model adaptive management, particularly with the ever-shifting landscape of Iraq’s geopolitical and security situation. As a three year program, adaptive management has been key in keeping the spirit of the program alive even while pivoting toward humanitarian response, increasing advocacy for civilian war victims, and more closely entwining project components. Some of these adaptations were due to outside influences, while some were due to a project design that required updating. Throughout the life of the program, BPCS sought to ensure that our organizational culture, people and skills, tools and systems, and broader enabling environment such as donors and host governments were supportive of change and learning. Following are lessons learned on program design and adaptive management.

Insight Name: Integration of Complex Program Components  Date of Learning:   May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....
Program technical components would most effectively be managed independent of one another

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....
Components were struggling to communicate, plan activities in a coordinated way, and support partners who were participating in multiple components through subawards. This could result in partners being overwhelmed or confused.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...
Support to partners has to be coordinated between component teams to leverage their work most effectively, as well as to share experiences on capacity issues in order to respond in a cohesive way.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...
Integrate all teams at the design phase to work together to support partners, many of whom will work in multiple areas of a program. During implementation, meetings need to be held to discuss partners that work with multiple components to ensure a united response and avoid duplication of efforts.

Key Words:
Partner management, structure, subawards

Broadening Participation Through Civil Society (BPCS)
Lessons Learned Report
Insight Name: Advocacy & Sustainability in Marla Activities  Date of Learning: May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....

Advocacy efforts could be effectively introduced to Marla Ruzicka War Victims Fund implementing partners during the second half of the program as it would be difficult for the CSOs if introduced too early.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

Once the idea was understood (i.e. that advocacy was a longer-term approach to addressing the problems they were working on), there was more interest in advocacy than anticipated. However for organizations who were typically direct implementers, adjusting to policy advocacy as an approach required more resources and time.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

Advocacy should have started earlier and we should have provided more guidance and resources from the beginning. This would have included linking the partners with the relevant government authorities earlier, which would have allowed relationships to develop further. We also learned that helping implementing partners adapt to a methodology such as advocacy requires intensive preparation and training, and therefore requires resources - as well as to support advocacy activities: it is not just meetings and leaflets.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Recommend to start advocacy activities from the beginning, plan time for building skills and relationships, and provide more resources to work towards specific results.

Key Words:

Advocacy

Broadening Participation Through Civil Society (BPCS)
Lessons Learned Report
Insight Name: Advocating for NGOs on regional/provincial level Date of Learning: May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....

The original work plan, focused on the federal and IKR regional level, would progress as anticipated, and that Enabling Environment objectives were clear and able to stand alone as a separate component.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed.....

After the 1st reading in parliament, the law stalled on a federal level. As a result, the Enabling Environment teams shifted their strategies to pursue support for stronger monitoring and evaluation of the IKR NGO fund.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

Maintaining flexibility and rapid response, both from implementers and donor, is crucial to pursuing alternative strategies to achieve project goals. In this instance, we learned that working on a provincial level yielded much stronger results than attempting to implement legal changes on a federal or regional government level. Additionally, we learned that achieving advocacy results is predicated taking advantage of opportunities that come of better integration with the consortium, moving beyond basic NGO registration goals.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Recommend flexibility in advocacy strategies and a willingness to work in unexpected ways, particularly with different levels of government.

Key Words:
Policy, advocacy, NGO law

Broadening Participation Through Civil Society (BPCS)
Lessons Learned Report
**Insight Name:** Broaden Staff Skill Building  
**Date of Learning:** May 26, 2015

**Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....**

Organizing the BPCS team and developing specialized skills by program technical component would be best way to organize the program.

**Step 2: Observation. We Observed....**

That this (a) limited opportunities for synergies and integration, and (b) created hard-to-fill gaps when people were away/left. We also observed consortium partner ACDI/VOCA organize their team geographically whereby all team members were aware of activities across all components.

**Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...**

It’s important to keep entire team connected and communicating or silos/competition and gaps can emerge, and program cohesiveness can be harder to maintain.

**Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...**

Do more cross-training and sharing of responsibilities to ensure more team members have a broader skill-base and feel more aware and connected to other parts of the program.

**Key Words:**

Team management, structure

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Broadening Participation Through Civil Society (BPCS)  
Lessons Learned Report
Over the lifetime of the BPCS program, nine rounds of subgrants were issued to 51 local civil society organizations to monitor elections, collaborate with and engage citizens, execute advocacy campaigns, and implement livelihoods projects for civilian victims of war and terrorism. In the process of implementing these subgrants, Mercy Corps developed a strong system for working with subgrantees, as well as identified a number of areas for improvement moving forward, particularly for programs which offer a large number of subgrants.

Insight Name: Subgrant/Partner Selection  Date of Learning: May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....
Subgrant selection based on both technical proposal and institutional capacity as presented in a proposal would be sufficient. The pre-award assessment (of financial management capacity) was only to be used once selection has been made and should not influence selection decisions.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....
The pre-award assessment could reveal information to the selection committee that could influence the decision, as well as past experience with the partner from a financial management point of view.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...
Pre-award assessments should be conducted prior to the final decision (although this is not in line with the program’s subaward manual), and previous grants & compliance/finance experience with the partner need to be weighed in with the decision in addition to previous programmatic experience.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...
Establish a database of civil society partners for Mercy Corps Iraq to refer to for future program partnership to ensure strong local partners are selected moving forward. Ensure that all subgrantees receive a written evaluation following their project that Mercy Corps can refer to in future that documents our experience with them from a programmatic, financial management, and M&E perspective.

Key Words:
Subgrant management, partner selection
Insight Name: Subgrants and Partnerships  Date of Learning: May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....
Awarding subgrants would help foster partnership and enable Mercy Corps to support partners to achieve mutually desirable results - including strengthening the capacity of the partner.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....
That civil society partners would treat Mercy Corps as a donor rather than a partner (and that some Mercy Corps team members also fell into this mindset), and that relationships could be transactional rather than transformational. Many partners also tended to implement proposed activities to the letter rather than discussing the need for adjusting activities with Mercy Corps in order to achieve the results sought.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...
It is important to invest in developing a sense of equal partnership, rather than a donor-recipient relationship. All members of the Mercy Corps team also need to embrace a partnership approach and be focused on achieving project and capacity strengthening objectives, rather than focusing on implementing activity plans to the letter if they are not producing the results that were expected.

In some cases however, if the results were more important than the relationship or capacity building, then fixed obligation grants (FOGs) could be more appropriate.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...
Ensure that the objectives of a relationship are clear (e.g. produce results, build capacity, strengthen a relationship) and make a conscious decision about whether a subgrant or a FOG is more appropriate. In all cases, it is necessary to clarify relationship expectations from the beginning and ensure that the Mercy Corps is flexible enough to adjust their approach accordingly in order to play the appropriate role.

Key Words:
Subgrant management, FOG, partnership
Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....

Different specialized teams are necessary to manage subgrants: program (technical assistance), grants & compliance (G&C: financial management and compliance), and monitoring and evaluation (M&E: activity monitoring, report verification).

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

That in the early years of the program, partners could find it overwhelming and confusing to work with different Mercy Corps teams, particularly if visits, etc. were not coordinated. It was also easy for internal communication to be confused and for efforts to be duplicated.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

It is essential to have a clear internal and external communication plan across and within teams working with the same partner, including clearly identified focal points.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Establish a clear communication protocol during kick off meetings (both internally and with partner), hold regular review meetings to share information and bring the different perspectives around one subgrant together, and use shared tools, e.g. a shared work plan and issues log to avoid duplication of efforts and gaps.

Key Words:

Subgrant management
Insight Name: Subgrant management skills  Date of Learning: May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That…..

Having a program technical team to support technical aspects, and a separate grants and compliance (G&C) team would be sufficient to follow up and support subgrantees implement their projects.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

That these teams need to work more closely together than originally planned, and that bottlenecks and misunderstandings could arise between the teams when the program team assumed that G&C would take care of the “rules” and that the programmatic role was purely technical.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

All teams involved need to have a shared sense of ownership, and the program team in particular needs to have a strong understanding of the subgrant manual (i.e. subgrant rules, regulations and processes). This is necessary to ensure smoother implementation and avoid miscommunication from different Mercy Corps teams to the subgrantee.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Invest in more cross-team building and shared tools (e.g. issues log for subgrantees that is used by program, G&C and monitoring and evaluation) and ensure that all team members involved in subgrant management are familiar with the subawards manual.

Key Words:

Subgrant management
Insight Name: Managing multiple rounds  Date of Learning: May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....

One team could manage multiple rounds of subgrants, including concurrent subgranting processes (which included managing both a selection process, as well as managing the actual subgrants).

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

That subgrant selection is an extremely time-consuming process and that the preparation and follow up is labor-intensive. Ensuring this is done well can mean that other activities are neglected and more time can be spent on paperwork than engaging with partners.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

A subgrant selection team should be identified in advance and managed in a way that it does not allow other activities to be neglected. This could involve pulling people in temporarily from other teams to support, or hiring short-term support to manage paperwork.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Continue to develop detailed work plans (RASCIs were useful - plans identifying the person responsible, accountable, support, consulted and informed), drawing on a larger pool of people with an eye on other concurrent commitments. It may also be necessary to accept a longer selection process, which is not always possible in a program’s timeframe.

Key Words:

Subgrant management, partner selection, team management
Insight Name: Proposal review and selection  Date of Learning: May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....

Involving all consortium partners to review and select proposals for subgrants in accordance with clear criteria would result in fair, transparent and appropriate proposal review and funding decisions.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

That even “objective” criteria are interpreted differently by partners, and the role of partners who know the applicants must be factored into the decision making process, without biasing the process or threatening its perceived transparency.

We also observed that bringing all consortium partners together to review proposals was an excellent team building experience and helped all partners feel more engaged in the program.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

More time needs to be invested at the beginning to ensure that all review committee members understand the criteria and are looking for the same thing, and will use the scoring sheet consistently. The review committee should also have an opportunity to interview the shortlisted applicants to learn more about them beyond the proposal.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Build in more time for committee preparation before meeting, as well as time for interviews (although this threatens to lengthen an already time-consuming process.

Key Words:

Partner selection, funding decisions, committees
Insight Name: RFA Standards                          Date of Learning:   May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....

We believed that a request for application (RFA) process that was a simplified version of those used by international donors would be an appropriate way to identify potential subgrantees through an open and transparent process.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

That our application form - which appeared simple to us - was still too complex for the civil society organizations (CSOs) we were targeting. For example, many could not distinguish between an objective, output and activity, and this resulted in a very low standard of proposals. We found it was difficult to find a balance between a format that CSOs could understand and use, and one that would provide us with enough information to make an objective decision and respect our donor’s transparency requirements. We also observed that some CSOs hired consultants to write beautiful proposals, which had little bearing on the CSO’s capacity or plans.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

If we require complex proposals, then CSOs need more support to understand the format and how best to present their organizations and their plans. We also learned that Iraqi CSOs express their ideas better verbally than in writing, so the technical proposal should not hold the highest weight in determining subgrant selection.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Plan more time for proposal training and holding information sessions to provide more information and support to CSOs. Our strongest process involved an initial concept note followed by a workshop in which CSOs were provided training and were able to work on their proposal with consultation - building capacity of the applicants while also ensuring stronger proposals. Better yet would be a process that relied more on interviews and visits than written documentation.

Key Words:

RFA, partner selection, proposal, subawards
Insight Name: Policy advocacy  Date of Learning: May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....

Using an online survey to identify the main policy issue to address as policy issue for a new round of subgrant funding would bring good understanding of where we need to focus.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

That survey was too limiting to allow civil society to express their concerns about different issues.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

We need to hear from partners more directly and them and discuss directly with targeted audiences in person.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Adopt a more participatory approach to identifying priorities and needs that not only involve civil society, but also community members.

Key Words:

Decision making, participation, surveys
Insight Name: New vs. skilled CSO sub-grants  Date of Learning: May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....

The level of skill in the selected civil society partners was high enough to be able to adhere to Mercy Corps methodologies and requirements in a professional way.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

That the selected partners needed more skill building and motivation than expected or planned for. In particular, during the negotiation process, both the subgrantees and Mercy Corps pushed for smaller budgets, particularly in personnel - when most organizations did in fact need extra people to meet expectations. The most successful organizations were those that were highly committed to their visions and missions, and who had selected motivated and committed individuals to implement the project.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

The selection of partners needs to be quite conservative when assessing staff structure and find ways to really test the motivation and commitment of subgrantees.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Recommend using more interviews and ground truthing to select local partners rather than relying on a paper-based proposal process. Opportunities to meet and observe CSOs in workshops is useful, as well as visiting their office to see their level of organization and to what extent there is a team with a segregation of duties and appropriate skills.

Key Words:

Partner selection, subgrant management
Insight Name: Sub-Grants vs. FOGs  Date of Learning:  May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....

Using sub-grants to work with civil society partners working on the Marla Ruzicka Iraqi War Victims’ Fund is a good approach to managing the work and the relationship it would enhance the sense of partnership and give Mercy Corps more opportunity to strengthen the partners’ capacity.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

There is gaps in delivery and monitoring the progress of activities, and CSOs had little incentive to perform on time and to specification given that they still received their monthly payment whether or not they were on time. On the other hand, Mercy Corps’ partner ACDI/VOCA was using Fixed Obligation Grants (FOGs) to manage Marla partners and experienced much faster delivery of outputs.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

Sub-grants are a great way of developing partnership, yet Fixed Obligation Grants (FOGs) ensure that partners are more likely to stick to the work plan, with payment upon delivery of defined milestones.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Recommend to considering the use of FOGs instead of Sub-grants in the future for projects that have clear deliverables (assuming the partner has appropriate capacity to meet these obligations).

Key Words:

Subgrant management, FOG

Broadening Participation Through Civil Society (BPCS)
Lessons Learned Report
Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....

The selection criteria for civil society sub-grants were effective and self-evident, and would enable the most appropriate organizations to be selected for the program. We also believed that public advertising would be sufficient to attract the type of organizations we wanted to work with.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

Using websites was not sufficient to ensure that eligible CSOs were aware of the Requests for Applications (RFAs) and Expressions of Interest (EOIs). We also saw that some of the larger cities were more accustomed to checking certain websites, but other areas needed more targeting to ensure geographic distribution.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

It is necessary to have public meetings to announce the information and ensure that the selection criteria are well understood. This also provides Mercy Corps with a chance to start meeting the partners, answer questions directly, as well as get a sense of who they are. In order to verify criteria, ideally it is best to carry out site visits and ask the community about the organizations’ reputation and relationships. Looking at their Facebook page can also help to reveal alliances, or show past performance. Ideally more time would be allocated to this stage to do more research on potential subawardees.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Recommend planning more time for a more thorough selection process, which includes site visits (beyond the required pre-award assessment, which typically comes only after selection).

Key Words:

Partner selection, subawards
Insight Name: Subgrant adaptive management   Date of Learning: October, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....

Subgrantees would use their work plans as a living document to be adapted based on learned experiences and changes in the operating environment.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

CSOs were using the work plans laid out in their proposals as their final work plan, whether activities were working or their plans were reflective of needs on the ground. CSOs viewed work plans as a mandatory document as part of the RFA process, rather than as a management tool.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

In providing management to subgrantees, BPCS staff must provide the technical support to allow and promote the idea of a work plan as a living document, which should be adapted based on learnings on the ground. This means that CSOs should be encouraged to assess whether their programming is effective, to find creative solutions, and to plan to adapt their programming as needed. This is particularly important in complex environments with rapidly shifting needs.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Recommend working closely with civil society organizations to identify the role of a work plan in project management, as well as to provide reliable feedback through monitoring and evaluation which encourages the revision of project activities as needed.

Key Words:

Subgrant management, adaptive management
Organizational Development and Capacity Building in Local Partners

Working effectively with local organizations is often perceived as a challenge by INGOs. The BPCS program invested heavily in fostering the skills that civil society organizations need to be successful partners to communities, government, other local organizations, and international development agencies. The intent was to help CSOs to establish solid relationships, build their capacity to apply for future funding opportunities, and be strong community partners. BPCS took a diverse approach to capacity building, and following are the lessons we’ve learned about what works best in supporting local partners.

**Insight Name:** CSO Coaching Skills  
**Date of Learning:** May 26, 2015

**Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That…..**

Coaching for civil society leaders was an advanced skill and should only be introduced at a later stage in the program.

**Step 2: Observation. We Observed….**

That coaching is a very important skill for BPCS staff, which can be used in all stages of the program. In fact, when it was introduced it helped to accelerate other concepts introduced. Coaching helped leaders change their communication styles and approaches, which in turn helped adjust leadership styles (e.g. facilitating a shift from centralized management to a more participatory approach).

**Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that…**

Coaching is an effective skill to be used as a foundation to help encourage and support CSOs in their organizational development. By improving leaders’ communication styles, it can help them make other changes in their organization more smoothly.

**Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will…**

Recommend incorporating coaching training for staff, consortium and partner leaders earlier in the program.

**Key Words:**

Coaching, capacity building, organizational development, leadership
Insight Name: Subgrants support CSO development  Date of Learning:  May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....

The BPCS Organization Development (OD) component should not issue subgrants for their CSO partners. Rather, OD partners should apply to subgrants offered through the other components of the program along with all other CSOs. We thought that linking funding to OD would distort participant’s incentives and that it would attract organizations for the money, rather than those purely committed to strengthening their organizations’ capacity.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

OD partners struggled to implement the learnings that they gained without a structured project to practice on, and had trouble updating systems based on their learnings in already operational projects. Furthermore, once subgrants were issued, OD partners were frustrated if their organizations were not selected, or if the focus of the awards were on areas they did not work on.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

Organizational development requires time and structured practical experience and ongoing guidance to solidify learnings that OD partners receive through training and coaching.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Recommend launching subgrants specifically for OD partners in coordination with training activities to practice the skills they have learned in a carefully monitored and supported environment. The mechanism will need to be designed in a way that does not distort incentives to apply to participate in the program (i.e. commitment to capacity strengthening will need to be a key criteria).

Key Words:

Capacity building, organizational development, subawards
Insight Name: Trust is essential for CSO development  Date of Learning:  May26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....
There would be resistance from CSOs to making changes to how they operate in order to strengthen capacity, particularly when it came to restructuring internal governance and decision making processes.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....
If done carefully, CSOs accepted the idea of organizational development, including making difficult changes, but only when a safe space was created to do so. Taking the role of a facilitator and coach rather than an advisor or evaluator is an important approach to reduce resistance.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...
Building rapport and trust between the CSOs and the implementing partners is important for developing organizations. This can be done by effectively using coaching techniques to empower CSO leaders to overcome resistance and make decisions in their organization’s best interests. Using coaching to facilitate self-assessments is also a powerful way to engage CSO members in self-reflection and having honest conversations about changes that are necessary.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...
Continue to use coaching to build trust and improve the quality of communications with partners, as well as recommend conducting assessments to determine CSO willingness to change their practices to assess best partners for capacity building projects.

Key Words:
Capacity building, organizational development, coaching
Insight Name: Consider Sustainability early in CSO development Date of Learning: May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....

Sustainability is an advanced phase, so it should be addressed with CSO partners late in the program.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

That understanding and planning for sustainability is one of the most needed skills for CSO partners. It is also one that requires a different way of thinking, and a strong set of interlinked skills that take time to develop. Thinking about funding from non-traditional sources (e.g. private sector, community donations, crowdfunding etc.) requires an ability to re-think the CSOs’ value proposition to different target audiences, which proved challenging. Developing social enterprise models is also a new approach that involves a shift in mindset and new skills.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

It is important to address the importance and definition of sustainability from the beginning and introduce key concepts early to work on opening mindsets that will allow new skills to be introduced over time.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Recommend to start with sustainability, and integrate this theme into all other capacity strengthening activities to build skills over time.

Key Words:

Organizational development, capacity building, partnership, sustainability
As a large, complex program working on democracy building in a complex and highly sensitive environment, it was crucial for BPCS to establish strong relationships with a wide array of stakeholders. Following are the lessons learned over the course of the three years about the best way to engage stakeholders in meaningful dialogue about program design and approach.

**Insight Name:** Policy advocacy and community engagement  
**Date of Learning:** May 26, 2015

**Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....**

We could best understand the community’s interests and priorities by asking civil society organizations. We needed to understand this in order to design a subgrant process that would address community needs.

**Step 2: Observation. We Observed....**

Civil society organization’s interests and priorities are not always in line with the wider community, but may represent the organization’s interests or those of a smaller constituency.

**Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...**

To identify community interests and priorities, a broader needs assessment approach needs to be taken that includes other community representatives, such as local leaders, media and non-traditional activists.

**Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...**

Use a broader and more participatory needs assessment approach in identifying priorities.

**Key Words:**

Community needs
Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That…..

Our partners could rely on outreach to personal connections as the best way to connect with government, particularly high-level officials.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

When new elected officials came in, we lost our connection with the government and relationships did not transfer easily.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

We need to approach institutions rather than individuals.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Increase outreach to offices and teams rather than individuals, and continue to strengthen the capacity of partners to establish accountable relationships with government based on shared interests, rather than personal connections.

Key Words:

Government relationships
Insight Name: Civic Engagement  Date of Learning:  May 26, 2015

Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That…..
Civil society organizations (CSOs) were the best entry point to engage citizens in a participatory democracy.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....
- Sometimes citizens weren’t aware of CSOs or didn’t trust or weren’t interested in working with them, and instead utilized other forms of civic activity such as youth groups, social media, blogging, and ad hoc activities.
- CSO credibility suffered from a lack of specialization in civil engagement, political affiliations, poor previous performance, and lack of transparency.
- Civil society actors also include professional associations, syndicates unions, chambers of commerce, and academia.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...
We needed to take a broader approach to civil society and needed a specialized approach for each kind of group (assuming this is possible/appropriate within the scope and budget of the program).

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...
- Hire a consultant to conduct research, mapping and a strategy on whether it makes sense to work with informal civil society actors to ensure that we don’t do harm to a dynamic sector, and identify what type of assistance would be appropriate.
- In the future, gain a better understanding of the perceptions of unions and syndicates in order to make a decision about whether to work with them and if so, how.
- Build into program design research into a broader definition of civil society and make a conscious decision about whether to work with each group and what approach is appropriate.

Key Words:
Civil society
Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....

It was not necessary to work directly with the government and the private sector as full program stakeholders to achieve program objectives that focuses on civil society.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

- When we did bring government and civil society together, it provided an opportunity to build trust that otherwise didn’t exist.
- The government was willing to listen and participate. Meeting government inspires citizens to be involved in civic life, and this link furthered progress to achieving program objectives.
- The private sector is interested in working with civil society on clear, smart goals and participating in the community but do not know how. Civil society does not know how to approach the private sector. Alternative actors (youth groups) were able to secure private support for events, e.g. Coca Cola and Zain, but formal civil society has yet to achieve a credible reputation with these partners.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

We should have informed and involved government and the private sector much earlier in the program, and developed more opportunities for engagement.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Build a government outreach strategy, identify champions, make government aware of what we’re doing, involve them in more training activities, and do the same with the private sector and academia. We have only started to bring CSOs together with government and the private sector, which is positive to date. Joint training sessions on interest-based negotiations are proving to be particularly successful at building bridges and platforms for continued work together.

Key Words:

Government, private sector, stakeholders
Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....

We believed it was sufficient to work effectively without deliberately publicizing BPCS programming through the media.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

Our impact and reputation was limited because people didn’t know about the program or the achievement of consortium and subgrant partners. This made it harder to gain entry into different forums and meant we were overlooked by actors who could have presented opportunities.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

It is necessary to spend more time, energy and resources publicizing our efforts and partners.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Recommend creating a media strategy involving traditional and social media at the start of the program and ensuring that it is resourced. This should include an internet presence (particularly Facebook in the Iraqi context) and a news feed such as Whatsapp (again, for the Iraqi context), and regular press releases and newsletters to key stakeholders.

Key Words:

Communication, media
Step 1: Hypothesis. We Believed That.....

Civil society organizations (CSOs) were the most important stakeholders to reach in achieving program objectives around good governance and civic participation, which was built into project design.

Step 2: Observation. We Observed....

That further progress would require engagement with a wider range of stakeholders, including government, private sector and community leaders. The program’s definition of civil society also excluded key actors such as media, unions, syndicates, political parties, informal civil society activists, academics etc.

Step 3: Learnings and Insight. From that we learned that...

We need to be very clear about who we are engaging and why, and what limits will be necessary to respect time, scope and budget constraints. If we choose to engage further actors (which we did during the program), different approaches would be necessary, e.g. more formal meetings to engage government, and a more active Facebook presence to engage young activists. Individual relationships take time to build, as does creating linkages between different stakeholders.

Step 4: Decisions and Actions. Therefore, we will...

Take a broader approach to all stakeholders in selecting who to engage with, and develop a specific, targeted outreach to each stakeholder group as appropriate.

Key Words:

Governance, stakeholders
Conclusions and Next Steps

One of the key strengths of the BPCS program was its ability to adapt the program design and work plan to better suit the realities on the ground in a rapidly changing and complex environment. However, strengthening communication and technical skills for team members, consortium partners, CSO partners, and external stakeholders, as well as improving mechanisms for community feedback, would have further contributed to the program’s effectiveness in building a strong, integrated civil society which supports community involvement in Iraq’s burgeoning democracy. Some of the lessons captured in this report were integrated into BPCS programming, while others are suggestions for programs moving forward.

It is the hope of the BPCS team that this report will be useful in future Mercy Corps programming, particularly around civil society, consortium management, complex program implementation, partnership development with local organizations, and subgrant implementation.