



**PULTE INSTITUTE**  
FOR GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT



# **The Importance of State Legitimacy in Achieving Stability: A case study of the role of governance in a conflict-affected country**

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Report prepared for the Pulte Institute for Global Development,  
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABOUT THE AUTHORS</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>A. THE CONSEQUENCES OF POOR GOVERNANCE</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>B. THE BROADER IMPACT OF LOCAL SERVICE DELIVERY</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>C. INCORPORATING POLITICAL AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>D. THE CASE OF IRAQ</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>D1. USAID and UK Assistance To Iraq</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>D2. Building Effective and Legitimate Institutions: Impact of Programming</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>D3. Lessons Learned</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>E. RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>19</b>

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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\*The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of Chemonics International, Inc.

Conflict narratives in fragile states are often framed by identity groups or other non-state actors along ideological or ethno-sectarian lines to achieve political ends. But in many instances, the main grievances of populations in affected communities are centered around basic dignity and livelihoods. Non-state actors, including violent extremists, often try to capitalize on these grievances by implementing their own distribution systems to meet communal needs as a way of strengthening their credibility and allegiances. When conflict abates, international efforts to meet the basic needs of a given community can help stem further violence, but these recovery efforts often neglect the importance of building state legitimacy in making the transition from stabilization to stability.

### A. The Consequences of Poor Governance

From Afghanistan to Somalia, every conflict-affected country contends with its own set of issues brought about by a unique set of circumstances. But whether those issues are caused by civil war, invasion, or chronically weak governance, there are commonalities in the consequences of the government's inability to meet its population's basic needs. Frequently, the result is a competition with and among non-state actors to provide services such as health care, primary education, or even trash collection. This competition can be political or, in the absence of political expression, can foster ceaseless cycles of violence and other illicit activity that spawn their own set of consequences.

Irrespective of its causes, poor governance is often seen by the international community as the source of local instability, poverty, and even broader national security challenges. But the remedy to ineffective governance is not limited to filling the power vacuums that arise from these circumstances. Political patronage and corruption in states with a history of centralized control can also be a source of localized and broader conflict and require a different set of tools to instill accountable governance and connect underserved populations with their civic and

## Competition for Legitimacy in Conflict-Affected States

In some communities in southern Libya, tribal leaders increasingly filled the power vacuum following the fall of the Gaddafi regime by taking responsibility for service delivery. Whereas they had previously played a role primarily in social issues, such as mediation between tribes, “traditional authorities now take on responsibilities far beyond the inter-tribal roles they played during the Gaddafi era, and are tasked with attempting to provide services and security to a community that has severe shortfalls in healthcare, sanitation, electricity and financial services.” The legitimacy that traditional informal authorities gained in the eyes of many community members was due in part to tribal loyalty but could also be attributed to the relative incompetence of formal governance structures in these communities.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Yemen Civil War is often characterized as a proxy war by international actors, the conflict is driven by a different set of dynamics and actors at the community level. While tribal leaders and mediators continue to play a primary role resolving conflicts in Yemen, other sets of influential elites include women and youth groups who initiate dialogues and act as mediators. In addition, the private sector engages in economic policy, humanitarian and development efforts, and recovery and reconstruction. In the city of Taizz, for example, the Hayel Saeed Group helped mediate to build consensus amongst conflicting parties to improve access to goods and services for the local population.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Fransje Molenaar et al. [The Status Quo Defied: The legitimacy of traditional authorities in areas of limited statehood in Mali, Niger and Libya](#). Clingendael Institute. 2019.

<sup>2</sup>Todd Diamond, Daniel Emory, and Jaclyn Grace. [Elite Bargains and Political Deals Toolkit: A User's Guide to Applying EBPD Theory in Localised Conflict Settings](#). Chemonics International.

government institutions. Because in many such instances basic service delivery is the most visible connection populations have with government, initial donor interventions – commonly referred to as stabilization initiatives – prioritize direct service delivery often at the expense of improved governance. But when stabilization becomes a protracted crisis of ineffective governance, the need to solidify formal political structures and processes against informal power structures and economic interests becomes increasingly tied to state legitimacy and longer-term stability.

Research aimed at connecting state-building, service delivery and livelihood recovery defines state legitimacy as “a belief in the right to rule, and it is therefore a crucial ingredient in stable and effective governance.”<sup>3</sup> The means by which government or state institutions gain and maintain legitimacy are many fold; the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) broadly groups them into four categories – process, performance, shared beliefs, and international norms.<sup>4</sup> Only the first two are within the scope of this paper.

### ***The Costs and Benefits of Stabilization Assistance.***

The U.S. government and other international donors typically respond to conflict-affected crises in the first instance by meeting the immediate needs of affected communities with the aim of facilitating recovery and achieving stability. This form of stabilization assistance, according to the 2018 U.S. Stabilization Assistance Review, is “part of a spectrum that also includes both conflict prevention and longer-term peacebuilding and reconciliation.”<sup>5</sup> For many conflict-affected states however, this transitory form of stabilization is a de facto end goal, in recognition that the political or more deep-rooted divisions will not be solved in the length of time to which donors are willing to commit. But stabilization itself can come with a cost. In the name of doing the right thing for people in desperate need of public goods and services, additional non-state actors, such as local civil society and other community-based organizations, are

## Scope of this Study

The consequences of ineffective state governance can manifest themselves in the form of a lack of security, justice and livelihood opportunities, as well as essential services. Violence prevention in the form of military assistance is generally not within the mandate of development assistance. While access to justice and livelihoods are an integral part of development assistance, the scope of this paper focuses on the role of essential service delivery, and to a lesser degree livelihood opportunities, in creating stability in a conflict setting, both in terms of the capability to provide such services and the processes by which those services are delivered.

often selected by the international community as partners of first choice to accomplish what government cannot. By “picking winners,” the international community can inadvertently foster further competition for legitimacy within communities that can fall along territorial, tribal, or ethno-sectarian lines.

The U.S. government characterizes stabilization as “a political endeavor involving an integrated civilian-military process to create conditions where locally legitimate authorities and systems can peaceably manage conflict and prevent a resurgence of violence.” The U.S. definition also notes the transitional nature of stabilization, explaining that efforts aim to “establish a foundation for... longer term development.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the UK Government’s Approach to Stabilization defines stabilization as “an activity which seeks to support local and regional partners in conflict-affected countries to reduce violence, ensure basic security and facilitate peaceful political deal-making, all of which provide a foundation for building long-term stability.”<sup>7</sup>

While none of these definitions explicitly reference a

<sup>3</sup>Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium. [Service Delivery, Public Perceptions, and State Legitimacy](#) (8).

<sup>4</sup>OECD. *The State's Legitimacy in Fragile Situations: Unpacking Complexity, Conflict and Fragility*. OECD Publishing. 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264083882-en>.

<sup>5</sup>U.S Department of State. [Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas](#). Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (1).

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>7</sup>[The UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation: A guide for policy makers and practitioners](#), (154)

formally recognized governing authority, whether the goal is conflict prevention, longer-term peacebuilding and reconciliation, or long-term stability, a key ingredient in achieving these outcomes is effective governance. Our argument, based on the evidence of more than 10 years of stabilization, governance, and economic programming in Iraq – both successes and lessons learned – is that these goals are more likely to be achieved if addressed from the outset in unison with efforts to improve governance. A holistic approach centered around strengthening state legitimacy at the stabilization phase will better enable good governance to contribute to longer-term stability.

***Stabilization Versus Capacity Building.*** Stability is not a process; it is the desired long-term outcome of stabilization efforts. The UK government describes stability in terms of security, representative political systems, respect for human rights and the rule of law, the capability to manage conflict and change peacefully, and opportunities for social and economic development. “This type of ‘structural stability,’ which is built on the consent of the population, is resilient and flexible in the face of shocks, and can evolve over time as the context changes.”<sup>8</sup> Recognizing that these conditions are not fully present even in many countries not extracting themselves from outright conflict, it is still important to ensure that stabilization efforts do not inadvertently undermine the long-term stability that they seek to create – known as the “Do No Harm” approach<sup>9</sup> – nor do they prioritize short-term gains at the expense of more sustainable outcomes. Too often, stabilization interventions focus on “quick wins;” this is at least due in part to donor funding and requirements, which generally result in implementers prioritizing activity designs that demonstrate the most significant “outcomes” in the least amount of time.

But in recent years, instability in many conflict-affected countries has turned into prolonged crises of ineffective state functioning as donor funding has taken separate tracks: stabilization and capacity building. Countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq are large enough that multiple

donor interventions could operate alongside each other without crossing paths; stabilization activities in Kandahar or the Ninewa Plains could run in tandem with capacity building in Kabul or Baghdad, respectively, without coordination or without adversely impacting respective project objectives.

Recent U.S. Government efforts to address this spiraling of donor assistance in ways that are not always complementary include the passage of the Global Fragility Act (GFA), which calls for the creation of “a unified United States strategy that is intentional, cross-cutting, and measurable, and harnesses the full spectrum of United States diplomacy, assistance, and engagement over a 10-year horizon to help countries move from fragility to stability and from conflict to peace.”<sup>10</sup> Moving from the strategic to the operational, long-time advocates of the GFA point to the need to design country-wide assistance programs “across all the pillars of good governance and development... to help empower and build the capacity of governments and local actors to deliver basic services, be responsive to their citizens, and ensure institutions are effective and legitimate.” This emphasis on governance is seen as crucial because “violent conflict is political at its core, and development assistance alone is not enough.”<sup>11</sup>

In announcing the implementation of the Global Fragility Strategy, the Biden Administration identified the initial set of countries the strategy would target and in so doing emphasized “the importance of local solutions and the need to thoroughly understand local contexts while promoting subnational, national, and regional actors in ownership, participation, and accountability.”<sup>12</sup> With this in mind, this paper offers evidence from one country case study – Iraq – to support this approach in the initial GFA countries and more broadly where applicable.

In positing that security is outside the realm of development assistance, and thus outside the scope of this study, it is worth pointing out that the Global Fragility Strategy calls on the U.S. military to “support this Strategy through

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<sup>8</sup>UK Ministry of Defense. [UK Building Stability Overseas Strategy](#). 2011.

<sup>9</sup>Mary Anderson. *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace – Or War*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999.

<sup>10</sup>Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations. [United States Strategy to Prevent and Promote Stability](#). 2022.

<sup>11</sup>Elizabeth Hume et al. [Getting from Here to There: Successful Implementation of the Global Fragility Act](#). Alliance for Peacebuilding. 2020.

<sup>12</sup>Erol Yayboke, Catherine Nzuki, and Anastasia Strouboulis. [The Global Fragility Strategy Gets a Refresh](#). 2022; the initial countries are Haiti, Libya, Mozambique, Papua New Guinea, and five countries in coastal West Africa (Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo).

small-footprint, coordinated, partner-focused activities.”<sup>13</sup> This aligns with the idea that human security is the first in the “hierarchy of political goods” which are “intangible and hard to quantify claims that citizens...make on states”<sup>14</sup> and which are very much a cornerstone of state legitimacy and stability. While not addressing this point further here may indicate limits to the utility of this analysis, the purpose of the paper is to analyze the operationalization of development assistance and the context in which it can be applied; the establishment of human security is part of that context.

## B. The Broader Impact of Local Service Delivery

In any fragile or conflict-affected state, the inability to effectively manage institutions or implement laws in an equitable manner often leads to frustration and disillusionment among the very segments of the population who take the greatest personal and political risks to bring about change. Tangible services or improvements in quality of life based on the recognized government’s presence are usually a valuable barometer of citizen satisfaction with state structures of governance.<sup>15</sup> Citizens want to see the benefits of the new social contract they are committing to with government, irrespective of the power dynamics or underlying social and political identities that connect them to the government.

Local government plays a critical role in establishing and maintaining that social contract because most citizens’ experience with government is local. In broad terms, local authorities are generally mandated to provide the essentials – water, roads, sanitation – that ought to be available in a legitimately governed society. The foundational requirements for this legitimacy broadly fall into three categories: enhancing existing services, safeguarding and optimizing material assets, and providing additional new services. As roles and responsibilities are delineated in a post-conflict order (an order that includes security and at least a nominal commitment to the rule of law), local and regional government involvement in addressing these

requirements generally should increase. Yet often citizens on the periphery of a state’s governing structure, who in many cases suffered most of the consequences of conflict, are likely to be the least likely to see any real improvement in quality of life and are disengaged from the decision-making that directly affects them.

Hence in a post-conflict setting where the previous form of formal governance has been erased, such as Libya after the fall of Ghaddafi or Iraq after the fall of Saddam and the defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), there is a tendency among western donors to search for partners who are best able to provide the “quick wins” donors are looking for and who also genuinely do the right thing by their community, especially in peripheral areas. But a quick win in one community can create reputational risk of donor favoritism in another.<sup>16</sup> Equitable distribution of resources and services becomes harder as the sphere of participation widens. Service delivery improvements in uniformly rural areas of a country, for example, may not have the same effect in a neighboring region that is a crossroads for commerce and culture. On the other hand, similar political and social tensions between populations and local governments that are geographically dispersed may provide opportunities to replicate models that successfully address issues related to effective governance and civic responsibility.

U.S. and other donors rightly argue that this development objective should be pursued to counter the influence of malign non-state actors, but in so doing this approach often distinguishes between malign and benign actors, rather than formal and informal actors. Such political fluidity that arises from these geographic and actor-based differences requires flexible approaches to improving transparency, accountability, representation, and capacity at the local level. To be successful, these approaches should be based on a strategy that is more sustainable than simply funding the local entity most readily able to meet exogenous donor requirements, no matter how benevolent its intentions.

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<sup>13</sup>Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations. [United States Strategy to Prevent and Promote Stability](#). 2022.

<sup>14</sup>Robert Rotberg, “The Failure and Collapse of Nation-States: Breakdown, Prevention, and Repair,” in *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences*. (Princeton University Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>15</sup>See the survey results in section D2, Service Delivery Improvement and the Correlation with Stability below.

<sup>16</sup>In Afghanistan in 2009-2010 for example, U.S. assistance aimed at “getting officials and civil servants in place with adequate infrastructure and support systems, while continuing work to improve lives of populations in municipalities and population centers” targeted “recently secured areas”, rather than communities that were not recently in conflict with or controlled by the Taliban. See U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan and U.S. Forces, Afghanistan, “[US Government Integrated Civil-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan](#),” August 10, 2009, p. 22.



To be sure, establishing and maintaining effective governance is not a uniform process across an entire country and to the degree that it succeeds it likely does so in a non-linear way and at different paces in different localities. However, a government that can demonstrate a vision of the benefits of participation in a social contract can create a “virtuous circle” that is “rewarded with increased citizen compliance with its laws and rules—crucially, tax compliance—which over time boosts state capacity to deliver services more effectively and, in turn, generates more legitimacy. In this way, the cycle of capacity, legitimacy and citizen compliance becomes self-reinforcing.”<sup>17</sup>

The mechanisms of assistance employed to help build and maintain this legitimacy can vary from policy reform to skills building to in-kind grants, but the intended outcomes should be geared toward enhancing the human and institutional capacity of government. They include:

- Increased access to and participation in decision-making around the delivery and planning of critical public services
- Improved strategic planning and management capacity of municipalities to govern in an inclusive way
- Increased avenues for citizen engagement by women, youth, and other marginalized groups to effectively articulate their immediate priorities

Regardless of the mechanism used, we can measure these outcomes by identifying and defining suitable performance standards and indicators for each service and for the levels and types of participation in decision making, which can be objectively measured qualitatively and/or quantitatively. Once the service-related measurements have been obtained, indicators can be developed along with solutions to fill gaps that might be (and in many cases are) present in the performance of those services. Solutions can be long- and short-term and focus on resource management, response capability or technical service maintenance needs,

and/or upgrading of services based on the indicators.

The responsibility for implementing these solutions should reside with the government actors who will be held accountable for results and the core function of donor-assisted capacity building should be to strengthen government’s ability to implement solutions and to publicly explain how the process of governance actually works. In their demands for better services and accountability, many people believe local governments already have the responsibility, authority, and resources for local service delivery, and they have little concern for the political or bureaucratic bottlenecks that prevent this from happening. In countries such as Iraq and Libya,<sup>18</sup> with a history of large, centralized state institutions, many reform efforts have focused on decentralizing services to better respond to public demand, to strengthen the citizen-to-government accountability relationship, and also at times to compete with armed non-state actors that usurp this role. Removing legal and administrative hurdles at the central level of government and building the capacity of local actors to effectively deliver services are two sides of the same coin that add value to the social contract.

To be sure, in Iraq and elsewhere sectarian tensions still exist, and worthy efforts have been made to address social cohesion in conflict-affected communities such as Mosul and Sinjar. But a key driver in preventing communal disputes from being resolved is often access to resources. This is not to suggest that programming focused on addressing the root causes of conflict should give way to more governance capacity building, but rather to note that a more equitable distribution of public resources through improved governance can have an outside positive effect on stability.

### C. Incorporating Political and Social Dynamics

Technical assistance – whether at the policy level or the implementation level – has little chance of improving basic conditions if undertaken in a vacuum, especially in a country emerging from conflict where the spoils of state-controlled resources are at stake.

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<sup>17</sup>OECD. *The State's Legitimacy in Fragile Situations: Unpacking Complexity, Conflict and Fragility*. OECD Publishing, Paris, 2010. [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/the-state-s-legitimacy-in-fragile-situations\\_9789264083882-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/the-state-s-legitimacy-in-fragile-situations_9789264083882-en)

<sup>18</sup>UCLG Africa. *Involving Libyan Local Authorities in the Process of Programming Cooperation with the European Union Local Authorities' Road Map For the 2021-2027 Cooperation cycle with the European Union*, 2019.

Despite stabilization being first and foremost a political endeavor,<sup>19</sup> program strategies are too often driven by technical solutions that fail to address the underlying causes of the instability they seek to solve. The UK Government's Approach to Stabilization notes this, saying, "Many previous stabilization activities have been relatively unsuccessful because they have been treated as primarily or exclusively technical matters, e.g. building infrastructure, providing basic services, building the capacity of government agencies... through training and equipment."<sup>20</sup>

As noted above, technically driven approaches to stabilization – notably, service delivery initiatives – are popular among development practitioners and funding partners in part because they offer tangible outcomes and are likely to demonstrate more immediate "results" than less visible political approaches. Technical approaches are often unsustainable, however, unless their design is informed by a holistic understanding of both the political environment and the conflict system in which they operate.

Understanding the political and conflict dynamics is central to developing a tailored approach to stability for each context. Designing programs around these factors will help ensure that resources are used effectively and that the desired stabilization outcomes lead to more durable stability.

***Thinking and Working Politically.*** Thinking and working politically (TWP) is a mindset that aims to "do development differently" by recognizing the overarching role that a country's national and local political dynamics play in the development assistance it receives. TWP is comprised of three principles:

- Strong political analysis, insight and understanding
- Detailed appreciation of, and response to, the local context
- Flexibility and adaptability in program design and implementation.<sup>21</sup>

By emphasizing these three principles, also referred to as "analysis, context, and design," TWP aims to increase project impact by addressing political dynamics that are too often overlooked. Many of the challenges that TWP aims to address are challenges that development practitioners face when attempting to implement stabilization programming in unstable or fragile states. Deeply entrenched power dynamics, inflexible bureaucratic norms, complex relationships involving formal and informal actors, and unpredictable contextual changes are all challenges that define the places in which stabilization interventions are most needed. TWP is also key to designing and implementing programs aimed at building capacity. Effective TWP facilitates stakeholder-led change efforts that enable incremental improvements to activities through an iterative process of trial and adjustment.

***Systems Conflict Analysis.*** In fragile settings, the local context often involves conflicts that have their own internal dynamics but are nonetheless influenced by the broader country or regional context. Even when driven by informal and non-state actors, conflict dynamics are often defined by clear power structures that need to be understood as part of TWP. Applying a "systems approach" can be particularly helpful in places characterized by complex conflict situations.

A systems conflict analysis (SCA) refers to a strategic approach that involves mapping and interpreting causal relationships among key actors and factors of conflict on the macro level. This level of analysis helps explain "the dynamic relationships and causalities between different conflict factors, and the interconnectedness between conflict factors and stakeholders."<sup>22</sup> SCA's strategic lens can help practitioners identify leverage points for influencing the conflict system in a positive way while avoiding missteps that could inadvertently exacerbate drivers of conflict. In contexts in which key actors, drivers of conflict, and contextual realities vary significantly by province, town, or even community, taking a local systems approach to SCA will help untangle these unique dynamics and pinpoint ideal entry points for programming.

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<sup>19</sup>Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations. 2018. [USG Stabilization Assistance Review](#). U.S. Department of State.

<sup>20</sup>DFID Stabilisation Unit. "[The UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation: A guide for policy makers and practitioners](#)," 25. 2019.

<sup>21</sup>TWP Community of Practice. [The Case for Thinking and Working Politically](#).

<sup>22</sup>CDA Learning Collaborative. "[Conflict Systems Analysis: Benefits and Practical Application](#)."

## The Importance of Agency and Ownership, not Just Representation

Meaningful and inclusive participation in governance should abide by the adage “nothing about them without them.”<sup>23</sup> Beyond establishing quotas, program designers and practitioners should identify opportunities to include women, persons with disabilities, youth, the elderly, and internally displaced people (IDPs) in positions of power among implementers and partners. Steps to achieve this include:

- Increasing equal access to and participation in decision-making and accountability mechanisms around the delivery and planning of critical public services.
- Strengthening the regulatory framework and management capacity of officials to govern in a gender-sensitive and inclusive way.
- Increasing avenues for citizen engagement and public advocacy by women, youth, and other underrepresented groups to advance their priorities in their community.
- Building community outlets to encourage participation by women, youth, and minorities to contribute to social cohesion.

Both TWP and SCA are frameworks that acknowledge the inherent complexity of the contextual realities in fragile settings. Rather than attempting to impose a packaged solution, TWP and SCA can help map interests, behaviors, and motivations to find leverage points and devise interventions accordingly. A key factor in addressing this complexity is the consideration of gender equity and social inclusion (GESI). Given that there are significant power differentials that affect (and are affected by) gendered

roles and expectations, gender dynamics play a key role in shaping a conflict system, as well as broader political realities. In Iraq, for example, the sizable number of women in parliament has not resulted in advances for women’s rights; this is at least in part because of the expectations and pressure of the powerful political parties to which these women belong.

On a more individual level, participation in governance is crucial in that such a process provides the population with the opportunity to attain “positive freedom,” which Amartya Sen sees as the ultimate goal of public policy.<sup>24</sup> His instruments of positive freedom – namely, political freedoms, social opportunities, and transparency guarantees – arguably take on increased significance in conflict and post-conflict settings where individuals and communities have previously been subject to coercive and oppressive treatment.

In such settings, empowerment and choice are an integral part of individual and community healing.<sup>25</sup> Because lack of control and agency can instill a sense of powerlessness among citizens and prevent trust-building between government and citizens, programs that aim to build government legitimacy in conflict-affected environments should seek to empower local populations by engaging them in the design and implementation of activities. A participatory and inclusive approach can reinforce individual agency and choice, and help to build mutual respect and trust in that process. Creating space for people to share opinions, suggest solutions, and opt out without consequences is important in that it allows them to have a voice in their collective future. Asking community members for their views and preferences on available options and solutions – and making program and policy decisions in line with their preferences – is a critical form of empowerment.

### D. The Case of Iraq

The governing structure in Iraq that followed the U.S. invasion in 2003 was created from a blank slate, albeit with the qualification that former high level Baathist party members were banned from serving. But there was still a

<sup>23</sup>The phrase was initially associated with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, but in recent years has been expanded to include other marginalized groups, such as the transgender community and women’s rights movements.

<sup>24</sup>Martha Nussbaum. “[The Ethics of Substantial Freedom](#).” 2001.

<sup>25</sup>SAMHSA’s Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative. “[SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach](#).” 2019.

history of high expectations of what government should provide and a fear of speaking out against it. For decades as a de facto socialist state controlled by the Baathist party, in which the state provided all services to the populace, the government of Saddam Hussein increasingly strangled what had been an active civil society in Iraq in the pre-Saddam era. By 2003, the culture of civic engagement was for the most part lost.

The 2005 constitution purposefully created a weak state, the design of which was driven by internal and external powers with agendas that did not necessarily align with the overall good of the country.<sup>26</sup> It sought to reduce the power of a strong executive by creating presidential and representative councils for decision-making by consensus. This attempt at power-sharing quickly led to the proliferation of political parties more interested in seizing and maintaining control over the resources of the state than reaching consensus on what was good for the country as a whole. These parties practiced identity politics, using divisive rhetoric and de facto quotas along ethno-sectarian lines to allocate government appointments and contracts.

In the years prior to the rise of ISIS, political patronage “created entrenched interests, often in the form of clientelist and crony capitalist networks combining political forces, bureaucrats, and private entrepreneurs.”<sup>27</sup> This led to revenue from the country’s vast oil wealth being siphoned off by a cascading hierarchy of government decision makers through state contracts and licensing fees, and by employers taking cuts from staff salaries. This systemic corruption trickled down to daily personal interaction between local officials and those they represented, resulting in a humiliation that “alienates citizens from state institutions that are supposed to serve them and renders the state increasingly vulnerable to instability and violence.”<sup>28</sup> Because of the government’s system of power-sharing, all political parties were vested in maintaining this status quo for mutual benefit. Protests have periodically challenged the status quo, but arguably with little lasting effect. Between 2015 and 2021, protestors forced the dismissal

and resignation of two prime ministers – Haider al-Abadi in 2018 and Adel Abdul Mahdi in 2019 – and scores of provincial officials, including governors in Baghdad, Diwaniyah, Muthanna, Dhi Qar, and Najaf. Nonetheless, even what were seen as watershed elections in 2021 that broke up sectarian divisions seemed to do little to diminish the notion that party loyalty supersedes governing responsibility.

Even in provinces with well-intentioned change agents, such as Dhi Qar Governor Ahmed Al Khafaji and Karbala Governor Akeel Umran Al Terahi, patience has worn thin as both external and self-imposed obstacles to responsible governing have eroded public trust in officials and led to their ouster. This has limited the contributions citizens have been willing to make themselves to strengthen the social contract and help improve the government’s ability to meet their needs.

***Contested and Disputed Territories.*** In 2017, in the aftermath of the military defeat of ISIS, community need for basic services, particularly in the conflict-affected provinces of Ninewa and Anbar, took precedence over the government’s political reform agenda. ISIS swept into Iraq in 2014 in response to the economic and political failings of the Iraqi government, and to meet their needs following the defeat of ISIS, people were once again willing to turn to whomever would provide services. Depending on the location, various militias and tribes vied for power based on what they were able to provide.

In Ninewa province, the popular mobilization forces (PMF) established security relatively quickly in Mosul, which as soon as it did began undermining the legitimacy of the local government because people saw them as a non-law-abiding force that overshadowed and overpowered the local administration. Neighborhoods in West Mosul also continued to suffer from marginalization and poor provision of public services, as well as a perception that residents there – many of whom are migrants and IDPs from rural, tribal communities outside of Mosul – are not “original Moslawis.”

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<sup>26</sup>“The choices made in Iraq’s 2005 constitution have to be understood in the context of forced democratization by an occupying power and the outcome of the 2005 elections, which saw the triumph of parties with ambitions for regional hegemony. Problems with the process and content of the document were subsequently aggravated by incomplete implementation.” Matthijs Bogaards (2019): [Iraq’s Constitution of 2005: The Case Against Consociationalism](#). *Light*, Ethnopolitics, DOI: 10.1080/17449057.2019.1654200.

<sup>27</sup>Harith Hasan. 2018. [Beyond Security: Stabilization, Governance, and Socioeconomic Challenges in Iraq](#), p. 12.

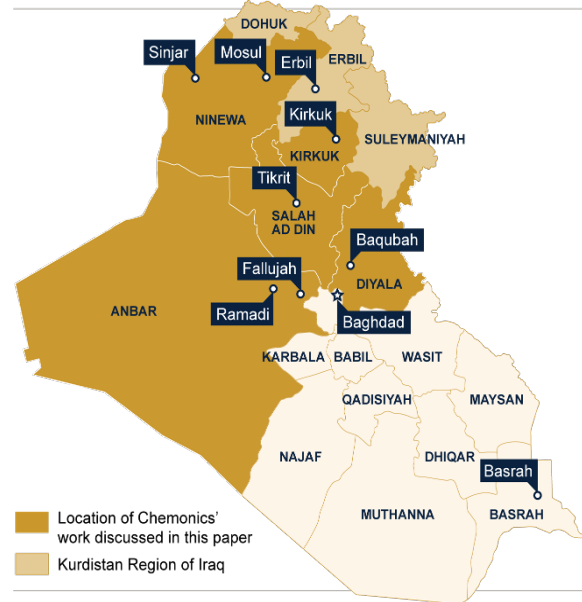
<sup>28</sup>Ryan Cocker. 2017. [Report of the Task Force on the Future of Iraq](#), p. 7.

Sinjar, west of Mosul, is a confluence of tension among Arabs, Kurds, and Yazidis, with the additional destabilizing factor being the influence of Turkey. Militias of all stripes, dominated by the Sinjar Resistance Units, known as the YBS, which is seen by Turkey as being affiliated with the PKK, have contended with a contested local administration for influence, with the result being that the basic services for and livelihoods of most Sinjaris have remained neglected for several years.

In Anbar province, both security and legitimacy were more tenuous due to the entrenched presence of tribes that were competing for influence, including tribes that support ISIS sleeper cells. Because of its vast desert terrain and its proximity to Syria, West Anbar was the first area to fall to ISIS and an area that ISIS fought hard to control, even after losing Mosul. Through their localized legitimacy, tribes can “control” both the government and ISIS, but even the powerful tribes only have influence enough to protect their own interests. Most of these tribes do not have much in the way of resources to provide and do not distribute what they do have equitably. Formal political power has historically resided in the eastern part of the province, with districts in the West perpetually being neglected. This despite the fact that when it controlled the western region, ISIS destroyed the vast majority of government entities in the hopes of erasing any semblance of governance other than their own. This continues to leave the West feeling excluded and unrepresented.

Across the provinces of Diyala and Salah Ad Din, in communities disputed by the government in Baghdad and the autonomous government in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the dominant political actor was the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) until 2017, when the KRI lost an independence referendum. In Diyala most of the PUK affiliated mayors and head of districts have kept their positions, but ethno-sectarian political parties aligned with armed groups have become power brokers, and ongoing ethnic and tribal tensions contribute to continued instability. In Salah ad Din the referendum led to violence and the expulsion of the local Kurdish population and left both the KRI and Baghdad without much legitimate authority. The provincial government in Tikrit, for its part suffered from low capacity and the destruction of much of the municipal institutions and service delivery systems.

Map of Iraq



In these and other contested areas of the country, even where a given non-state actor is dominant, reliance on the local power broker for basic services can equate to a sign of allegiance, even if it is only a survival tactic. This was most prominent among those who either fled a community or stayed behind when ISIS took control. In Anbar, for example, many people fled as ISIS fell, fearing retribution by PMFs, whereas people returning to Mosul were suspicious of those who stayed while ISIS controlled the city. This also holds true for “government” officials, many of whom maintained their formal positions through their role in illicit economic activity or membership in militias.

***Role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) as First Responders.*** Following the defeat of ISIS, Iraqi CSOs of all political and ethno-sectarian stripes played a significant role in the post-conflict context as the primary channel for the international community. As stabilization actors, the ability to interact with and direct resources from international donors to meet specific community needs was a source of immediate credibility for the CSOs themselves and to some extent the donors that were partnering with those CSOs as well. In Sinjar, for example, Chemonics partnered with a CSO to rehabilitate and equip a local primary school; this was a visible sign of recovery that aimed to encourage IDP return. Chemonics also supported a CSO in Anbar to launch a grassroots cleaning and beautification

campaign in collaboration with the municipality. In Mosul, where government-run health services lacked the resources to respond to COVID during its first months, Chemonics supported a local organization in conducting a disinfection campaign throughout the city.

Although CSOs helped international implementers localize their approaches to ensure the latter was being as responsive as possible, these CSOs quickly became seen as taking orders from a menu of interventions being offered by the international community. And as needs evolved and the importance of structured governance gained prominence alongside the supply of goods and services, the reputation and legitimacy of CSOs began to be questioned on multiple fronts. Local organizations in Ninewa, for example, could provide rubble removal activities, hygiene kit distribution and awareness, and waste management and electricity repair simultaneously or sequentially, as the donor preferred. As government actors began to gain their footing, the natural role for CSOs would have been to serve as advocates for the population and watchdogs of government, but access to funding remained connected to service delivery, and CSOs resisted allowing local authorities to take on some of those services accusing the authorities of either bias in service distribution, incompetence, or corruption to restrict them from working with donors. This “service replacement” on the part of CSOs hindered local government’s ability to recapture its role as a legitimate service provider. It may also have led to an unintended “substitution effect,” in which foreign assistance is so large that it fills needs and frees up local resources for engaging in war.

What’s more, among those chasing the plethora of funds made available for local services were many of the same political actors that were paralyzing the public sector. In much the same way that state resources were captured by various actors, much of the space in which civil society operates was also captured by political parties and other local groups, who were able to turn CSOs into their own respective government contractors. These entities were seen by international development organizations as a “bridge” between people and the government.

This designation made these CSOs the primary service providers in many communities, but it also enabled government to usurp the roll of CSOs as the voice of the people meant to hold government accountable. In both the pre-ISIS and post-ISIS stages, civil society leaders were conspicuously absent from the discussion on broader stabilization efforts, and in terms of building the capacity of government officials, the lack of support to CSOs to strengthen their ability to hold those officials accountable was seen by some as a missed opportunity.

The complex bureaucratic hurdles to effective governance are a reflection of the deep vested interests of the large, centralized state institutions left behind by Saddam Hussein. As the largest and most desirable employer in Iraq, the central government continues to control the vast majority of the country’s resources; as such it represents an easy and lucrative prize for political parties and an easy target for protestors. Protests demanding better services also tend to call for even more public sector jobs by those who are unemployed. Given the history of strong governance in Iraq, some argue, perhaps counterintuitively, that the existence of a strong civil society filling the role of service provider is an indicator of instability. The remedy for this, many Iraqis say, is for civil society to more actively support the government in fulfilling its role rather than hold it accountable.

## **D1. USAID and UK Assistance to Iraq**

In the nearly 20 years since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, at least \$223 billion in assistance has been provided to the country, with a significant amount of that coming from the United States.<sup>29</sup> The amount of funding and number of projects that focused on service delivery, stabilization, good governance, livelihoods, and social cohesion goes well beyond the projects listed below. This list includes projects implemented by Chemonics International in these technical areas, which provide the evidence base and lessons learned for the recommendations made at the conclusion of the paper.

### **Governance Strengthening Project**

The USAID-funded Governance Strengthening Project

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<sup>29</sup>According to the SIGIR audit of 2013, Iraq received \$220.2 billion in assistance, \$61 billion of which came from the United States. The US also provided an additional \$3 billion in “humanitarian assistance” since 2014. See <https://www.cnn.com/2014/06/19/how-the-us-lost-billions-over-nine-years-in-iraq.html> and <https://www.state.gov/u-s-announces-humanitarian-assistance-for-iraq/>

(GSP; known in Iraq as Taqadum), which ran from September 2011 to September 2017, aimed to build the institutional capacity of Iraqi provincial and local governments to empower elected officials and improve government service delivery to citizens. The goal was to work with local leaders to increase government engagement with and accountability to citizens. The project's theory of change was that through decentralization, Iraq's provincial and local governments would become more effective in responding to community needs, citizens would become more involved in local decision-making, and local authorities would work with greater accountability and transparency. The project focused on three key areas: 1) legal and policy reforms; 2) institutional strengthening of decentralized authorities within provincial and local governments; and 3) providing support to provincial officials for improved service delivery.

Among GSP's results were:

- *Service delivery capacity enhanced.* GSP worked with 15 targeted provinces — Anbar, Babil, Baghdad, Basrah, Dhi Qar, Diwaniyah, Diyala, Karbala, Kirkuk, Maysan, Muthanna, Najaf, Ninawa, Salah ad Din, and Wasit— in developing and implementing the Service Delivery Improvement Process across the six line ministries of Health, Education, Construction and Municipalities, Sport and Youth, Agriculture, and Labor and Social Affairs.
- *Provincial and national government public financial management improved.* As part of the project's Local Financial Management Module, GSP assisted the Ministry of Finance in establishing Administrative and Financial Affairs Directorates that enabled provincial governments to perform their own budgeting, auditing, accounting, and reporting functions. The provinces were trained on and institutionalized the integrated and transparent process of developing investment and operational budgets.
- *Monitoring and oversight of service delivery and public expenditures strengthened.* GSP assisted provincial governments in forming Essential Service Delivery Oversight working groups. Composed of members from local service delivery ministry directorates, the groups allowed provinces to better monitor and deliver services to citizens at the local level and close existing gaps in public service delivery. These working groups conducted surveys and site visits at the neighborhood level to assess the conditions of service delivery,

make recommendations for improvements, oversee implementation of these improvements, and conduct follow-up visits and surveys to measure progress.

## Iraq Social Cohesion

The project entitled Promoting Trust in Co-Existence: Facilitating Community Cohesion and Resilience in South West Kirkuk (known as the Iraq Social Cohesion (ISC) project), was funded by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office from October 2019 to May 2021. ISC aimed to increase social cohesion and resilience in communities in southwest Kirkuk and other selected locations in northern Iraq that were considered most at risk from the resurgence of violent extremism. To this end, ISC supported community-led peace efforts to work together to identify and address conflict drivers and promote drivers of peace through peace committee initiatives.

Among ISC's results were:

- *Drivers of conflict identified for selected communities.* ISC and local communities conducted conflict analysis and mapping of key stakeholders and marginalized and underrepresented groups for 10 locations. Using a local systems approach to conflict analysis, selected communities conducted regular and systematic analysis of local conflict drivers to identify opportunities to build positive peace and foster social cohesion. This approach provided the project team with a comprehensive view of each local conflict ecosystem, preparing the project to engage strategically in a way that could contribute effectively to change.
- *Peace community initiatives (PCIs) to address selected local drivers of conflict designed and implemented in selected communities.* Drawing on information from stakeholder mapping and conflict analysis, ISC supported the locally led design and delivery of PCIs with facilitated internal and external community consultations and tailored communications for maximizing local awareness and involvement. ISC worked closely with community groups to design PCIs that eliminated barriers to women's participation and to enable representation from other underrepresented groups. The emphasis on inclusive participation helped build relationships between disparate stakeholders and aimed to increase collective commitment to peace.

- *Selected communities increased their capacity to identify, analyze, and address local conflict drivers.* ISC provided mentorship and training for selected community groups to equip participants with the knowledge, skills, and organizational capabilities to facilitate reconciliation and build durable, positive peace within their communities. ISC focused on tailored mentorship and the creation of internal mentorship and knowledge sharing systems among selected groups to ensure sustainable and continuous improvement in capability and impact. By prioritizing mentorship and capacity building, the project sought to ensure the sustainability of its results and contribute to long-term change.

These initiatives and mechanisms enabled the project to conduct community level surveys of grievances and drivers of conflict specifically related to service delivery, the results of which are summarized in Section D2.

## Iraq Regional Program

The USAID/OTI-funded Iraq Regional Program (IRP) was implemented from January 2019 to February 2022. Launched two years after Iraq Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's declaration of victory over ISIS, IRP expanded OTI's then-ongoing humanitarian assistance to ISIS-affected regions in Iraq under an umbrella Syria regional program. Building off initial work that focused on the recovery needs of ethnic and religious minority communities in the Ninewa Plain and Sinjar that were decimated and displaced by ISIS, IRP's mandate expanded to include support for the recovery of Mosul as well as ISIS-impacted communities in western Anbar.

Among IRP's results were:

- *Service delivery and access to government services improved.* IRP partnered with Iraqi government entities and CSOs at the district and governorate levels to provide and improve upon a wide variety of services in all programming locations. Eighty percent of the activities that IRP implemented were service delivery related.
- *Local economies and value chains to support livelihoods strengthened.* IRP worked to support livelihoods and promote local economic growth. IRP helped small business owners re-establish or expand operations, which contributed to local job creation. The project

focused on supporting the agricultural sector.

- *Moderate voices and civil society actors empowered through media and outreach.* Across programming areas, IRP worked with conflict-affected vulnerable communities to increase credible coverage of their recovery that counters disinformation within a politicized Iraqi media landscape.

## Durable Communities and Economic Opportunities

The USAID-funded Iraq Durable Communities and Economic Opportunities (DCEO) project, which began in 2020 and is currently ongoing, works with vulnerable communities, victims of conflict, private enterprises, and business associations to cultivate community cohesion and enhance private sector competitiveness. DCEO supports Iraqis to build resilient, adaptive communities and to advance economic well-being by addressing underlying drivers of conflict, increasing community leadership of inclusive local development, improving private sector networks, and enhancing micro-, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) competitiveness.

Results achieved to date of this five-year project include:

- *Community problem-solving dialogues convened and solution-oriented ideas identified.* Mixed dialogue sessions were convened in six target communities during 2021. These sessions resulted in a total of 135 potential project ideas to be funded through small grants, which will be narrowed in the coming months; an average of five projects will be funded per community.
- *Support provided to Iraqi start-ups.* DCEO has been delivering assistance to entrepreneurs and startups across Iraq by providing workspace, seed funding, mentoring, and training to facilitate innovation and vitality in the private sector.
- *Provision of investment facilitation services to Iraqi private sector enterprises.* DCEO provides assistance designed to increase access to finance for Iraqi firms, spurring economic growth and the associated creation of new private sector jobs. Transactions totaling more than \$135 million have spanned early-stage technology, education, industrials, agribusiness, and telecommunications sectors, as well as fast-moving consumer goods.



## D2. Building Effective and Legitimate Institutions: Impact of Programming

Monitoring and evaluating the impact of projects that operate in a context where TWP and SCA are key to implementation requires understanding that outcomes may be unintended, they may result from unattributable causes, and they may lead to non-linear change. The results of our work for the most part have been evaluated by qualitative surveys and interviews that demonstrate the impact our work has had on beneficiaries and partners.

The Department for International Development (DFID)'s Building Stability Framework outlines five building blocks that are essential for long-term stability, emphasizing that all stabilization activities should aim to contribute to one or more of these blocks. This section explores the impacts of Chemonics' programming through the lens that is most relevant to the scope of this research: Effective and Legitimate Institutions. This building block refers to institutions (both state and non-state) that "build trust with those they govern and grow in effectiveness over time."<sup>30</sup> This section will explore the outcomes and impact of our governance and stabilization programming, assessing to what extent they have contributed to building legitimate institutions that are effective and sustainable.

### ***Impact of Work with Non-Governmental Entities.***

In many cases, Chemonics worked closely with non-governmental organizations – namely, CSOs – to implement service delivery activities, relying on them for their community outreach and engagement capabilities. One internal mid-project assessment noted that working with CSOs (as opposed to governmental entities) was often more productive because CSOs tend to have more time to engage in this work, have better knowledge of and relationships with the people within their community, and can follow up, conduct outreach, and obtain approvals more effectively. In sum, the flexibility, transparency, and outreach capabilities of CSOs – and the legitimacy that many CSOs enjoy within their respective communities – were effective in helping to ensure immediate impact.

***The Legitimizing Effects of Community Engagement and Social Inclusion.*** The importance of community outreach and ensuring a collaborative process cannot be overstated,

particularly in a stabilization context. Chemonics programming in Ninewa found that across the board, where respondents were less satisfied with projects, their biggest grievance was a lack of community involvement in the project prioritization and selection process. Overall, Chemonics project teams found CSOs to be strong partners because even when they lacked technical skills, they possessed convening power, flexibility, transparency, and the ability to generate local buy-in. Findings indicated that local CSOs' abilities to engage communities in consultative processes, both during design and during implementation, was a significant advantage. Engaging local communities also helped create a path for sustainability by contributing to a sense of ownership.

Respondents to informal, community-level surveys in the Ninewa Plains noted that basic service provision and livelihood activities also affected social relationships within and among communities. Whether through decreasing competition over resources and bringing people together, or by addressing perceptions of inequity in the distribution of assistance, the results indicate that the process of engagement was as valuable as the activities themselves. This was true of connections made between Christian and Muslim communities in the Sinjar region of Ninewa, where survey respondents gave additional recognition to the importance of social activities to enable the recovery process to move forward. Respondents recognized the need to improve relations between different groups to maintain stability and safeguard a continuous recovery in target areas. Both groups recognized that families needed safe spaces and communities needed to "rebuild" social infrastructure. Respondents from different communities all pointed out that relationships have been affected and would need to be mended to make progress as a community.

### ***Short-Term Community Preferences Versus Long-Term Expectations.***

Community perceptions and expectations of provincial and local governments are complex and at times seem contradictory. The results of one mid-project assessment in Ninewa showed that 68% of survey respondents felt that international donors working with governmental entities led to a lesser tangible impact on the ground; moreover, these respondents

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<sup>30</sup>DFID Stabilisation Unit. [The UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation: A guide for policy makers and practitioners](#), 22.

perceived these entities as corrupt and burdened by bureaucracy. Chemonics' activities with the health and youth directorates highlighted challenges associated with such governmental partnerships. Both directorates expected Chemonics to provide assistance without being liable for how funding would be allocated in the future or committing to regular reporting; they wanted a donation as opposed to a partnership towards common objectives. It took the project team substantial effort to engage the directorates actively in the implementation of the activities and the provision of services in a transparent manner.

For these reasons, the assessment concluded that governmental partnerships appear to be risky in terms of outreach, transparency, and community perceptions. That said, Chemonics found that while communities may perceive CSOs as more trustworthy and legitimate more broadly, many of these populations do still ultimately expect government to fulfill the role of service delivery.<sup>31</sup> Even if positive community perception and satisfaction is the primary goal of a project, taking the easy route of eschewing governmental partners for CSOs is not conducive to this goal in the long term.

***Impact of Work with Governmental Entities.*** Although there are significant trade-offs and challenges to governmental partnerships, Chemonics programming has nonetheless achieved promising results through these partnerships. The vast majority of the work that Chemonics implemented in partnership with governmental entities fell under at least one of two categories, the first being direct service provision and the second being administrative decentralization. The latter aimed to build the capacity of provincial governorates to provide services while also creating processes and systems that would enable the governorates to sustain this service provision beyond the lifetime of the project.

***Service Delivery Improvement and the Correlation with Stability.*** In 2012 and 2013, Chemonics' program teams conducted two rounds of comprehensive surveys across 15 provinces in which service delivery improvement work was being implemented. These surveys

measured the percentage change in citizen satisfaction of government services, aiming to gauge the extent to which service delivery support to provincial governments was effectively increasing citizen satisfaction with service provision. Although these surveys were discontinued due to a change in project direction in 2014, the two provinces with the lowest levels of citizen satisfaction in government-provided services were Ninewa and Anbar, at 30% and 31% respectively. The province with the next lowest rate was Basrah at 46%. To be sure, dissatisfaction with government performance and/or responsiveness was likely just one of a myriad of factors contributing to the rise of ISIS in Ninewa and Anbar, but this wide gap in citizen satisfaction indicates that citizen dissatisfaction with service provision can contribute to instability by increasing the appeal of non-state actors who can provide basic needs and a level of dignity to the community.

***Increasing Perceptions of Legitimacy.*** Recognizing that the cause-and-effect relationship of service delivery and legitimacy can be tenuous, working with governmental partners can be fruitful despite the challenges. A limited mid-project assessment in Anbar conducted within the last two years found that basic service improvement activities increased perceptions of governmental bodies when the public recognized the service as government-provided. To a large extent, the degree to which service delivery improves community perceptions of governmental entities is dependent upon the ability of government to take credit for these activities. But the capacity for outreach and engagement still seems to rest primarily with CSOs.

### **D3. Lessons Learned**

The examples provided by the projects referenced above do not necessarily correlate to recommendations that would be applicable in all fragile and conflict-affected settings. But some generalized lessons that can be drawn are summarized below.

As immediate needs are met and stabilization takes hold, there tends to be a general recognition that **the role of**

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<sup>31</sup>In terms of who was best positioned to meet community needs, surveys in the Northeast showed a clear preference for the office of the *GoI qa'im makam* (mayor) to address service-related issues (59%), and while respondents in the Northeast resoundingly approved of CSOs' competence, with 83% of respondents judging them to be of either "high" (42%) or "medium" (41%) capability, but only 2% would go to CSOs first for service-related issues. Respondents in the northwest also approved of CSOs' competence, with 65% of respondents judging them to be either have "high" (27%) or "medium" (38%) capability, but only 5% saying they would go to CSOs first for service-related issues.

**a legitimately functioning state is important.** Even in communities with strong grievances directed at the state, rather than demanding the return of ISIS, for example, the demand is for government to be more responsive and engaged in distributing resources (including jobs) more equitably. As long as local CSOs continue to do this better, even if only at the micro-community level, they are seen as the best “bridge” or “partner” to enabling public sector service delivery. This segue, however, obscures the distinction between CSOs’ ability to provide directed, short-term assistance and government’s ability to build enough public trust in the way it allocates state resources to be willing to pay taxes or fees for services over the longer term.

Along the stabilization to stability continuum, **the role of civil society needs to evolve.** In some instances, such as in smaller communities in both Iraq and Syria that were liberated from three years of ISIS rule, civil society, like local government, needs to be re-created from scratch. But often civil society organizations are more agile and better able to quickly respond to international donor requirements to receive funding and deliver services. This role is accentuated when local government is not seen as representing parts or all of the community it serves; however, because the populations that CSOs serve tend to be smaller than even local government constituencies, CSOs are often not held to the same level of equitable distribution benchmarks than government entities are. The role civil society is better suited to play in enabling government to develop the skills associated with building trust is serving as a counterforce that holds government accountable. Building the capacity of CSOs to hold government accountable can contribute to both state legitimacy and stability.

As demonstrated in the Iraq examples, in fragile states what is considered civil **society makes up only a portion of non-state actors**, and even among CSOs, agendas and levels of influence are not all the same. In Iraq, militias are more politically affiliated than tribes and political and tribal influence can be susceptible to fluid allegiances. In Sinjar, for example, while the dominance of the YBS was once seen as a stabilizing influence there, when Turkish-Kurdish hostilities set off a regional spark, Sinjar was thrust

into volatility. Similarly, the influence of local CSOs can be positively or negatively impacted by the prevailing public sentiment towards their international sponsors.

Ultimately, this competition to bring about stability and improve living standards and the difference in perceptions about how to achieve that demonstrate a demand for change. There are indications that **the improvement of services through more effective governance can lead to an improvement in social conditions because doing so would decrease competition over resources among groups, leading to longer term stability.** But currently within the Iraqi political structure there is an entrenched cohort of political appointees and non-political government staff for whom the status quo is the best possible solution. Providing the skills for them to govern and conduct the public’s business in a participatory and equitable manner and to be held accountable for doing so is not the sole domain of technical assistance. These skills must be accompanied by an approach that discerns the motivations of key stakeholders to pursue their own interests and facilitates the design of more targeted programming that allows them to maintain their influence through legitimate means.

## E. Recommendations

Much of the international donor assistance for strengthening governance in fragile post-conflict states centers on two key pillars: material support for the provision of basic services and capacity building to strengthen public service delivery. To help future programming advance the process of stabilization, we offer the following considerations based on our analysis of the importance of state legitimacy in achieving stability.<sup>32</sup>

**1. Adapt to the unstable political environment in fragile contexts.** A project’s ability to respond quickly and appropriately to community needs is paramount to establishing credibility and trust. Similarly, projects in fragile contexts need ongoing analysis and adjustments based on shifting opportunities and constraints to stay relevant and responsive to changing power dynamics during project implementation. In a conflict-affected context, poor governance that creates real or perceived inequities is a key driver of conflict.

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<sup>32</sup>A similar set of recommendations were made in Todd Diamond and Cameron Berkuti, “[Improving Services and Strengthening Cohesion in Fragile States: The Case of Iraq](#)”, October 2017. The recommendations provided here have been revised based on the research and analysis in this paper.

The mindset of thinking and working politically thus includes dealing with informal and non-state actors as well as partnering with formal government structures.

2. ***Understand trade-offs without losing sight of longer-term governance objectives.*** Given the importance of meeting basic needs in a post-conflict context, immediate service-delivery goals to stabilize the country may inherently take precedence over long-term government capacity building objectives. Although local governance projects must adapt to political and conflict-driven realities, they must also fully integrate and monitor longer-term governance objectives to enhance the capacity of local institutions, both governmental and non-governmental. This includes the evolution of CSOs from service providers to guardians of accountability and the recognition of the role motivations play in the decision making of public officials as well as informal actors and influencers.
3. ***Emphasize community engagement as effective governance.*** A key element of good governance is the “how” as well as the “what” and a key to achieving the how is effectively engaging the public in decision making. Such engagement should invite participation rather than just provide explanation. Government must also recognize that its reputation matters; if it is succeeding in meeting people’s needs, it should proactively take credit for doing so. Public outreach approaches by government entities as well as CSOs should be supported and tailored to specific localities according to the target audience, enabling those who do not feel they can be heard at public events to voice their concerns to the greatest degree possible.
4. ***Encourage local governments to support reforms by sharing the costs.*** Cost sharing demonstrates the government’s commitment to taking ownership of, sustaining, and maintaining accountability for reforms and demonstrates a return on taxpayer (local and donor) investment. This is especially true in fragile states, where funds are often earmarked for “stabilization” or other political objectives but the objectives and commitments to any designated recipients remain vague. Given the typical scarcity of resources, this cost sharing can be minimal and may come in the form of in-kind contributions to project-recommended activities. Such contributions, even if only symbolic, can go a long way toward demonstrating

government legitimacy in support of community-led recommendations for improving service delivery.

5. ***Empower key stakeholders to think and work politically.*** TWP is not just a mindset for project implementation. Actively empowering key local government stakeholders to address drivers of conflict can help determine which informal power structures to target for strengthening existing political settlements or crafting new ones. By better understanding the motivations of non-state actors, be they local civil society organizations or ethno-sectarian groups with perceived outside influence, local officials can address the concerns of those whose support is critical for establishing and maintaining the legitimacy of the state.



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