



Afghanistan – Miguel Samper for Mercy Corps

# The Benefits of Community-Led Development Programming in Insecure Environments:

Findings from Iraq and Afghanistan

June 2010

## ABOUT THIS STUDY

The United States, European Union and other international donors have made considerable investments in Iraq and Afghanistan during the past decade, including in efforts to rebuild communities affected by conflict. These investments have been based in part on the belief that improved living conditions for local people will help to stabilize communities and pave the way for longer term development.

Yet the lion's share of assistance in both countries has often been channeled through efforts that do not actively involve intended beneficiaries. As an international humanitarian and development nonprofit with decades of experience working in challenging locations like these,

Mercy Corps has observed that community-led approaches that involve local people in selecting, planning, and implementing development programs yield the greatest benefits, even in highly complex, post-conflict environments. Through this briefing paper on research findings, Mercy Corps aims to provide insight on how humanitarian and development assistance in places like Iraq and Afghanistan can contribute more effectively to creating secure, productive, and just conditions, as seen through the eyes of local people.

With generous support from the Hewlett Foundation, Mercy Corps developed a research program – Learning for Effective Aid Policy and Practice (LEAPP) – to analyze how community-led aid models can most effectively help societies transition from conflict to recovery. Programming designed to provide rapid stabilizing effects in insecure environments may be implemented using a variety of methodological approaches: from quick-response programs with little involvement from local citizens and government officials, to community-led programs that involve community leaders and members in the processes of deciding upon, investing in, implementing, and maintaining projects that meet their most pressing needs. International non-governmental organizations (INGOs), including Mercy Corps, are known for employing community-led methods, which are the subject of this study.

The LEAPP study seeks to understand how community members themselves regard community-led programming, and how they evaluate the contributions made by the main types of project implementers – or actors – working in their areas. Through hundreds of interviews, we learned that community leaders and members believe that community-led methods of development lead to superior outcomes. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, INGOs were the most highly rated actor on every one of the community-led methods evaluated. They were also rated as the most effective actor in terms of program outcomes.

*The results of this study indicate that community leaders and members interviewed view community-led methods of development, as implemented by INGOs, as more effective at contributing to stability and development than other methods used by other actors.* In fact, the more that different actors are perceived as using community-led methods of development, the more successful they are perceived to be. The findings highlight three main reasons for the positive perceptions of community-led development: community-led development 1) allows people to participate and feel ownership, 2) meets urgent needs specific to each community, and 3) builds trusting relationships. Each of these factors is described in greater detail in this report.

This study suggests that development assistance investments could be more effectively employed through greater support for community-led development efforts, especially in insecure areas.

# Research Findings

## RESEARCH METHODS

LEAPP employed quantitative and qualitative research methods in Afghanistan and Iraq. In Afghanistan, Altai Consulting conducted 512 interviews with community leaders and members in 34 communities in the north (Kunduz, Takhar, and Baghlan), east (Kunar and Nangarhar), and south (Kandahar) during August 2009. In Iraq, Al-Reyadah Consulting conducted 520 interviews in 52 communities in the south, equally distributed between the governorates of Basrah, Thi Qar, Missan, and Muthanna, during September 2009. Among community members surveyed, 50% were women in Afghanistan and 47% were women in Iraq. Survey research was complemented by 10 focus groups in Afghanistan and 11 focus groups in Iraq. This briefing paper summarizes analysis provided to Mercy Corps in two full reports by GlobeScan Incorporated, an international research consultancy with over two decades of experience in conducting multi-country public and stakeholder opinion surveys.



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The central concepts of the community-led approach evaluated by LEAPP research are:

- Community-led development contributes to **capacity**-building through engaging local leaders and community members in constructive collaboration to implement development programs while modeling high standards of accountability and transparency.
- Community-led development contributes to **community**-building through bringing stakeholders together to collectively identify and address community needs, encouraging a culture of inclusivity and cooperation, and mitigating competition over resources.
- Community-led development contributes to **ownership**-building through increasing people's capacity and willingness to participate and invest in efforts to improve their communities.

For each of these central concepts, a series of indicators were developed to measure both processes and outcomes involved with community-led methods of development. Respondents evaluated INGOs, government, local NGOs, and Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs, or joint civilian-military units) on each of the different indicators.

As shown in the charts on the following page, INGOs were rated more highly in **Afghanistan** than other actors on all outcome measures, followed by local Afghan NGOs, then national and district government, and finally PRTs. The INGOs stand out most in Afghanistan for achieving significant results at reasonable cost, building trust with community leaders, and helping to reduce tension between people in the community. In **Iraq**, INGOs were also ranked most favorably in terms of outcome measures, followed closely by government organizations, with local NGOs in third place, followed by PRTs. The INGOs stand out most in Iraq for fighting corruption, building trust with community leaders, achieving significant results at reasonable cost, and delivering high quality products.

## Ratings of Different Actors on Outcomes

Total Sample, Mean Scores

<b>AFGHANISTAN</b> outcome	International NGOs	National and district government	Afghan/local NGOs	PRTs	INGO percentage gain over other actors*
Builds trust with community leaders	3.33	2.67	2.87	2.60	+23
Fights corruption	3.32	3.26	2.82	2.48	+16
Achieves significant results at reasonable cost	3.31	2.37	2.98	2.61	+25
Has high quality products	3.34	2.85	2.92	2.57	+20
Helps reduce tension between people in the community	3.32	2.72	2.90	2.58	+21
Completes projects on time	3.29	2.83	2.92	2.52	+19
Projects benefit a majority of community (not just a few)	3.33	2.81	2.94	2.56	+20
Effectively cooperates with local government officials	3.31	2.73	2.96	2.68	+19

 **Highest Score**

\* Mean scores for INGOs on each characteristic expressed as percentage gain over the average scores of National & District Government, Afghan/local NGOs, and PRTs (other actor average score = 100).

## Ratings of Different Actors on Outcomes

Total Sample, Mean Scores

<b>IRAQ</b> outcome	International NGOs	National, district and sub-district governments	Iraqi/local NGOs	PRTs	INGO percentage gain over other actors*
Builds trust with community leaders	2.16	1.73	1.60	1.71	+29
Fights corruption	2.15	1.74	1.60	1.44	+35
Achieves significant results at reasonable cost	2.15	1.95	1.63	1.72	+21
Has high quality products	2.14	1.99	1.63	1.67	+21
Helps reduce tension between people in the community	1.81	1.96	1.61	1.44	+8
Completes projects on time	1.81	1.93	1.65	1.65	+4
Projects benefit a majority of community (not just a few)	1.81	1.72	1.60	1.68	+9
Effectively cooperates with local government officials	1.80	1.74	1.61	1.72	+7

 **Highest Score**

\* Mean scores for INGOs on each characteristic expressed as percentage gain over the average scores of National, District and Sub-district governments, Iraqi/local NGOs, and PRTs (other actor average score = 100).

# Why is community-led development perceived as more effective?



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LEAPP research found three main reasons for the positive perceptions of community-led development:

- **Community-led development allows people to participate in and feel ownership for their own development.** Communities perceive development projects as most successful when they include community involvement, build consensus, and galvanize a strong sense of community ownership. Building ownership takes time, yet also yields corresponding benefits by enabling a more durable, sustainable project impact.
- **Community-led development meets urgent needs specific to each community.** Perceived needs of different communities vary widely. Because community-led methods involve people in identifying priorities, these methods were perceived as more effective at resolving urgent problems.
- **Community-led development builds trusting relationships, positively impacting perceptions regarding the capability of actors and the impact of their efforts.** The programs perceived as most effective are those that create linkages between people, with INGOs serving as a catalyst for improving local institutions and promoting inclusion of all groups, especially the most marginalized.

## 1. Community-led development allows people to participate and feel ownership

LEAPP research shows there are no short cuts when it comes to effective development. The efforts that rated highest among community leaders and members were those where the requisite time had been invested to foster ownership through carefully involving people in initiatives.

*“The way the National Solidarity Program and Mercy Corps handled the projects was very much appreciated. They met with the people and asked for their needs. We have chosen the projects that would be more relevant to us and people have therefore supported the projects that they had chosen.”*

*Community Member  
Nangarhar, Afghanistan*

In Afghanistan, 61% of community leaders and 33% of community members reported they had personally participated in a development project implemented by an INGO. Both Afghan NGOs and traditional local leaders – or *shura* – also had significant participation levels, with 34% of leaders reporting participation in projects with them. In Iraq, participation levels were lower overall due to the urban context: only 23% of community leaders reported they had participated in a project implemented by INGOs or elected local officials, the two actors that enjoyed the highest levels of participation.

In spite of limited personal participation, many respondents were able to express opinions about the methods of INGOs and other actors. The chart below illustrates how the ratings of INGOs on seven different aspects of promoting participation compare to the ratings given to other actors evaluated by respondents. INGOs are perceived as the most participatory of all actors, with respondents in both Iraq and Afghanistan rating them 27% higher than other actors.



## INGO percentage gain over other actors on promoting participation\*

Method	Afghanistan	Iraq
Promotes participation of community members	+27 %	+27 %
Encourages people to work together to improve their community	+18 %	+22 %
Gets community leaders to contribute to costs	+19 %	+15 %
Gets community members to contribute labor time	+27 %	+14 %
Actively involves people in the community in project management and supervision	+19 %	+33 %
Teaches people in the community new skills	+20 %	+26 %
Gets community to continue project after the organization leaves the community	+25 %	+28 %

\* Mean scores for INGOs on each characteristic expressed as a percentage gain over the average scores of government, local NGOs, and PRTs (other actor average score = 100)

## 2. Community-led development meets urgent needs specific to each community

While all communities surveyed feel a strong need for a wide variety of development programs, the demand for specific services varies considerably. In order for development interventions to be perceived positively by the population, local needs must be taken into account. The survey shows very low levels of satisfaction in both locations for most services, as highlighted in the summary chart below.

### Percent of interviewees satisfied with the quality of services in their communities

	Afghanistan	Iraq
Sample size (n)	512	520
Roads and transportation	38 %	17 %
Electricity supply	14 %	1 %
Education	43 %	24 %
Health care	7 %	16 %
Number of jobs increased in last year	26 %	30 %
Overall economic situation	11 %	12 %
Overall quality of life in community	14 %	11 %
Likelihood that quality of life will improve	21 %	16 %

1. "Significantly" or "Somewhat" 2. "Good" or "Very Good"

In Afghanistan, community leaders surveyed were particularly negative about the economy, with two-thirds reporting a decrease in jobs and describing the overall economic situation as "poor" or "very poor". However, the needs expressed by those surveyed in Afghanistan – most of whom live in rural areas – varied widely from community to community and between provinces, indicating that considerable programming flexibility is required to address the most urgent priorities of specific populations.

In Iraq, research found that people's negative assessments of life in their communities are driven by serious inadequacies in infrastructure, services, and the local economy. The magnitude of the problems that need to be addressed – combined with the context of large, highly populated urban communities – creates a much higher level of consensus on the main needs facing residents, as well as a higher level of cynicism regarding whether needs will be effectively addressed.

*"Focus on participation and coordination with local councils if you want to implement a project and we are ready to make any contribution and support."*

Community Leader  
Basra, Iraq



Iraq – Cassandra Nelson/Mercy Corps

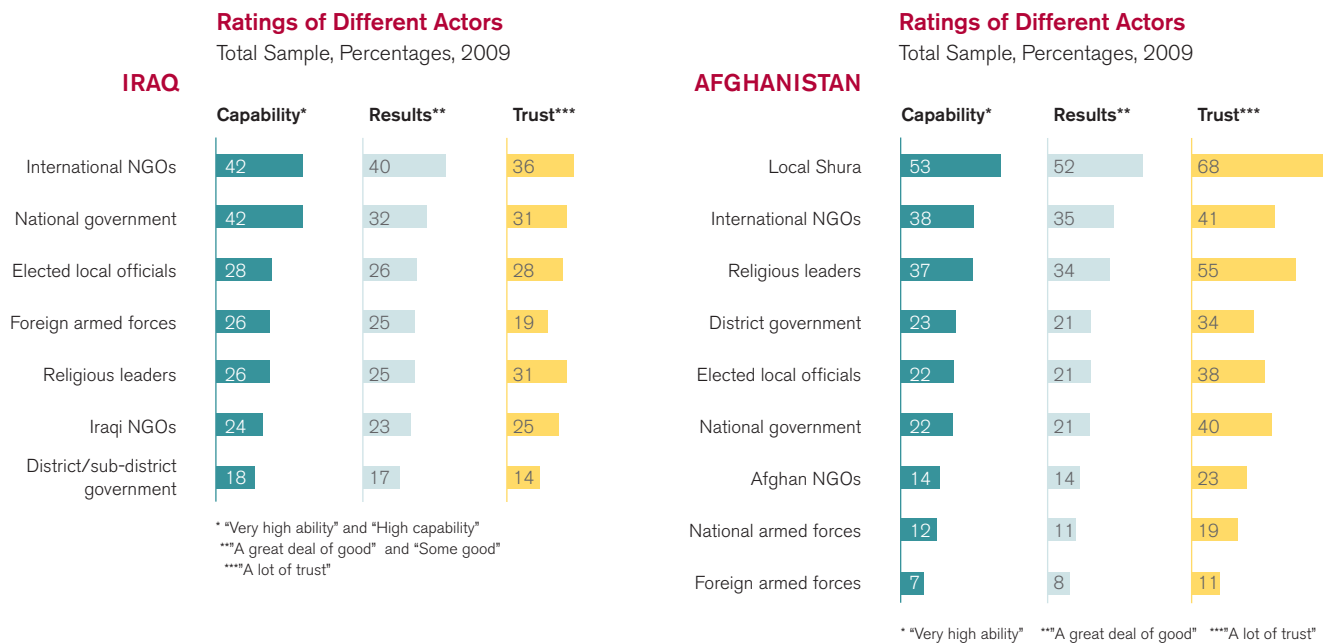


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Because community-led methods involve local leaders and community members in a process to identify and prioritize their most pressing needs, these methods were perceived by those surveyed in both countries as more effective at identifying and addressing their main problems. In Afghanistan, INGOs were ranked 18% higher than other actors on their ability to consult with people in the community to determine needs; in Iraq, INGOs led by 12%.

### 3. Community-led development builds trusting relationships

When asked to rate different organizations involved in development efforts in terms of people's confidence – in their ability to improve the situation in their communities, the benefits they bring to communities, and the level of trust people have in them – respondents in both Iraq and Afghanistan rated INGOs among the most capable, effective and trusted of organizations, as shown in the charts below. INGOs (with 36% of respondents expressing “a lot of trust”) were rated highest in terms of trust in Iraq, above religious leaders (31%) and the national government (31%). In Afghanistan, local shura are the most trusted actors (68%), followed by religious leaders (55%) and INGOs (41%). Foreign military forces receive the lowest trust ratings in Afghanistan (11%) and the second lowest in Iraq (19%).



When asked to compare different actors in terms of their ability to build trust with community leaders, respondents in Afghanistan ranked INGOs 23% higher than other actors. In Iraq, INGOs were rated 29% higher on trust building. In terms of how well they do at increasing communication between community leaders and local government officials, INGOs were rated 12% higher than other actors in Iraq and 19% higher in Afghanistan.

These differences in perceptions of capability, results and trust have clear impacts on respondents' choice of the development organizations that they prefer to implement projects in their communities. In Afghanistan, 41% of respondents prefer to work

with INGOs and 20% with local shura. In Iraq, 29% cited preference for collaboration with INGOs and 28% with the national government. Research findings suggest that the “dream team” for implementing development projects in Afghanistan would pair local shuras with INGOs; in Iraq, the development “dream team” would involve a partnership between INGOs and the national government.

## Armed accompaniment and people’s willingness to participate in development efforts

Mercy Corps employs a community acceptance model of security that eschews armed accompaniment, relying instead on community leaders and members to guarantee the safety of our staff by negotiating with armed actors to allow development activities to proceed. As part of LEAPP research, Mercy Corps was interested to learn how armed accompaniment impacts people’s willingness to participate in projects. The results indicate that actors are rarely accompanied by military forces or private security in the areas surveyed, and opinions are evenly divided as to whether armed accompaniment is desirable. There are significant differences between provinces in both Iraq and Afghanistan, with respondents in more secure areas being relatively favorable towards accompaniment, and respondents in less secure areas being much less favorable.

Findings suggest that local residents have the most reluctance to participate in development activities managed by groups accompanied by military or security accompaniments in the most insecure areas:

- In Afghanistan, in only two of the six provinces surveyed did a significant number of respondents rate the security situation as worsening, with 22% in both Kunduz and Kandahar reporting declining security. When respondents were asked to rate the likelihood of their participation in development programs using armed accompaniment, these were also the only two provinces with significant numbers – 38% in Kunduz and 48% in Kandahar – reporting that they would not participate in projects with armed accompaniment. This finding contrasts with the other four provinces, where a majority of respondents said armed accompaniment would make them more likely to participate.
- In Southern Iraq, the only province where a significant percentage (25%) reported that they would not participate in a development program using armed accompaniment is Missan. Notably, this is also the province where the highest percentage (19%) reports a worsening of security conditions. In Muthanna, where 95% say security conditions have improved, a large majority of 78% report that they would be more likely to participate in projects using armed accompaniment.

The findings of the study indicate that decisions about armed accompaniment should be made on a community-by-community basis and reviewed as security conditions change.

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*“We do not want the army or private security people to come into our village. Firstly because we do not need them, as the security in the village is good enough. Secondly, if they come, it will only make things worse, as the Taliban will try to attack them.”*

Community Leader  
Nangarhar, Afghanistan

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*“Previously there was fear of working with organizations accompanied by special security forces or military forces, but now there is not. We do not mind working with these organizations if they are accompanied by special security forces or military forces and we prefer them to be Iraqis.”*

Community Leader  
Basra, Iraq

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## Conclusions



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This study adds to a growing body of research that demonstrates the value of long-term, community-led, and needs-based assistance, even in insecure environments. It also raises significant questions about the efficacy of ongoing assistance strategies and investments in Afghanistan and Iraq that do not sufficiently involve local participation of communities, and that often focus predominantly on achieving short-term impacts. Foreign policy goals may ultimately be best served through a much clearer separation of security and development objectives, and through a more concerted effort to ensure that the methods through which aid is delivered foster greater community involvement and ownership.

The complete research reports summarized in this briefing paper can be found at:

[mercycorps.org/leapp](https://mercycorps.org/leapp)



Mercy Corps helps people in the world's toughest places turn the crises of natural disaster, poverty and conflict into opportunities for progress. Driven by local needs and market conditions, our programs provide communities with the tools and support they need to transform their own lives. Our worldwide team of 3,700 professionals is improving the lives of 16.7 million people in more than 40 countries. For more information, see [mercycorps.org](https://mercycorps.org).

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