



# MERCY CORPS' GOOD GOVERNANCE APPROACH

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To support communities grappling with world's most complex, interconnected and intensifying problems—from protracted conflict and famine to failed markets and climate change—Mercy Corps believes we must tackle the governance barriers that underpin these challenges. Weak governance is one of the biggest roadblocks to effective, lasting development in the transitioning and fragile environments where we work. It compounds natural resource degradation, inhibits economic growth, perpetuates gender inequalities, alienates youth and ignites conflict, among other impacts. In these contexts, governance institutions often lack the incentives, capacity and budgets to provide communities with the services foundational to sustainable and equitable development.<sup>i</sup> Citizens lack access to basic information about their rights and responsibilities, and ineffective accountability and transparency mechanisms exacerbate grievances, encourage corruption and foster disengagement and distrust in decision-making processes.

Increasing evidence links good governance to successful peace and development outcomes, and at a time when there are limited resources available to help the world's poorest and most vulnerable, it is essential that we renew our efforts to promote good governance.<sup>ii,iii</sup> This requires us to expand our investments in decision-makers and power-holders to ensure they are responsive, accountable to and capable of engaging with citizens. We must continue to harness the collective power, knowledge and capacities of communities, while finding new and innovative ways to increase citizen participation in the decisions that affect their lives. Finally, we must protect and expand spaces for vibrant civil society, and support inclusive dialogue and trust building opportunities across sectors and divides.



Only by utilizing an approach that targets the underlying governance constraints faced in fragile and transitioning contexts will we see the equitable and lasting progress that we seek. The remainder of this introduction outlines several of these constraints, providing context for Mercy Corps' good governance approach.

## Uninformed, Disengaged and Disconnected Citizens

Good decision-making processes both solicit and account for citizens' knowledge, experiences, views and values. However, citizens around the globe often lack access to basic information about their rights and responsibilities, face exclusion from planning and decision-making processes and have few avenues for providing feedback or holding leaders accountable. In many contexts, skepticism about political change and limited awareness of roles and responsibilities result in communities without a clear sense of civic duty or willingness to engage actively in governance systems. And many—especially the most vulnerable and marginalized—lack the knowledge, skills and connections to voice their demands and meaningfully participate. They are discouraged by the real and perceived control of decision-making by elites and leaders who often ignore their perspectives. When communities do not trust power-holders to respond—let alone listen—to their demands, they are less confident in their ability to effect change through the political system.

## Weak Civil Society Sector and Diminishing Public Space

A strong governance system requires a vibrant civil society sector and an independent media. These groups ensure that citizens are informed about the actions and performance of governance institutions and have the means to influence public policies freely. Therefore, civil society has a key role to play in mobilizing citizens to voice their demands, sharing information with the population and pressuring officials to be more transparent and accountable. However, in many developing, transitioning and fragile countries, civil society lacks the knowledge and skills needed to articulate and amplify the needs and demands of citizens. Furthermore, in many contexts the perceptions of elite-capture and lack of power or interest in holding institutions accountable have weakened civil society's legitimacy. In many countries, increasing legal restrictions and administrative hurdles determining how domestic and international civil society organizations (CSOs) operate and receive outside funding compound these challenges.

## Underperforming, Unresponsive and Unaccountable Institutions

Increasing evidence links state legitimacy to both the performance of governance institutions and the processes they use.<sup>iv</sup> While many countries have pursued decentralization strategies to expand the quality, efficiency and responsiveness of public service delivery at the local level, these efforts disproportionately focus on top-down structural reform with insufficient



Mercy Corps: Lindsay Hamsik

## THE CASE FOR STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY

*According to Freedom House, 2016 was the first year in over a decade that saw an overall decline in global freedom indicators, due in part to legal barriers placed on civil society organizations and limitations on freedom of speech. Strengthening civil society under such circumstances is all the more important to ensure the viability of linkages between citizens and governments.*

## THE LINK BETWEEN WEAK GOVERNANCE AND CONFLICT

*According to USAID, countries that have ineffective government institutions, rampant corruption and weak rule of law have a 30-to-45 percent higher risk of civil war and higher risk of extreme criminal violence than other developing countries. Mercy Corps' own research in fragile contexts supports this finding, suggesting a link between grievances with and distrust of government and an increased propensity for violence.*

investment in government officials' capacity to utilize participatory decision-making processes. To increase their legitimacy and functionality, governance institutions must recognize and value citizen participation and input, and have the willingness, resources, time and capacity to solicit and respond to feedback from community members.<sup>v</sup> However, institutions often lack the technical capacity, financial resources and political incentives to meaningfully engage citizens.<sup>vi</sup> Without well-designed and properly resourced reform efforts that are born from a genuine desire to involve the public and account for their input, governance institutions will continue to lack accountability to their constituents.

## Breakdown in Trust and Relationships Between Citizens and Government

Across the contexts where we work, there is a need to restore trust not only in citizen-to-citizen interactions, but also between citizens and their governments. According to the most recent round of the World Values Survey, more than 50% of citizens surveyed in over sixty countries reported they have little or no trust in their central government.<sup>vii</sup> This distrust exacerbates grievances and fuels unrest. Evidence suggests communities with higher stocks of social capital—or trust and relationships—are more likely to benefit from better health outcomes, fewer violent conflicts and less crime, higher educational achievement and increased economic growth.<sup>viii</sup> Strong relationships within communities, and trust between citizens and governments, are essential for people to act collectively and pursue shared objectives. For example, societies with robust associational life and diverse networks are more likely to be civically engaged and make collective demands on governance institutions. In fragile settings, conflict often reinforces communal divisions and citizens are isolated from institutions; this weakens relationships, hinders cooperation across networks and reduces incentives for collective action.

## Mercy Corps' Good Governance Approach

With these challenges in mind, Mercy Corps' good governance approach focuses on advancing four outcomes (as illustrated in Figure 1):

- › We **empower and engage citizens** by informing and mobilizing communities, and promoting citizen participation in governance processes;
- › We enhance the capacity, networks and inclusivity of local organizations to support a **skilled and connected civil society**;
- › We strengthen accountability mechanisms and support governance institutions in meaningfully engaging citizens to promote more **responsive and accountable decision-makers**; and

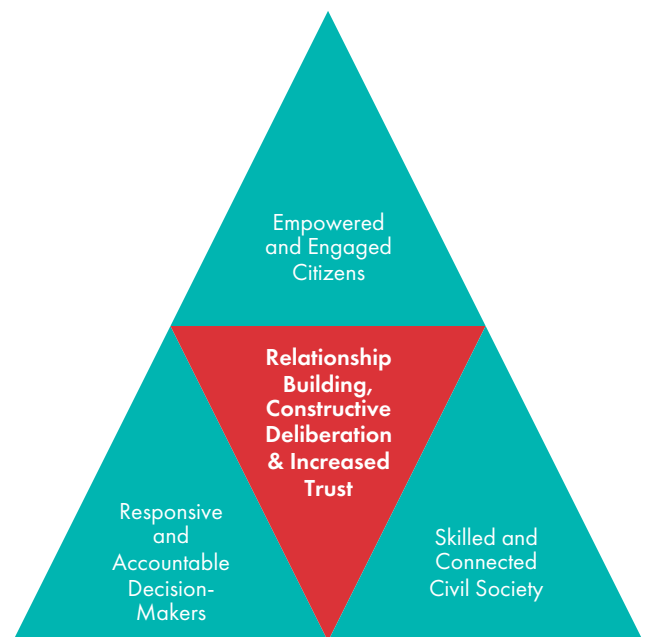


Figure 1: Mercy Corps' Good Governance Approach



- › We strengthen **relationship building, constructive deliberation and increased trust** by facilitating frequent and repeated interaction between diverse communities and sectors to address public challenges.

By elevating the voices of vulnerable communities and increasing their inclusion in decision-making, while simultaneously promoting responsiveness and accountability from governance institutions, we ensure governance processes are more equitable and effective. This approach creates a foundation for communities and institutions to tackle the underlying causes of the world's toughest challenges, working collaboratively to build secure, productive and just communities.<sup>ix</sup>

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## OUR APPROACH IN ACTION

By applying this approach, Mercy Corps contributes to a broader culture of good governance and civic engagement—enabling positive shifts in social norms, decision-making processes and structures to take root. However, our experience suggests there are several requirements for implementing this approach. There must be:

- › **A minimum level of security.** This ensures citizens, CSOs and decision makers who seek to engage in participatory, inclusive and accountable decision-making are able to do so without credible threats to their safety.
- › **Commitments from decision-makers and power-holders.** These commitments help ensure governance structures and processes are more inclusive, transparent and accountable.
- › **Community buy-in and willingness to engage in community processes and activities.** One of the main goals of our approach is to strengthen the capacity of communities to lead their own development and decision-making processes. To be successful, communities must be open to change, and there must be a basic commitment from community members to plan, work and learn together.
- › **Equal opportunities to engage.** Although all citizens do not need to be equally active in decision making to ensure governance systems are inclusive, responsive and accountable, everyone—regardless of gender, age, ability, race or ethnicity—must have equal engagement opportunities and the choice of whether to participate.

Governance mapping and assessment processes (e.g., policy analyses, political economic analyses, stakeholder mapping) enable our teams to evaluate if these requirements are met, identify what opportunities for change exist and leverage any openings within the governance system.


## OUR THEORY OF CHANGE

We believe that if citizens are empowered and engaged, civil society is skilled and connected, decision-makers are accountable and responsive, and mechanisms for constructive deliberation exist, then governance systems will be effective and equitable leading to more secure, productive and just communities.

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We now explore the four components of our good governance approach, providing programming examples for each.

## Empowered and Engaged Citizens



*We believe if community members have information and understand their responsibility and right to participate in decision-making, develop trust and constructive relationships with others in their community, and mobilize around common priorities, then they will more effectively participate in and influence governance processes through collective action.*

Mercy Corps aims to support a more informed and mobilized citizenry that can engage in decision-making and better hold leaders accountable. We equip citizens with the knowledge and skills critical to identifying, organizing and advocating for needed resources and services. Underlying these changes is the fundamental transformation of individuals' perceptions toward a sense of responsibility and agency as active participants in governance. As we increase citizens' understanding of their rights and responsibilities, we provide opportunities to turn that understanding into action. We encourage civic engagement by supporting community members to work together to make a difference in their communities, often in partnership with leaders and governance institutions.

Through our [community mobilization approach](#), we convene diverse community members and strengthen their relationships through repeated interactions and participatory decision-making. This process enables communities to identify and mobilize collectively around common priorities and take action together—all of which results in more effective community participation in and influence over governance processes. You can read more about our community mobilization process in the resource section (Appendix A) at the end of the document.

## CASE STUDIES: EMPOWERING AND ENGAGING CITIZENS

- › **Community Action in Iraq:** In Iraq, Mercy Corps' Community Action Program worked with local communities to create Community Action Groups (CAGs), bringing these groups together with local councils to plan, resource and implement 759 projects that improved health, education and social services. These formal and informal governance structures continue today, identifying and implementing projects through community action planning and budgeting.
- › **Community Health and Advancement in India:** 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 to improve their socioeconomic and health conditions. 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. In many cases, CAGs have enabled communities to address additional problems on their own and garner government and private sector support for projects.

## Skilled and Connected Civil Society



*We believe if civil society understands its role in sharing information and promoting transparency, has organizational and technical capacity to elevate citizen's concerns through advocacy and builds strong networks across sectors and levels, then it will better mobilize communities, represent their demands and hold governance institutions accountable to community priorities.*

Mercy Corps seeks to cultivate an increasingly skilled, interactive and interconnected civil society that can advocate for increased accountability and offer greater opportunities for citizens to engage in governance processes. Our governance approach strengthens civil society's ability to fulfill its important role in sharing information, elevating community priorities and motivating governance institutions to engage with—and be accountable to—citizens. Mercy Corps believes that when young people especially are able to contribute to their communities and participate in decision-making, not only do they gain confidence, increase their status and strengthen their relationships with peers and adults, but communities ultimately benefit from their bold ideas and openness to change. You can read about our complementary [Youth and Governance Approach](#) in Appendix A: Resources.

Through programs and partnerships, we work to build operational and functional capacity among civil society organizations, primarily local NGOs, implementing partners and their networks, using tools like our [Organizational Capacity Measurement Index](#) (see Appendix A for more details) and resulting capacity development plans. This includes

building CSOs' capacity to mobilize, aggregate citizen demands and link communities to decision-makers. As it strengthens its ability to assess and represent community priorities, we encourage civil society to serve as accountability partners for governance institutions. We increase CSOs ability to access information about the actions and performance of governance institutions, and support them in sharing this information with communities. We also facilitate networking and collaboration among CSOs around thematic issues and from local to national levels. Finally, we strengthen linkages between CSOs and government representatives, deepening civil society's connections and representation among decision-makers at all levels.

## CASE STUDIES: BUILDING A SKILLED AND CONNECTED SOCIETY

### › Broadening Participation through Civil

#### **Society in Iraq:** Mercy Corps' Broadening

Participation through Civil Society (BPCS) program developed the institutional capacity of 175 CSOs and transformed the way Iraqi civil society and the government work together. Through organizational development, technical assistance in advocacy and sub-grants, BPCS partners cultivated relationships with community leaders and government decision makers; accessed information and used it to monitor and improve government performance and service delivery; fostered the leadership of young people; and ended harmful practices that prevent women from getting ahead. The program supported civil society partners to form networks and coalitions through which they shared knowledge and resources, and mobilized greater numbers of citizens to reach their goals. As a result of BPCS, the government increased its responsiveness to civil society's demands and communities reported increased trust in civil society.

### › Advancing Civic Engagement in Tunisia:

Mercy Corps' Advancing Civic Engagement in Tunisia (ACT) program enhanced civic education and built the leadership capacity of women and youth in CSOs. Through training, networking and the introduction of the Global Citizen Corps, the program increased the confidence and capacity of 40 CSOs and 378 Tunisian youth leaders. Following the program's advocacy training, a group of highly engaged CSO members formed the Deep Tunisia Network with the goal of increasing the impact of their advocacy efforts. The network's key achievement was amending language in the Tunisian constitution to allow for greater participation of civil society in local development.



## OUR APPROACH TO LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

*At Mercy Corps, we know partnerships are critical to addressing the world's toughest challenges. The issues are too complex to go it alone. Every day, in almost every part of the world, Mercy Corps engages in partnerships—with civil society organizations, for-profit entities, donors, governments and other aid organizations. Local partnerships form the foundation of our programs, and provide access, legitimacy, local knowledge and unparalleled perspectives. But we do not partner for operational exigency alone. We recognize that for good governance to take root, it must grow from within. Only through effective partnerships—which support local ownership—can we hope to impact the complex systems and contexts where we work sustainably. For more information on Mercy Corps' Partnership Approach, please read our [Partnership Paper Series](#).*

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## Responsive and Accountable Decision-Makers



*We believe if decision-makers understand their responsibility to represent citizens' needs, are empowered to meaningfully engage citizens in governance processes and have the opportunity to build trust with citizens in a safe and constructive space, then institutions will be more inclusive, responsive and accountable to citizens.*

Mercy Corps complements our “demand-side” or “bottom-up” good governance initiatives with efforts targeting the “supply-side” (i.e., governance institutions and leaders). We support local government institutions in developing the skills and capacities to assess constituent needs, plan and budget for inclusive responses and equitably allocate resources. In our experience, local government officials can often be reluctant to engage, especially when doing so may involve personal or professional risk. Through capacity-building efforts, we work to decrease these perceived risks and increase government buy-in, responsibility and technical capacity to take citizen voices into account, ensuring they are more likely to engage with citizens in decision-making processes. To increase institutional accountability, we assist government officials, service providers and communities in co-creating feedback and grievance redress mechanisms. Our initiatives increase interaction between decision-makers and their constituents, providing opportunities for open dialogue, information sharing and trust building. To ensure scale, we develop strategic partnerships with influential stakeholders—including multilateral organizations like the World Bank and UN agencies—to align our work at the local-level with capacity and institution-strengthening efforts at national and regional levels. Our [Governance Engagement for Local Government Guide](#) details how Mercy Corps builds the capacity of governance institutions to engage citizens. Learn more about this resource in Appendix A.



## A FOCUS ON EFFECTIVE AND RESPONSIVE SERVICE PROVISION

*The effectiveness of service provision (e.g., health, infrastructure, agriculture, social welfare services) is an important measure of governance systems’ inclusivity, responsiveness and accountability. Service delivery is a core responsibility of governments, and research has revealed the important linkage between the inclusiveness and effectiveness of service delivery and perceptions of government legitimacy. In an effort to improve the equitable provision of quality services, and increase overall trust in governance institutions, Mercy Corps good governance approach promotes citizen participation in decision-making around resource allocation and service provision. This includes supporting accountability and feedback mechanisms that enable citizens to provide input on service quality and access.*

## CASE STUDY: SUPPORTING RESPONSIVE AND ACCOUNTABLE DECISION-MAKERS

- 1) **Promoting Sustainable Peace and Resiliency in Kayah State:** In Myanmar, Mercy Corps’ *Promoting Sustainable Peace and Resiliency in Kayah State* (PROSPER) program builds the capacity of local government and ethnic minority officials to engage communities through participatory development planning. Capitalizing on democratic gains at the national level, PROSPER works in an ethnically diverse area of the country that has historically experienced conflict and where both local government capacity and trust in governance is low. The team provides training and technical assistance to support local government officials to engage communities in decision-making. It also strengthens the connections between government and community members, and supports participatory processes to define development issues, identify solutions and develop priorities for action.

## Relationship-building, Constructive Deliberation and Increased Trust



*We believe if opportunities for repeated interactions exist within communities, and between citizens, civil society and government, and if there is a transparent, two-way flow of information between citizens and government, then there will be increased trust between citizens and their governments. The experience of engaging in repeated, constructive deliberation will enable information sharing and greater transparency, which will further increase trust and strengthen relationships between citizens, and between citizens and their governments.*

Efforts to strengthen social capital are fundamental to Mercy Corps' good governance approach, and integrated throughout our initiatives. Our work aims to increase trust, promote constructive dialogue and catalyze synergies between citizens, civil society, government and the private sector. To do this, our programs create opportunities for social interaction, relationship building and network creation—from community to national levels. This involves facilitating frequent and repeated interactions between diverse communities and institutions to build a sense of common purpose, identify shared interests and address public challenges. We look for opportunities to build linkages within and between communities and sectors at all levels. We also encourage the open and honest exchange of ideas and information, and create space for diverse groups to deliberate and build consensus. Ultimately, we understand there are risks involved in this work and utilize a conflict-sensitive approach to manage disputes and avoid exacerbating tensions.

## Conclusion

Mercy Corps' governance approach aims to foster more representative governance across all sectors. This approach is foundational to supporting citizen participation and accountable decision-making, facilitating a greater role for communities and civil society in governance, while building institutions' capacity and partnerships to bring our efforts to scale. When we integrate this approach into programming across sectors, we see more effective, community-led outcomes, ensuring we make sustainable progress towards peace, prosperity and justice in the fragile and transitioning contexts where we work.



Mercy Corps: Benjamin Medam

### THE GOVERNANCE AND PARTNERSHIP TEAM

*The Governance and Partnership (GAP) team provides technical guidance, solutions and tools that enable our program teams, colleagues and partners to integrate good governance principles into program development, implementation, research and strategy.*



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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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# Appendix A: Resources

The following resources complement Mercy Corps' good governance approach.

Topic	Resource	Description
Community Mobilization	<a href="#"><u>Guide to Community Mobilization Programming</u></a>	Mercy Corps' community mobilization process aims to increase a community's capacity to collectively identify its own needs, priorities, resources and solutions. By strengthening social capital and a sense of common purpose, the process fosters collective action and empowers diverse community members to work together to address their common challenges. Building on existing community strengths and capacities and managed by community members, it begins by bringing diverse stakeholders into a common process. As a catalyst, Mercy Corps is accountable to the community while supporting them in achieving their vision. This guide explores the process that not only helps build the skills to create and implement community plans effectively via community-led projects, it models the principles of good governance and the value of collective action.
Local Partnerships	<a href="#"><u>Partnership Paper Series</u></a> *	Local partnerships form the foundation of Mercy Corps' programs, and provide access, legitimacy, local knowledge and unparalleled perspectives. But we do not partner for operational exigency alone. We recognize that for good governance to take root, it must grow from within. Only through effective partnerships—which support local ownership—can we hope to impact the complex systems and contexts where we work sustainably. This series explores our approach to building local partnerships.
Organizational Capacity	<a href="#"><u>Organizational Capacity Index</u></a> *	Mercy Corps developed the Organizational Capacity Index through the Governance and Partnerships (GAP) Technical Support Unit to facilitate partner organizations to identify and understand their capacity strengths and weaknesses and to improve upon them in order to better align with their organizational vision and strategic direction.
Social Capital	<a href="#"><u>Social Capital and Good Governance</u></a>	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. This paper explores the important role social capital plays in building good governance.
Supply Side Local Governance	<a href="#"><u>Community Engagement for Local Government Guide</u></a>	Local governments and public agencies make better decisions and have greater positive impact on communities when they increase the frequency, diversity, and level of engagement with community residents. Creating opportunities for citizens to participate in the governance decisions that affect their daily lives helps build trust in local government officials and institutions, promotes community ownership and buy-in, and enables future cooperation. Mercy Corps created the Community Engagement for Local Government Guide to assist government institutions and public agencies in engaging citizens and stakeholders in local decision-making and other community projects.
Youth and Governance	<a href="#"><u>Youth and Governance Approach</u></a>	Mercy Corps believes there is tremendous benefit and opportunity when young people engage with their communities, understand their potential influence in the public sphere and are equipped with the skills and resources needed to voice their priorities. When young people are able to contribute to their communities and participate in decision-making, not only do they gain confidence, increase their status and strengthen their relationships with peers and adults, but communities ultimately benefit from their bold ideas and openness to change. This document explores our approach to engaging youth in good governance.

\* Unfortunately, this resource is only available internally at this time.

# Appendix B: Works Cited

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- <sup>vii</sup> Institute for Future Studies. (2014-2016). *World values survey*. Retrieved from <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>
- <sup>viii</sup> Aldrich, D. P. (2012). *Building resilience: Social capital in post-disaster recovery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- <sup>ix</sup> Governance systems refer to formal and informal/traditional power structures within society. Governance systems are effective when they are responsive, accountable, and transparent; they are equitable when decision-making processes are inclusive, fair and just, and membership is representative of the population as a whole.