



SOCIAL CAPITAL AND GOOD GOVERNANCE

A Governance in Action Research Brief

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Overview

Social capital—the norms, relationships and networks that enable people to act collectively—is increasingly linked to positive development and well-being outcomes. Communities with higher stocks of social capital are more likely to experience better health outcomes, fewer violent conflicts and less crime, higher educational achievement and increased economic growth.ⁱ Evidence demonstrates that, “[t]hose communities endowed with a diverse stock of social networks and civic associations are in a stronger position to confront poverty and vulnerability, resolve disputes, and take advantage of new opportunities.”ⁱⁱ Numerous scholars have suggested that social capital enables citizens to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives and make collective demands of governance institutions, and that societies with robust associational life and diverse networks are more likely to be engaged civically and participate in governance than those without such networks. While research and experience have illustrated correlations between social capital and well-being, the aid sector lacks an understanding of the processes and pathways through which social capital contributes to good governance and promotes the collective good—learning that could fundamentally improve our programmatic approaches.

This research brief attempts to fill this gap by providing an overview of existing literature on social capital and governance and discussing practical applications for aid agencies seeking to improve governance outcomes at the local level. We begin by defining social capital, summarizing its benefits and drawbacks and how it is generated and maintained. We then provide a framework outlining how social capital contributes to good governance and discuss how Mercy Corps' good governance approach aligns with this framework. Finally, we provide guidance for future programming with strategies for strengthening social capital as a means for promoting good governance.

What is Social Capital?

Social capital refers to the quantity and quality of social resources (i.e., social relations, networks, membership in groups and access to wider institutions in society) on which people draw in pursuing their livelihoods and wellbeing.ⁱⁱⁱ Frankenberger et al. suggest social capital “is based on strong perceptions of local embeddedness, self-regulating moral codes, and the norms, reciprocity and trust that exist between individuals and groups at the community level.”^{iv} Some recognized signs of well-developed collective social capital include close interaction between people, the ability to rely on others in times of crisis, and open communication between stakeholder groups.

As the glue that helps bind society together—transforming self-seeking individuals into connected community members with shared interests and motivation to work collectively for the common good—social capital forms the foundation for a cooperative and stable society.^v It also contributes to social cohesion, defined as the overall quality of connectedness in a community or society, making social capital and social cohesion mutually reinforcing. At the heart of social capital theory is the idea that trust and relationships matter for the economic advancement and the political and social well-being of a community.



What is Social Capital?

Mercy Corps defines social capital as the networks and resources available to people through their relationships with others. It refers to the connections that exist between people, and their shared values and norms of behavior, which enable and encourage mutually advantageous social cooperation.

Definition adapted from Aldrich and Putnam

Mercy Corps: Sean Sheridan

THE DEBATE: IS SOCIAL CAPITAL AN INDIVIDUAL OR COMMUNITY ASSET?

Mercy Corps considers social capital to be both an individual resource and a collective good. At the individual-level, it refers to the relationships and networks that a person can utilize to improve his or her well-being. At the community-level, it refers to the collective relationships and networks a community can leverage to improve their well-being as a whole. For the purposes of this paper, we will primarily examine how social capital—as a collective resource—impacts good governance at the communal level.

However, we recognize the importance of individual social capital and acknowledge that within a given community, different individuals will have different levels of access to social capital based on their gender, class, race, religion, ethnicity or ability. We integrate a discussion of individual social capital into our overall analysis when possible and encourage additional inquiry into the topic.

The Building Blocks of Social Capital

Despite various definitions, there is consensus among scholars that social capital includes: 1) cognitive elements: norms and values, and 2) structural elements: networks and relationships, as well as formal and informal rules and institutions that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. These elements are explored below. Importantly, social capital is determined not only by the number or quantity of connections possessed by an individual or community, but also by the quality of those connections and how they are utilized.

1. **Cognitive Elements:** Norms and values are the attitudes that predispose citizens to cooperate, understand and empathize with each other. Fundamental to social capital are the norms of trust and reciprocity. Trust is the expectation that people will regularly demonstrate honest and reliable behavior, based on commonly shared values.^{vii} By influencing the expectations of others' behaviors, trust makes it possible to maintain peaceful and stable social relations that are the basis for collective behavior and productive cooperation.^{viii} Reciprocity is the assumption that individuals will repay, in kind, what another person has provided them. Scholars argue that higher-levels of reciprocal relationships lead to more cooperative and well-functioning societies. Together, trust and reciprocity encourage mutual reliance, obligation and solidarity, increasing the possibility that individuals will act collectively.

2. **Structural Elements:** Networks are formal and informal associations between individuals, groups or organizations that facilitate coordination and cooperation. They include voluntary associations that bring together members around common interests (e.g., sports clubs, choral groups, religious/cultural associations), fostering social capital by forging ties between like-minded people and across different social groups when their interests align.^{ix} Networks can also be public goods-oriented, such as parent-teacher associations, professional associations, entities that manage natural resources or labor unions. Informal (e.g., community savings groups) and formal (e.g., government bureaucracies) institutions provide rules or structures that govern how benefits and goods are allocated among members of a group and assign roles and responsibilities. Whether implicit or explicitly agreed-upon, rules shape the expectations citizens have about the behavior and responsibilities of others. Without enforceable rules that set limits on human behavior, individuals may be tempted to free ride on the efforts of others.



VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

According to Robert Putnam, who is referred to as “the founding father of social capital theory,” membership in voluntary associations builds the social capital necessary for effective engagement in public goods associations and increases civic participation. Putnam’s critics have argued that time spent in school, work or with the family restricts time for voluntary activities. Mercy Corps recognizes that the ability to participate in voluntary associations is often a function of time and resources only accessible to certain subsections of the population and frequently dependent on gender or class. When facilitating community groups or networks, we look for opportunities to reduce time burdens and resource constraints that hinder the participation of marginalized or vulnerable groups.

Mercy Corps: Lindsay Hamsik

Cognitive and structural forms of social capital are inter-connected and mutually reinforcing. For example, participation in social networks or associations can facilitate the development of shared trust, norms and values. However, the existence of a relationship or connection does not ensure related interactions will be positive. Without positive norms guiding interaction, networks that support cooperation and coordination in one context may promote conflict and competition in another.^x Ultimately, both cognitive and structural elements are essential to social capital formation; the cognitive elements of social capital predispose people toward mutually beneficial collective action (i.e., trust and reciprocity) and the structural elements of social capital (i.e., networks and institutions) facilitate such action.

Forms of Social Capital: Bonding, Bridging and Linking

Scholars typically separate social capital into three forms: bonding, bridging, and linking.^{xi} Each form is well-suited for building different types of relationships, and therefore no one type of capital is more important than the others; they must be developed and sustained together to ensure community well-being.^{xii}

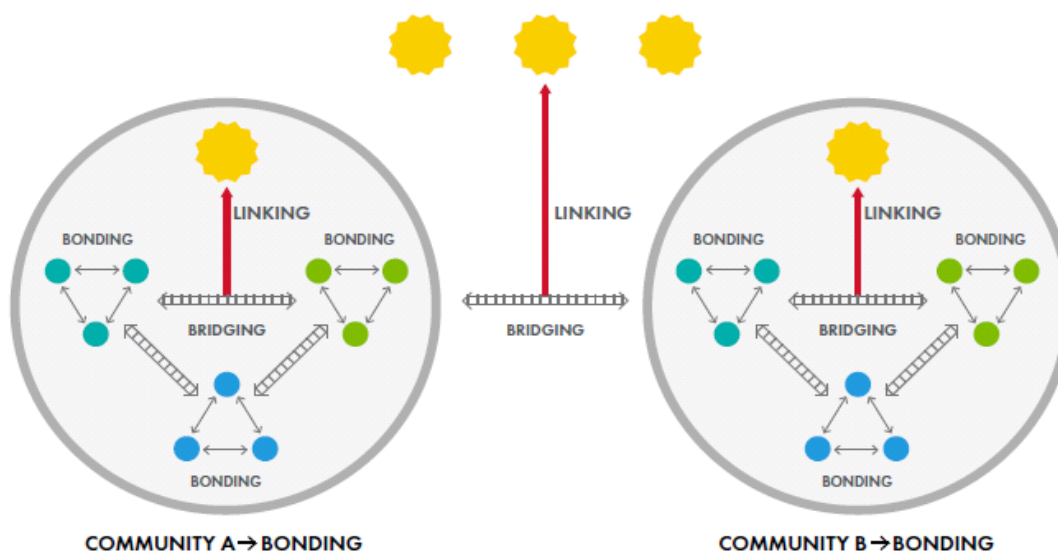
- › **Bonding social capital:** Horizontal relationships in a homogeneous group—such as within a peer group, family, culture, religion, gender or ethnicity—where individuals share a location, identity, values or demographic characteristics.
- › **Bridging social capital:** Horizontal relationships between heterogeneous groups from different geographic locations, ethnicities, religions, genders or other identity groups. These relationships or networks cross social stratifications and identities, connecting members of a homogenous group to “extra-local networks, crossing ethnic, racial and religious cleavages.”^{xiii} Bridging social capital is often a product of involvement in organizations, such as civic and political institutions, parent–teacher associations, sports and interest clubs, or educational and religious groups.
- › **Linking social capital:** Vertical relationships between social networks with differing levels of power or social status. This includes relationships and engagement that cross hierarchies or “vertical distance,” such as links between decision makers (e.g., higher level government, political elites) and the general public, individuals from different social classes, communities and international NGOs, or communities and the private sector. The presence of linking social capital suggests individuals and groups are able to connect with people who have access to external resources or power.

As part of a gender-based violence awareness program in Ipiales, Columbia, Mercy Corps has developed a sports and yoga-based curriculum aimed at teaching youth respect for the opposite sex. These types of programs are critical to building bridging social capital.

Mercy Corps: Miguel Samper



Figure 1: Relationship Between Bonding, Bridging and Linking Social Capital



Bonding, bridging and linking occurs at different levels: both within a community (i.e., between individuals and different community groups) and between communities. For example, in Communities A and B three sets of three like individuals bonded to each other, illustrated here by blue, green or teal triads. Individuals and groups with bridging social capital are able to connect across divides with other groups or individuals in the community (e.g., blue triads connecting with green ones). Linking social capital then enables these individuals or groups to connect to sources of power (represented here by yellow circles) within their community. A community can aggregate social capital communally—when community members are able to access bonding, bridging and linking social capital equitably, and a community has strong relationships and networks that cross identity lines or move up hierarchies, that community as a whole builds bonding social capital. A bonded community can more easily bridge geographic or other divides in connecting with another community (e.g., Communities A and B have sufficient bonding social capital to connect with each other). Once connected, these communities are better equipped to organize collectively, link with higher-level power sources external to their communities (illustrated by the three yellow circles above), and make demands of these sources.

Bonding social capital serves numerous roles: it helps create shared identities, develops local reciprocity and intra-group trust, and provides emotional closeness, social support and aid during crises. Such ties have been shown to increase survival strategies and provide immediate economic support. In their analysis of poor communities in rural areas of northern India, Kozel and Parker (2000) report that social groups among poor villagers served vitally important protection, risk management and solidarity functions, from lending money to close kin/neighbors to covering health costs when a family member was sick.^{xiv} In a study on social capital in rural Indonesia, bonding social capital enabled remote villages to form rotating savings and loans groups, known as *arisan*, which provide credit and a safety net, helping households respond to economic shocks.^{xv} In both cases, bonding social capital was limited in its ability to bring about significant economic advancement and opportunities outside the community despite the benefits, nor did it catalyze economic development or efforts focused on political change in the community. Nonetheless, because bonding social capital helps engender high levels of solidarity within a group, it can encourage individuals to mobilize effectively around a common purpose. It is also considered a foundation from which to establish bridging and linking ties to other groups.^{xvi}

While bonding social capital can be restrictive to outsiders (i.e., those who do not share the characteristics bonding the group), bridging social capital provides communities with access to external actors who have new knowledge, significant financial resources and political connections. In connecting individuals, groups and communities across geographic, ethnic, caste, race, culture and other social divides, bridging social capital tends to inculcate broader identities and more generalized forms of reciprocity and trust than occurs through bonding relations.^{xvii} Bridging ties also provide access to a larger pool of resources, information and opportunities than available with bonding ties. The classic example illustrating the

importance of bridging social capital comes from Granovetter’s work on the strength of bridging ties, which provided more employment opportunities than bonding ties.^{xviii} Daniel Aldrich’s research on community resilience following Hurricane Katrina (2005) is another example that shows communities with higher levels of bridging social capital prior to the natural disaster had more access to resources and a faster recovery rate than those communities that relied predominantly on informal support from immediate family, friends and neighbors.^{xix}

Linking social capital—which crosses hierarchies through relationships across formal or institutional lines of power, authority or influence—helps increase communities’ access to key resources in formal institutions outside the community, including financial and technical support, capacity-building and increased access to formal decision-making processes.^{xx} These relationships often connect communities with civil society organizations, government, service providers or the private sector. Aldrich’s study of local residents in the coastal villages of Tamil Nadu, India demonstrates the importance of linking social capital. While relatively poorer and marginalized groups had never met a government representative at any level, some had met the collector—a sort of ombudsman—and that connection allowed them to register for disaster aid following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.^{xxi}

Each form of social capital is useful for meeting different needs and has particular advantages and disadvantages, making communities characterized by a mix of bonding, bridging and linking capital are more effective in solving problems than those who have only close networks (bonding social capital) or loose connections to the outside world.^{xxii} As social network scholars have highlighted, bonding social capital allows underdeveloped regions and individuals of low socio-economic status “to get by, but without linking connections to extra-local organizations they have difficulty getting ahead.”^{xxiii}

How is Social Capital Created?

Given evidence that social capital contributes to economic advancement and social cooperation, it is important to consider how communities generate each form so that stakeholders (i.e., communities, civil society and governments) can support these efforts. Generally, scholars support one of three primary theories for how social capital is created and maintained: 1) historical and cultural determinism; 2) institutional and structural origins or state-centered; and 3) communitarian or community-centered.

Theory 1: Historical & Cultural	Theory 2: Institutional & Structural	Theory 3: Communitarian
<p>Social capital is generated through organic, long-term processes (e.g., the history of a strong central state versus a weak one; patterns of human settlement, such as commercial urban centers versus rural enclaves; histories of conflict, religious or cultural tradition; or socio-economic equity) built on generations of culture and history.</p> <p>Key proponents: Putnam, Fukuyama</p>	<p>Social capital is largely the product of the political, legal and institutional environment. A sufficiently powerful third-party enforcer (i.e., the state) compels otherwise untrusting individuals—through the threat of force or the creation of institutions and a legal environment that facilitates co-operation—to act collectively.^{xxiv}</p> <p>Key proponents: Levi, Skocpol, Rothstein, North</p>	<p>Social capital is generated through locally-agreed reforms in local institutions, rules and norms. The internal efforts of community groups—villagers’ self-initiated organizations and local leadership—help grow social capital.^{xxv}</p> <p>Key proponents: Ostrom, Krishna, Aldrich</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Synergy Theory Key proponents: Naryan, Evans, Woolcock</p>		

Table 1: Theories of Social Capital Generation

The synergy theory falls between institutional and communitarian views, acknowledging the importance of: 1) top-down processes—facilitated by state and formal institutions—which create an environment and incentives that enable the growth of social capital, and 2) bottom-up processes that allow communities to build trust and reciprocity.^{xxvi, xxvii} Maximizing the social, political and economic benefits of bonding, bridging and linking social capital requires linkages between and engagement among both the state and the community. Although the synergy theory elevates the role of institutions (i.e., states) and communities as primary protagonists in the creation of social capital, it does not dismiss the important role of history and culture. In fact, research has shown that communities with prior experience in collective action are better equipped to use these practices in solving problems.^{xxviii}

The synergy theory provides insights for third parties (e.g., donors, INGOs) seeking to support social capital development. First, unless they are accompanied by parallel efforts to build trust and relationships at the community level, top-down institution-building approaches that value technocratic or financial assistance are not sufficient to generate social capital and achieve longer-term development outcomes. Second, because the synergy theory identifies communities and governments as the key drivers of social capital generation, external NGOs, donors and aid agencies should nurture and strengthen existing relationships and linkages between government and communities where possible rather than attempt to create new ones and generate social capital themselves.

The Potential Downsides of Social Capital

Although we often think of social capital as having positive benefits, it is considered value-neutral—neither good nor bad in and of itself. In a given situation, the form(s) social capital takes, coupled with its strength and the interplay between it and existing social and political dynamics, will influence whether it supports progress toward a peaceful, just society. In fact, some scholars have referred to social capital as a “double-edged sword” and warn of its potential for unintended, negative consequences. For example, street gangs, mafia families, drug rings and racial supremacy groups are all characterized by high levels of perverse social capital in that their actions lead to harmful ends.

There are numerous cases in which social ties are more of a liability than an asset. For example, linking and bridging social capital can result in negative effects if used for nepotism, corruption and/or suppression of other viewpoints.^{xxix} Bonding social capital, when concentrated among elite members of society, can be used to control the institutional basis of local power. When this is layered on top of existing prejudices, strongly bonded groups can inhibit the access of out-groups.^{xxx} Social capital can exacerbate inequality if it perpetuates institutions that restrict membership based on gender, religion, caste or other socioeconomic divisions.^{xxxi} Accumulation of bonding social capital in deeply divided or segregated societies can reinforce communal divisions, hinder co-operation across network boundaries and reduce incentives for group leaders to compromise.^{xxxiii}

A person’s social, economic and political position in society, as well as his or her education level, is a primary determinant of the forms of social capital accessible to them.^{xxxiv} The more wealthy and educated have higher levels of bridging and linking capital, whereas the poor primarily have access to bonding social capital, in large part because they have less time and economic power to participate in associational activities.^{xxxv} The absence of social ties can have negative impacts.^{xxxvi} Communities and neighborhoods with little social capital may be unable to keep up with counterparts belonging to robust networks. Those already on the periphery of society, who lack strong network ties to authorities, can be further marginalized

› CAN SOCIAL CAPITAL BE DESTROYED?

Different factors can contribute to the erosion of social capital, including conflict, inequality or technology that diminishes the need for social interaction. Aid agencies are cautioned against interventions that may deplete existing stocks of social capital by introducing projects/processes that increase inequality or incentivize power holders to undermine collective efforts. Finally, agencies must acknowledge pre-existing forms of social capital and ensure programs avoid aggravating relations or heightening tensions that can erupt in conflict.

by well-connected groups.^{xxxvii} Social capital, therefore, does not always function as a public good if it results in benefits for only certain segments of society.^{xxxviii}

Importantly, over-reliance on one type of social capital may also have negative impacts. In poorer communities, an excess of bonding social capital and the absence of bridging and linking capital can limit access to outside resources for economic, social and political advancement. Similarly, over-dependence on linking capital can have negative impacts, as evidenced by Mercy Corps' study of the response to the Gorkha earthquake in Nepal. Ten weeks after the earthquake, households with higher levels of linking capital showed poorer short-term coping and medium-term recovery capacities, suggesting that being linked to government officials may not yield returns if government capacity is low or where governance systems do not function well. People who perceived local government mechanisms to be supportive may have relied on them for assistance instead of other support structures.^{xxxix} Ultimately, understanding and taking these pitfalls into account can increase the likelihood that stakeholders benefit positively from social capital.

Can Social Capital Generate Demand for Good Governance?

The literature on social capital describes the importance of networks, relationships and trust in encouraging cooperation; however, it has rarely examined whether social capital impacts the performance of governance institutions.^{xl} This section outlines how social capital can enable communities to overcome the collective action problem, and how collective action can result in more transparent, accountable, responsive and inclusive governance systems.

Overcoming the Collective Action Problem

The collective action problem describes a situation in which multiple individuals would benefit from a certain action, but the associated cost makes it unlikely that any individual can or will undertake and solve it alone. An example of a collective action problem would be the formation of a community-watch group in a high-crime neighborhood. Although everyone would benefit from improved security, initiating the watch group requires time and resources too great for any one individual to bear alone. The ideal solution is to undertake this activity collectively and share the cost.

The free-rider problem further complicates collective action, as an individual is usually better off in the short-run by choosing not to cooperate with others and can benefit from the collective action of others without taking part him/herself.^{xli} Social capital helps individuals overcome the collective action problem by enhancing norms of trust and reciprocity, which restrain individual opportunism and make individuals better able and more inclined to act collectively for mutual benefit. Trust and reciprocity are the core links between social capital and

THE BENEFITS OF COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Workers' collectives or unions provide an important example of how social capital enables individuals to act collectively and advance their demands. When workers join together and use collective bargaining practices, they are able to significantly alter the balance of power, increasing their influence and their ability to redress inequality and exploitation.

The most effective workers-rights movements have used a combination of bonding, bridging and linking social capital: workers develop bonding ties through their local union, unions connect (or bridge) across regions to elevate a common platform, and they use linking social capital to connect with influencers and power-holders. Across the globe, unions have used collective bargaining to enforce occupational safety standards; improve quality of the work environment such as lighting, ventilation and heating; institute formal grievance procedures; arrange the composition of benefits; create fair pension plans; influence policies on layoffs and increase wages.

collective action, but can only be sustained and validated through frequent behavior and repetitive interactions among individuals.^{xlii}

Links Between Social Capital and Good Governance

Trust, a product of high levels of social capital, can increase citizen participation in groups and networks that help them identify common priorities and more effectively voice their demands. When citizens are able to clearly articulate their demands, they are better able to target, advocate for and monitor the improvement of government services, increasing accountability. This “demand” for good governance precipitates “supply-side” responsiveness, transparency and accountability from government. According to Putnam:

Citizens in civic communities . . . demand more effective public service, and they are prepared to act collectively to achieve their shared goals. Their counterparts in less civic regions more commonly assume the role of alienated and cynical supplicants. . . . On the supply side, the performance of representative government is considerably facilitated by the social infrastructure of civic communities and by the democratic values of both officials and citizens.^{xliii}

Figure 2 (adapted from a diagram appearing in *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam) depicts how building relationships and trust at different levels leads to increased citizen engagement and more responsive governance. Social capital flows from individual interaction to larger organizations and collective activities, increasing participation in governance activities and ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of governments and institutions. At local levels, bonding social capital helps like-minded individuals act collectively and begin to develop a voice; bridging social capital amplifies citizen voice when several groups aggregate together; and linking social capital connects citizen voices with government officials and others who can influence decision-making.



Figure 2: The Impact of Social Capital on Governance

Building on this logic, Mercy Corps has developed the following causal pathways to illustrate the mechanisms through which social capital can facilitate collective action, which in turn facilitates demand for good governance.

-) Bonding and bridging social capital encourage new relationship building and more active participation in associations, which provide opportunities for citizens to discuss civic affairs and become more sophisticated consumers of politics.** Citizens awaken not only to their intrinsic *right* to good governance, but their *responsibility* to assume an active role in advocating for better governance.

Demand: Through community networks, citizens increase their awareness of political issues and discuss whether the government is doing everything that it should to improve their welfare.



Supply: Knowing their constituents are monitoring and discussing their behavior, elected political representatives work harder to govern effectively or face removal from office.

- › **With enhanced social capital, individual preferences shift toward community-oriented concerns, increasing the likelihood citizens will act collectively.**

Demand: By enhancing preferences for collective benefits, social capital enables citizens to articulate demands—which benefit the collective rather than profiting some members of society at the expense of others—to government.



Supply: Governments have stronger incentives to act on demands that benefit the collective, as these typically lead to greater social and political return.

- › **This shift enables citizens to aggregate their collective demands, and linking social capital helps them articulate these demands to government.**

Demand: In communities with high levels of social capital, citizens will be able to organize groups that can articulate their collective interests to government more effectively.



Supply: The more government is made aware of communities' wishes, the greater the likelihood its policies will reflect them.

Is Social Capital Sufficient?

While social capital may predispose individuals to cooperate and network, these factors may be insufficient in shifting governance outcomes. Social capital is an asset that remains latent until stakeholders activate it for their benefit.^{xliv} The following are additional capacities critical to activating social capital's positive impacts on good governance.

- › **Leadership Capacity Among Change Agents:** Research suggests that developing the leadership capacity of change agents—individual or groups, from influential community members to NGOs or political parties, who work to transform systems—is critical to harnessing the positive benefits of social capital in improving governance. Change agents can help articulate, aggregate and represent citizens' priorities by coordinating, organizing, building and maintaining relationships with key government decision-makers. Although specialized knowledge and competencies in advocacy, negotiation and political skills are required, change agents need not be existing power-holders, traditional leaders or elders. Research shows that new leaders, such as women or youth, often possess the most relevant characteristics of a change agent, from political and negotiation skills to interest in and connections with outside resources.^{xlv} A seven-year longitudinal study in rural India found that social capital was most productive in communities with effective new leaders who helped villagers act collectively, formulating clear, fair and widely agreed-upon rules. The study demonstrated how leadership roles are important for both building and maintaining social capital.^{xlvi}
- › **Government Capacity:** One hypothesis suggests that when political elites and bureaucrats are members of a society rich in social capital, they are more able to compromise with one another and work together efficiently. Bureaucratic cooperation leads to efficiency in the internal operations of a government.^{xlvii} However, evidence of this causal pathway is inconclusive. In an empirical analysis of German and American subnational governments, social capital was not shown to have a statistically significant correlation with administrative efficiency. In other words, high levels of social capital in the population did not impact the ability of a government to respond efficiently and effectively to citizen demands.^{xlviii} Government capacity to respond to citizen demands may go beyond social capital and depend on other factors, such as institutional structure, financial and human capital, organizational incentives and culture. Therefore, although social capital can contribute to effective and inclusive governance, it should not be considered a cure-all.

Social Capital and Mercy Corps' Good Governance Approach

Social capital theory provides a lens through which we can understand and affect governance outcomes. By normalizing trust and reciprocity within a community (i.e., bonding social capital) and between groups (i.e., bridging social capital), and fostering relationships between themselves and decision-makers (i.e., linking social capital), these communities can build the skills, opportunities and confidence to act collectively, participate in decision-making and advocate for responsive, accountable and transparent government.



Proposals for strengthening democratic institutions center almost exclusively on deficiencies in financial and human capital (thus calling for loans and technical assistance). However, the deficiencies in social capital in these countries are at least as alarming. Where are the efforts to encourage 'social capital formation'?

Robert Putnam in "The Prosperous Community: Social Capital and Public Life"

Mercy Corps: Thatcher Cook

Mercy Corps' Approach

Mercy Corps' good governance approach aims to elevate the voices of vulnerable communities and increase their inclusion in decision-making, while simultaneously promoting responsiveness and accountability among governance institutions and service providers. Working from both the bottom-up and top-down, Mercy Corps aims to empower and engage citizens, promote a skilled and connected civil society, and increase the responsiveness and accountability of decision-makers. At the center of this approach are efforts to strengthen social capital; we work to build relationships, increase trust, promote constructive dialogue and catalyze synergies between citizens, civil society and governments.

Community mobilization—the process of building a community's capacity to identify its own priorities, resources, needs and solutions to promote participation, accountability and peaceful change—is the foundation of Mercy Corps' governance approach and central to our efforts to support social capital development.¹ Underpinning these changes is a fundamental transformation in individuals' perception: they must ultimately adopt a sense of responsibility and agency, viewing themselves as active participants in governance. Our mobilization initiatives seek to shift these perceptions, from community attitudes and norm to practices and behaviors, fostering an environment conducive to collective action where citizens are empowered to meet the challenges of societies in transition.

Mercy Corps ensures its community mobilization approach is as inclusive as possible through Community Action Groups (CAGs), which convene and mobilize a wide cross-section of society—people of different ages, religions, genders, and/or ethnic groups—to make decisions jointly. Mercy Corps' facilitated process guides the CAG as it works to identify issues,

¹ For more information, please see Mercy Corps' Governance in Action Research Brief titled "How Effective is Community-Driven Development? Incorporating the Evidence into our Community Mobilization Approach."

prioritize community needs and plan solutions, all in consultation with the broader community. We complement our community mobilization process with efforts to strengthen civil society and inter-community linkages. Mercy Corps works to increase civil society’s ability to share information and facilitate connections between governance institutions and citizens by building these organizations’ skills and networks to ensure citizens are well informed about the actions and performance of governance institutions and have the means to freely influence public policies. This includes building civil society’s capacity to mobilize, aggregate citizen demands and link communities to decision-makers.

To maximize the sustainability of collective efforts at the local level, Mercy Corps works with government, building their capacity to engage with communities, illustrating the benefits of community participation in local decision-making, and creating opportunities for joint community-civil society-government interactions and relationship building. These efforts build trust between vulnerable communities and the institutions on which they depend, while enhancing communities’ stocks of bridging and linking social capital.

Our programs facilitate opportunities for social interaction, relationship building and network creation—from community to national levels. To promote secure, productive and just communities, we recognize our programs must work to build trust, support cooperation and instill a sense of common purpose. To do this, we look for opportunities to build linkages within and between communities and sectors—at all levels. We also understand there are risks involved in this work and utilize a conflict-sensitive approach to avoid the pitfalls associated with social capital development.

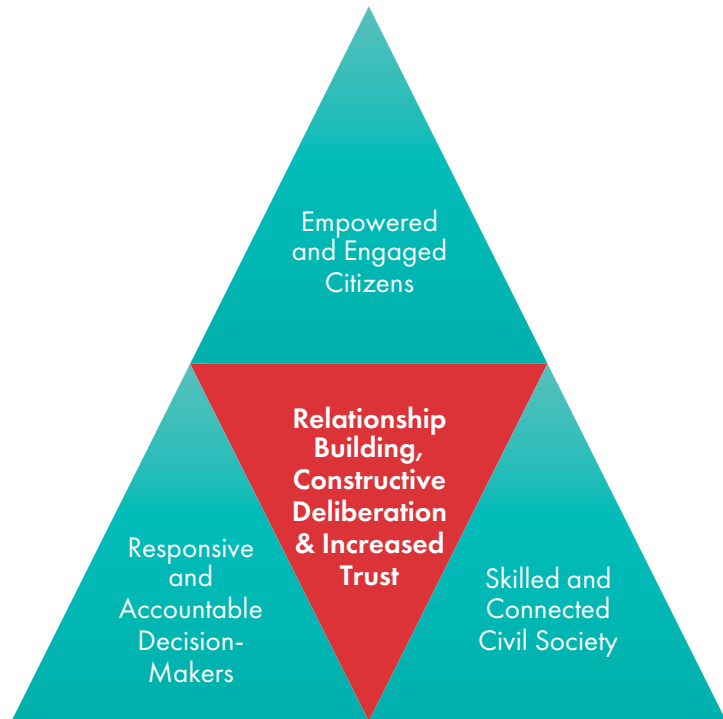


Figure 3: Initiatives to Strengthen Social Capital at the Core of Mercy Corps’ Good Governance Approach

› Can We Measure Social Capital? A Case Study from the Democratic Republic of the Congo

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mercy Corps, in partnership with LINC, has incorporated social network analysis research into our IMAGINE program, which aims to improve services—providing safe drinking water for almost 1 million people in eastern DRC.² IMAGINE’s governance approach focuses on building accountability between consumers, service providers and government to ensure equitable, sustainable and responsive services. To understand relationships between formal and informal organizations involved in governance of water service provision at local, municipal and provincial levels, the IMAGINE and LINC teams implemented a longitudinal Organizational Network Analysis (ONA), surveying over 767 organizations in Goma and Bukavu. Aiming to map the current situation and develop recommendations to improve collaborations, the research included detailed analysis of sub-groups within the network, including 15 organizational types (e.g., community based organizations, state services, local NGOs, donors), 15 sectors of work (e.g., water, governance, health), and individual organizations most central to the water governance networks and the IMAGINE program.^{xlix} The program team measured baselines for bonding, bridging and

² For more information on LINC, visit: <http://linclocal.org/>

linking capital of these sub-groups and relevant organizations, and will take measurements at the end of the project to evaluate change over time and assess impact of governance activities on partner organization networks. Through an ongoing process of stakeholder engagement, baseline results have been presented to key actors in the network for qualitative interpretation and to define desirable change in the networks that would improve water governance (e.g., facilitate movement of resources, access to information, coordination, collaboration, collective action).

Guidance For Practitioners: Supporting Social Capital and Promoting Good Governance

This section includes program examples illustrating some of Mercy Corps' successful efforts in supporting social capital development within and between communities, as well as guidance for future programming seeking to strengthen social capital as a means to promote good governance. These strategies draw on our experience and review of relevant research and are not exhaustive.

Supporting Intra-Community Cohesion and Building Bonds Within a Community

1. **Help convene marginalized and minority groups—such as women and youth—to develop relationships and identify common priorities before engaging the whole community.** Decades of experience have reinforced the importance of outreach to traditionally marginalized groups in ensuring programming is successfully inclusive. Mercy Corps' community mobilization approach works to expand inclusion of often marginalized populations in community decision-making, providing these groups: 1) a safe, constructive forum and joint purpose around which historically excluded groups can gather, and 2) a process for exploring commonalities and unifying priorities. Building this bonding and bridging social capital can increase marginalized groups' common sense of purpose within their community. Importantly, programs must also look for opportunities to expand marginalized groups' linking social capital within communities to ensure their voices are successfully integrated into social discourse.

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- › Yes Youth Can, a youth-led, youth-owned and youth-managed program convened Kenyan youth independent from their larger communities with the goal of empowering them to participate more effectively in their country's development and future. Using a three-pronged approach supporting leadership, entrepreneurship and political advocacy, Yes Youth Can reduced the historic marginalization of youth in Kenya and successfully attenuated inter-ethnic conflict around the 2013 elections. Alongside partner organizations, Mercy Corps helped establish and mentor over 17,500 village youth groups representing over 500,000 Kenyan youth. Each of these groups, known as *bunges* (Swahili for parliament) introduced youth to the democratic process, fostering collective engagement around joint activities ranging from raising awareness about the risks of early marriage for girls to managing economic ventures, such as running a tree nursery. The program ultimately enhanced youth's bonding and bridging social capital, amplifying their collective voice.



Mercy Corps: Andrea Long

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2. **Incorporate targeted activities to build relationships and trust across community divides and between groups struggling with asymmetric power relations in the community.** In its efforts to increase community cohesion and communal bonds, Mercy Corps' community mobilization process encourages participation across diverse community groups and sub-populations—bringing together women and men, youth and traditional elders, people of all different

abilities, and different religious, ethnic or cultural groups. Mercy Corps' staff is trained in techniques to encourage participation in divided societies, including targeted mentoring for marginalized groups in communities where they have higher barriers to entry and require additional support. By engaging communities in projects that benefit a broad range of people, community members experience first-hand the positive impact of collective action that crosses traditional barriers. The mobilization process also provides an opportunity for direct engagement between marginalized groups and traditional power holders. Working together on community-led development projects helps lower barriers that limit marginalized groups' inclusion in decision-making, particularly youth and women, by increasing their confidence and demonstrating their capability to contribute to community affairs.

3. **Shift individual preferences towards collective goods that benefit the whole community rather than specific groups along ethnic, gender, or socio-economic divides.** Many of Mercy Corps' community initiatives focus on civic education and leadership development aimed at transforming the way people see their role in society and strengthening their ability to influence their community's direction. Youth and adults alike benefit from opportunities to learn about their rights and responsibilities, whether through formal civic education courses or informally as an integrated part of development programming. For example, across the contexts where we work, Mercy Corps' school-based civic education programs have translated into youth's greater interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communication skills and increased civic knowledge and interest in public affairs outside of school. Across the globe, our programs stress the importance of leading community actions as a means of building a sense of civic responsibility.

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- › Research conducted on Mercy Corps' USAID-funded Somali Youth Leaders Initiative (SYLI) illustrated that youth who took part in the program's civic engagement projects were more likely to believe they have the power to make a positive difference in their community. Similarly, the combination of education and civic engagement increased citizenship responsibility—the perception that youth have a responsibility to improve their community. Youth who were involved in student-led community action projects were more likely to believe in the effectiveness of lodging a complaint with local officials, raising an issue in a group or discussing concerns with community leaders as strategies for affecting change. Moreover, youth involved in civic engagement activities were more likely to employ these non-violent actions. Findings indicate that participating in student-led community action projects can increase the belief that nonviolent alternatives to address concerns exist and are effective, reducing the likelihood of youth supporting political violence.



Mercy Corps: Lindsay Hamsik

4. **Support transparent processes for decision making that lower the cost individuals face when engaging in collective action.** CAGs provide a structured, transparent process for a community's self-organization around common values and priorities, rather than along traditional ethnic, socio-economic or gender lines that reinforce community divisions. Through CAGs, communities collectively develop and implement community actions, using inclusive, accountable and transparent decision-making methods. This helps eliminate the free rider problem; with clear rules and expectations, communities can act collectively and enhance community-wide trust. Mercy Corps' experience has demonstrated that when CAGs are representative and promote transparency, trust and participation are reinforced and communities are likely to continue community-led actions and advocacy even after a program ends. For example, in a post-program evaluation of the USAID-funded CAIP and Peaceful Community Initiative (PCI) programs in Central Asia, CAG members in 61% of communities reported they were more willing to contribute and/or take action for the benefit of the community following their experience. And, 69% of respondents reported engagement in community action following program completion with communities implementing over 1,000 projects independent of program funding.

› With support from Tazo Tea and the Starbucks Foundation, the Community Health and Advancement Initiative (CHAI) has helped more than 82,000 people in tea and botanical producing communities in Assam and Darjeeling, India and Alta Verapaz, Guatemala to improve their socioeconomic and health conditions since its inception in 2003. The program works through representative CAGs that mobilize their communities to improve local infrastructure, health, income sources and opportunities for youth. The CAGs develop action plans, secure community contributions and implement projects. On average, the community contributes 40% of construction costs for infrastructure projects in the form of labor and locally available materials such as boulders, stone, sand and wood. Community contributions and participation through the formation and strengthening of the CAGs has been integral to the success and sustainability of CHAI interventions, which have been implemented in 88 communities in Darjeeling alone. In many cases, CAGs have also allowed communities to address additional problems on their own or garner support from Government of India programs or estate owners. This has resulted in new cross-sectoral collaboration, with tea estate management sharing costs and government departments providing technical guidance.



Mercy Corps: Sanjay Gurung

5. **Build trust through iterative and repeated opportunities for collective action.** Important features of social capital, such as trust and reciprocity, are developed over time through an iterative process. To build trust within communities, Mercy Corps uses a series of phased grants as a tool to provide multiple opportunities for joint actions that can build trust. With each subsequent grant, communities independently engage in problem solving activities, using mobilization skills and methodologies they acquired through the project, ideally demonstrating greater initiative and ingenuity, building reciprocity and trust and witnessing the advantages of working together.ⁱ By providing repeated opportunities or incentives for communities to work together and apply learned skills, Mercy Corps' community mobilization approach emphasizes that collective action is not a one-off strategy, but a larger practice for effectively meeting communal demands. We also work to ensure the skills and institutions introduced during our community mobilization projects feel relevant and transferrable beyond a given project.ⁱⁱ Analysis of Mercy Corps' community mobilization initiatives in Georgia found that "sustained behavior change often does not take place during implementation of the first project" and that reinforcing skills through multiple applications, with the support of the implementing agency, contributes to the likelihood of sustained behavior change.ⁱⁱⁱ

› Through its Peaceful Community Initiatives (PCI) program in Fergana Valley, Mercy Corps supported communities to undertake infrastructure projects, while providing support for frequent social projects (e.g., sports and cultural events, festivals, seminars, openings). Communities perceived these social projects as critical to cementing their relationships and enabling the sustainability of infrastructure projects. The primary focus of these initiatives was not to change the appearance or functionality of the villages significantly, but to initiate a shift in perceptions and behavior. Non-traditional leaders (e.g., women, youth) emerged around smaller initiatives and continued mobilization efforts beyond the project, incrementally altering power dynamics in favor of more inclusive leadership and decision-making mechanisms.

Building Bridges Between Communities

1. **Strengthen the conflict management capacity of community leaders to increase positive social interaction between different communities.** In many places where Mercy Corps works, migration, climate change, displacement and urbanization are forcing disparate communities to share increasingly scarce space and resources,

increasing tensions between them. By supporting capacity building around conflict management, negotiation and mediation, communities can more effectively ease tension and proactively address potential or existing conflicts with other communities. Using an interest-based negotiation or IBN approach—back-and-forth communication moving toward agreement in which some interests are shared, some are different and some are in conflict—in our community mobilization efforts ensures people living in high-risk conflict and transitional environments have the skills to understand their and others’ core needs, and have the capacity to satisfy these interests by collaborating on joint development initiatives.

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- › Mercy Corps’ peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria aim to reduce violent conflict between pastoralists and farmers by improving relationships and resolving disputes. Two concurrent projects, *Conciliation in Nigeria through Community-Based Conflict Management and Cooperative Use of Resources* and *Inter-religious Peacebuilding in Northern Nigeria*, enhanced the capacity of 700 local leaders to resolve community conflicts inclusively and sustainably. Leaders have strengthened relationships and resolved dozens of conflicts, including land, cattle rustling and domestic disputes. The leaders also used these skills to help communities understand each other’s interests and design joint community initiatives to prevent future conflict. Communities collaborated on natural resource management activities and joint economic activities such as cassava processing, beekeeping and biomass briquette production. These economic and natural resource initiatives have strengthened relationships and promoted collaboration across conflict lines.

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2. **Provide targeted activities to build relationships and trust between disparate communities.** Connecting communities that do not frequently engage with each other through opportunities for positive social interaction can foster more positive perceptions of other groups. When communities have the chance to gather and participate in activities that both groups enjoy, a foundation is laid for increased empathy and understanding, precursors to the development of bridging social capital.

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- › To better engage local communities in conflict mitigation, Mercy Corps’ has incorporated the community mobilization approach into its work supporting Syrian refugees and their host communities across the Middle East. In Jordan and Lebanon, our program model focuses on interest-based negotiation and incorporates mediation and non-violent communication as tools for peacefully resolving disputes. The aim is to build community leaders skills as change agents in their communities with a focus on mitigating the risk of local conflict between refugee and host communities. A process (utilizing local community nominations, self-selection, key informant interviews and focus group discussions) helps identify the community leaders or representatives Mercy Corps will support in establishing informal conflict management groups aimed at identifying and addressing local risks. These groups meet regularly, undertaking quick coordinated action in response to emerging risks using social media and other communication methods. To build social cohesion, Mercy Corps also supports community leaders in designing and implementing community-based events and activities aimed at bridging the gap between host communities and refugees. Examples include open days for kids and families, community clean-ups, football tournaments, mural painting, film screening and community meetings. The program is intentionally flexible: processes and training methodology are adapted to each national and local context to ensure they are culturally relevant. In Jordan and Lebanon, the community representatives, in close cooperation with local authorities, use the conflict management mechanisms to design and implement projects that improve municipal or basic urban services and increase positive social interaction between host and refugee communities. This social interaction fosters positive perceptions among participants. To date, the conflict management mechanisms established through the program have mediated 66 local disputes and implemented 59 community projects.

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3. **Build capacity of civil society organizations (CSOs) to develop networks that include a broader range of members and interests, and aggregate demands across communities.** While effective at mobilizing communities at the local level, civil society’s influence must reach higher levels to amplify citizen’s voices and demands. To

accomplish this, we assist CSOs in developing networks across communities—including facilitated forums, such as networking conferences, or through informal cross-visits that facilitate sharing and learning—at provincial and national levels. We also help develop CSO capacity to advocate for action on community-level issues and needs with higher-level governance institutions that have broad-reaching authority. This support enables civil society to aggregate demands across diverse communities and build links between communities and government.

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- › Mercy Corps’ Advancing Civic Engagement in Tunisia (ACT) enhanced civic education and built the leadership capacity of women and youth in CSOs with the goal of effectively and sustainably filling new spaces for public participation as the country underwent reform. Through training, networking and the introduction of the Global Citizen Corps, the program increased confidence and capacity to successfully engage with local and regional government among 40 CSOs and 378 Tunisian youth leaders. A major focus of the program was developing civil society’s advocacy skills. Following the program’s advocacy training, a group of highly engaged CSO members formed the Deep Tunisia Network with the goal of increasing their impact. The network’s key achievement was amending language in the Tunisian constitution to allow for greater participation of civil society in local development. Through training, capacity support and opportunities to plan and implement projects in collaboration with local authorities, the program excelled in building the CSOs and youth’s confidence when engaging civically, ultimately empowering them to participate actively in decision making at local, regional and national levels and positively change Tunisia’s southern governorates. As ACT-supported CSOs continue to expand their member base, they promise to support many more community members



Mercy Corps: CAWTAR

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4. **Coordinate mobilization efforts with the government’s local development planning processes.** Mercy Corps seeks to coordinate with existing government efforts, including local development planning. In many contexts where we work, the government’s bottom-up planning process is structured to aggregate community plans at district, regional and national levels as they move up the governance system for approval and resourcing. Through this process, local planning provides an opportunity to support bridging and linking social capital. When possible, Mercy Corps’ programs connect the mobilization process to this formal planning process, making sure communities can participate and have a voice at various levels of planning.

Harnessing Change Agents & Linking with Governance Institutions

1. **Build advocacy skills to link communities to external resources in government and private sectors.** The ability to seek external resources to solve community-level problems is an indicator of the level of linking social capital a community possesses. In addition to supporting communities in pooling their internal resources, Mercy Corps ensures communities feel equipped to address issues by providing advocacy trainings focused on building skills to lobby for support from the public sector, private actors and civil society.^{liii} Mercy Corps’ community mobilization process incorporates capacity building on advocacy and strategic planning, and reinforces skills and learning by mentoring community leaders and civil society as they implement advocacy strategies. In an ex-poste evaluation (three years after the project closed) of Mercy Corps’ community mobilization work in Central Asia, community groups mentioned advocacy skills as one of the primary tools enabling the community to look for external resources and sustain collective action responses to locally identified problems.^{liv}
2. **Identify and support change agents through targeted leadership development and on-going mentoring with the goal of enabling them to harness social capital strategically and improve governance outcomes.** Mercy

Corps' experiences reinforce the critical role of leadership capacity in channeling communities' social capital into improved governance outcomes. In ex-poste evaluations of community mobilization programs in Georgia and Central Asia, communities with the strongest leadership capacity were able to sustain collective action beyond the life of the project. For this reason, we work to identify and support change agents with the capacity to link communities to decision-makers, helping develop their confidence to engage and motivate their communities. Mercy Corps adapts its community mobilization approach in contexts where traditional leaders may be less willing to include women, youth and minority voices in leadership structures by facilitating additional platforms, like working groups within the leadership structure, to elevate their voices and ensure they are heard. Accordingly, our community mobilization approach also focuses on building the leadership and management capacity of CAG members, creating space for new change agents to emerge and facilitating opportunities for participants to articulate their opinion and ideas (i.e., through participation in decision making and participatory planning activities). In the formation of CAGs, communities often initially select typical leaders out of habit; however, the multi-phase project cycle, along with regular transparency and confirmation meetings, provide opportunities for communities to become confident in choosing younger or alternative leaders who represent their interests and fulfill their roles effectively.

› In addition to providing a platform for new change agents to engage in decision-making, the community mobilization approach integrates training and leadership development to foster and mentor a number of potential leaders, including groups that may typically be excluded from leadership roles (e.g., women, youth and ethnic minorities). As part of Mercy Corps' Women's Awareness and Inclusion (WAI) Program under Community Action Program (CAP) III in Iraq, the team conducted a pilot to introduce a needs identification and prioritization training module for illiterate women. Piloted in five WAI program centers in each governorate, groups of 15 women participated in a training and group discussion aimed at identifying and prioritizing community needs. Mercy Corps team members assisted several women from each group in attending meetings with CAG and local council members to share the results of the exercise, ensuring women's voices were included in conversations about community needs. At a meeting in Al-Warka'a sub-district of Muthanna, the Mayor attended the meeting to listen to the needs of women in the community. CAG members were encouraged to secure support for a project aimed at meeting one of the needs identified by the women. Through this exercise, illiterate women often excluded from discussions about community development, gained vital engagement skills in their interactions with local leadership and confidence in their ability to participate in the governance process.



Mercy Corps: Awatif Khalil

3. **Facilitate civil society-government-private sector collaborations and explorations of how multi-sector groups can collectively address local problems.**^{lv} Mercy Corps builds the capacity of CSOs and their networks at the provincial and national levels to advocate for action on community-level issues and needs with higher-level governance institutions that have broader-reaching authority. This includes facilitating joint community-government planning activities. These activities are designed to link communities to decision makers. Just as Mercy Corps builds the capacity of CSOs and their networks to advocate with governance institutions, we also pursue opportunities to connect the private sector with civil society in constructive ways, amplifying community voices among private sector actors.

› In Tunisia, Mercy Corps partnered with local economic development associations to host a collaboration workshop, engaging civil society and private sector representatives. The opportunity to discuss and exchange information allowed both sides to think collectively about problems hindering the development of their region. These collaborations elevated

Tunisian CSOs as sources of local development projects and fostered win-win relationships between the private sector and civil society where both parties undertake advocacy actions jointly, ensuring local development is more sustainable.

- › Mercy Corps works to reduce natural disaster risk and boost economic development simultaneously in Nepal and Timor-Leste in the innovative Managing Risks through Economic Development (M-RED) program funded by the Margaret A. Cargill Foundation. M-RED mobilizes communities through Community Disaster Management Committees (CDMCs) and supports them as they develop disaster risk plans. CDMCs receive support to advocate for their community's needs and engage with government at district and national levels. M-RED facilitates knowledge sharing between CDMCs and government disaster management actors, and ongoing capacity building to prepare and respond to natural hazards and climate change (through EWS, hazard risk modeling, and the Emergency Contingency Fund). M-RED also strengthens social capital between farmer groups and private sector actors around knowledge and information sharing, as well as access to inputs and services to prepare and respond to livelihood risks. It also helps farmer groups develop important links with agriculture extension workers, agro-vets, and government agriculture and livestock departments, as well as buyers, aggregators and processors to ensure the sustainability of market-based adaptations.



Mercy Corps: Miguel Samper

4. Build capacity of local government to engage local

communities in decision-making systematically. In addition to training communities how to engage with government, Mercy Corps builds the capacity of local government to use participatory methodologies.^{lvi} Mercy Corps trains local government officials in community engagement and participatory community planning processes, so that government can serve as effective counterparts and sustain relationships with communities beyond the life of a program. A major finding of our community mobilization work in Kosovo was that government officials and communities need safe and facilitated opportunities to practice relationship building.^{lvii} As such, joint community-government trainings and meetings between villages and municipal officials are institutionalized as part of our community mobilization process. Throughout the community mobilization process, we foster linkages between local government and communities and work to gain government support and ownership of both the process and projects. This includes coordinating mobilization efforts with the government's local development process to ensure community voices are included in local planning and budgeting processes. Mercy Corps also works to build local government's capacity to solicit feedback on service provision and delivery, including through community scorecard processes. These accountability mechanisms help facilitate interactions and develop linkages and trust between communities and government.

- › In Myanmar, the Promoting Sustainable Peace and Resiliency in Kayah State or PROSPER program trains local government and ethnic minority administration officials in community engagement and participatory development planning. Capitalizing on democratic gains at the national level, PROSPER works in an ethnically diverse area of the country, which has historically experienced conflict, where both local government capacity and trust in governance has been low. The team supports local government officials in engaging communities in decision making, connecting with community members to define development issues, identify solutions and develop priorities for action and resources—strengthening both the supply and demand side of governance.



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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within.

Now, and for the future.



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