



***Theme: The Role of Youth in Rebuilding Communities After Conflict—
A Case Study***

Development and the Next Generation: Investing in Iraqi Youth ⁱ

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A demographic youth bulge threatens Iraq's future. In 2004, half of all Iraqis were under the age of 20 years old. Given current population growth rates, the population will double by 2030. (Kunder, 2006)

It has been said that we do not bequeath our communities to our children, but rather, we borrow our communities from them. From this perspective, no group has a greater stake in sustainable communities in Iraq than Iraqi youth. This paper will explore three fundamental questions: Do Iraqi youth have opportunities to contribute in economic sectors? Do Iraqi youth possess the skills and decision making capabilities for meaningful contribution? And do today's leaders in Iraq's communities perceive young people as a source of positive, constructive energy and leadership?

These questions will be addressed from the perspective of what ACDI/VOCA has learned over the past three and a half years leading projects in eight governorates in central and northern Iraq. The rebuilding that is currently underway in Iraq offers hope for expanding an "opportunity space" for greater engagement of youth as positive agents of change in their communities.

Context

Demographics. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, over 60 percent of the population in Iraq is under the age of 25 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). This is one of the highest percentages of youth in the world; young people under the age of 25 in the United States compose only 35 percent of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001, pg. 1). In these numbers, youth could be a potentially destabilizing force; however, if given the appropriate skills, opportunities, and guidance, they offer a potentially powerful force to promote positive change.

Security. The first and foremost requirement for enabling positive change is a basic level of physical security. While the security situation in many parts of Iraq is difficult, certain areas such as the Kurdish governorates of Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah are quite stable and offer a platform for instituting youth programs. However, even in restive areas such as Diyala and Salah ad Din governorates, engaging youth is a top priority to prevent further strengthening of violent elements and destabilization.

Economic Environment. In the last 25 years, three wars and more than 10 years of sanctions have significantly deteriorated the Iraqi economy and the critical infrastructure required for development. This new generation faces significant economic hardship as it lacks the tools and opportunities for productive employment. In 2004, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimated unemployment among Iraqi youth at approximately 33 percent (UNDP, 2005). However, as a result of the worsening security situation, this number is increasing and is likely to continue increasing for the foreseeable future. Furthermore, many employment opportunities are now reserved for individuals of a certain religion or ethnicity, exacerbating tensions and divisions in Iraqi society. Lack of employment coupled with limited opportunities to gain vocational skills makes young people particularly vulnerable to recruitment by radical movements in Iraq. This creates a cycle in which young people become disenfranchised from mainstream society, further diminishing their employment prospects in the long term and affecting Iraq's long-term economic prosperity and stability. Beyond economic opportunities, an untrained and inexperienced workforce will not produce the leaders required for Iraq's government and institutions.

Social Environment. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), prior to 1991, Iraq had one of the best educational systems in the Middle East with an enrollment rate of 100 percent for primary schooling (UNESCO, 2003). Iraq's institutions of higher education also met international standards. Since 1991, however, sanctions and war have severely deteriorated the educational system to the point where in late 2006, the Iraqi Ministry of Education announced that only 30 percent of Iraq's 3.5 million students were attending classes (UNHCR, 2007, pg. 1). Violence targeting schools, teacher kidnappings, poor infrastructure, and limited resources are just a few of the overwhelming problems in Iraq's educational system that affect educational attainment and skill level. Education is a particular challenge for youth in Iraq's internally displaced population. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that approximately 1.9 million Iraqis, about 7 percent of the total population, are internally displaced. Finally, of those youth who do advance to higher education in Iraq, many leave the country for a more secure environment and more professional opportunity.

Youth are also experiencing declines in physical and mental health, with one in eight children dying before their fifth birthday (Integrated Regional Information Networks, 2007). In addition, the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) reports that 4.8 million children under five years of age are malnourished, with one in five of these chronically malnourished. In addition to these poor health indicators, omnipresent violence is causing widespread cases of post-traumatic stress disorder. Promises of improvement over the last four years of U.S. engagement in Iraq have left many disillusioned. Finally, lack of opportunities and a sense of hopelessness about the future are also increasing the number of youth recruited by gangs and militias that engage in drug use, crime, and violence.

ACDI/VOCA Projects in Iraq

ACDI/VOCA has been working in Iraq since July 2003 and has implemented four projects—two community development programs and two microfinance programs. Two projects are currently ongoing. The microfinance programs, which deliver training and technical assistance to Iraqi microfinance institutions, fall under the Iraq Private Sector Growth and Employment Generation project and have awards totaling \$8.6 million. This paper focuses on the youth aspects of the two community development projects, Community Action Program I and II (CAP I and II), with awards to ACDI/VOCA totaling over \$58 million. Both projects are funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). CAP I has been implemented with three subimplementers: Counterpart International, the Center for International Conflict Resolution at Columbia University, and Overseas Strategic Consulting. ACDI/VOCA is one of five CAP I partners with awards totaling over \$271 million over the three-year life of the project. ACDI/VOCA is implementing CAP II, which began in October 2006, as one of four subgrantees under an award to CHF International.

Project Purposes. CAP's overarching objective has been described as follows: "[T]o promote grassroots democracy and better local governance via a project-plus process paradigm of demand-driven community development. This paradigm has been validated by prior USAID programs in other war-torn parts of the world" (International Business and Technical Consultants, Inc. 2006, page v). CAP projects encourage groups to work together to improve their communitiesⁱⁱ. Emphasis is placed on involving traditionally underrepresented groups, including youth, to contribute to the economy and help build peaceful interaction among various groups. A special fund, the Marla Ruzicka Iraqi War Victims Fund, formerly called the Leahy Program, supports humanitarian purposes. CAP II builds on the work of CAP I with greater emphasis on strengthening responsible and effective local governance by institutionalizing community-level mechanisms and capacity for citizen participation in local decision making and development.

Project Assets. ACDI/VOCA has employed over 150 Iraqi nationals and 10 expatriates on CAP I. Iraqi nationals hold key programmatic and support positions (e.g., community development, finance, information technology, management information systems, and procurement) and are especially important for continuity in an environment that makes it difficult to retain expatriate staff and for sustainability. Further, Iraq's difficult security situation severely limits expatriate staff mobility, thus emphasizing the importance of having national staff in key programmatic oversight positions. ACDI/VOCA is currently working out of two offices.

Methodology. CAP's most important feature is that citizens determine their own priorities and take responsibility for planning and monitoring projects that meet those priorities. To this end, ACDI/VOCA facilitates stakeholders' participation in project design and implementation and builds on their initiatives and demands for community ownership. Community-driven action boards are therefore the foundation of our community development methodology, and communities provide contributions to the subprojects they choose to implement. To date, they have contributed over \$6 million (12 percent of total cost of CAP I) to subprojects developed under CAP I. Youth

initiatives, especially initiatives that focus on job creation and entrepreneurship, have been a consistent focus of our work for purposes of political stability and sustainability after donor funding ends. Our primary methodology depends heavily upon the more progressive stakeholders of Iraqi civil society, government, business, and an engaged citizenry working together in genuine partnership to create an alternative future.

The Marla Ruzicka Iraqi War Victims Fund supports individual and community projects to benefit innocent victims of Coalition Forces. The role and participation of ACDI/VOCA community action groups (CAGs) in the so-called “Marla project” development process varies from community to community. Some group members take an active role in identifying possible civilian victims and visiting families. Others prefer to concentrate on other CAP projects and not to be involved with civilian victims’ assistance activities. In all cases, the Marla projects will target beneficiaries who have been disabled, especially those who have lost limbs, hearing, or sight, or individuals who have lost a family member, especially their primary breadwinner. Marla “community” projects help communities deliver health and rehabilitation services or rebuild critical social infrastructure, such as schools and health centers.

Challenges. Security has been ACDI/VOCA’s greatest challenge. Working in governorates with a total population of nearly 11 million under CAP I, which includes approximately 54 percent Sunni Arabs, 33 percent Sunni Kurds, and 13 percent Shia Arabs as well as in “variable” and “nonpermissive” security environments is the norm. Of the eight governorates in which ACDI/VOCA has been working, one has a “nonpermissive” security environment; four, “variable” security; and three, “permissive.” Challenges include restricted movement due to tenuous basic minimum security (e.g., field visits by expatriates restricted to the Kurdish governorates); threats to staff, contractors, and community board members; frightened local officials; and challenges to project monitoring.

As a result of security challenges, low absorptive capacity for unskilled youth coupled with few employment opportunities for youth with limited marketable skills, especially in conflict-prone areas, cannot be addressed quickly. Further, many youth are employed in low-paying, unskilled jobs, which makes it difficult for them to escape poverty. And available work tends to be in the informal sector, which may also fuel the gap between rich and poor.

Results/Expected Results. Over 1,330 subprojects in 150 communities were completed under CAP I throughout the eight governorates covered by ACDI/VOCA. The projects have been diverse, including health clinic and school rehabilitation, infrastructure construction, provision of youth and women’s center supplies, small business and cooperative support, and agriculture support. These projects have generated more than 334,000 employment days. In addition, ACDI/VOCA has provided training in local governance, advocacy, community mobilization, project and business management, and conflict resolution to improve the skills of community members and allow them to independently manage sustainable development projects in their communities.

In the second phase of CAP, CAP II, ACDI/VOCA will build on these initial successes improving the linkages between CAP I CAGs, as well as new CAGs, and the local government. In CAP II, ACDI/VOCA will be working with top-performing CAP I CAGs in areas where security does not impede effective development work. CAGs will also receive further training in the role of civil society and in topics such as economic development to provide them with new opportunities.

Youth Opportunities in Economic Sectors

Employment Generation. Overall, ACDI/VOCA has spent nearly \$3 million for youth initiatives throughout Iraq. This has included 82 projects benefiting 321,000 youth and creating over 1,400 long- and short-term jobs. Projects specifically targeted to broadening opportunities for youth and economic growth include (1) youth cooperatives and other community organizations, (2) apprenticeship programs, and (3) labor-intensive infrastructure projects.

Economic development working groups to improve long-term employment opportunities have been created under various CAGs. These working groups analyze market opportunities and give preference to initiatives that can most effectively advance opportunities for marginalized groups, including youth. For example, ACDI/VOCA is assisting a youth cooperative that is producing and selling plastic windows and doors and covers for greenhouse agricultural projects. This assistance provides 35 youth with long-term employment and income generation opportunities while providing the city with a needed service.

Another successful job creation initiative is a smithy cooperative in a conflict-prone governorate. This cooperative provided jobs to 35 youth and increased their family income. ACDI/VOCA supplied the tools, machines and raw material. The cooperative teaches youth to smelt and fashion ore to produce iron doors, windows and hand rails.

In 2006, ACDI/VOCA assisted a women's organization whose membership is over 1,000 and serves women of all ages, including youth. Twenty-five staff, including school teachers and social workers, work full time to provide services to members and other community beneficiaries. Project support also made it possible for the organization to start a weaving project that aims to train up to 200 women and assist them with job placement. Additional activities of the organization include glass crafts production, and sewing workshops. The center also provides courses for primary, intermediate, and secondary school students who have fallen behind in the regular school system.

Short-term employment opportunities are incorporated into all community development projects. Short-term jobs offer youth an alternative to joining radical movements, generate income and ensure that youth are involved in productive activities. Short-term and high-impact employment opportunities for youth under CAP have generally involved labor-intensive infrastructure projects with a focus on the cities in the most conflict-prone areas of central and northern Iraq. For example, ACDI/VOCA works with community boards on infrastructure projects such as road repair and debris removal

that enable community leaders to show their communities immediate, positive, tangible results. In one city, ACDI/VOCA hired unemployed local youth to clean an agricultural channel to increase local agricultural production, creating 3,750 days of employment for the youth.

Figure 1: Irrigation Canal Cleared Through ACDI/VOCA CAP Project



Linking school and work through effective public-private partnerships is one of the most effective ways to contribute to sustainable communities. In 2005, CAP introduced the Apprenticeship Program, which provides practical, on-the-job training for recent high school or college/university graduates (25 years or younger) not acquired in school that meets the needs of the job market. Apprentices work in a diverse range of fields, including accounting, graphic design, hotel management, engineering and veterinarian medicine. They are paid while gaining work experience at the same pay scale as government workers. Employers or sponsors who volunteer through the CAGs provide apprenticeship training in the workplace and, in some cases, in the classroom as well.

Over 620 apprentices have been placed to date in over 37 government entities, 13 nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and 184 private companies. The program has been implemented in six governorates and has been a great success, even in nonpermissive security environments. In fact, the local council in one city requested an expansion of the program.

I didn't have the chance to apply for a long-term job in the field of my study, but when I have joined this program, it was the opportunity that I was waiting for. Besides getting the training I was encouraged to prove myself and seek a job....Usually after graduation many youth find themselves unsuccessful to find a job, while this program makes you aware of how and where to find a job, that is in addition to the training you get. -Participant of ACDI/VOCA Apprenticeship Program

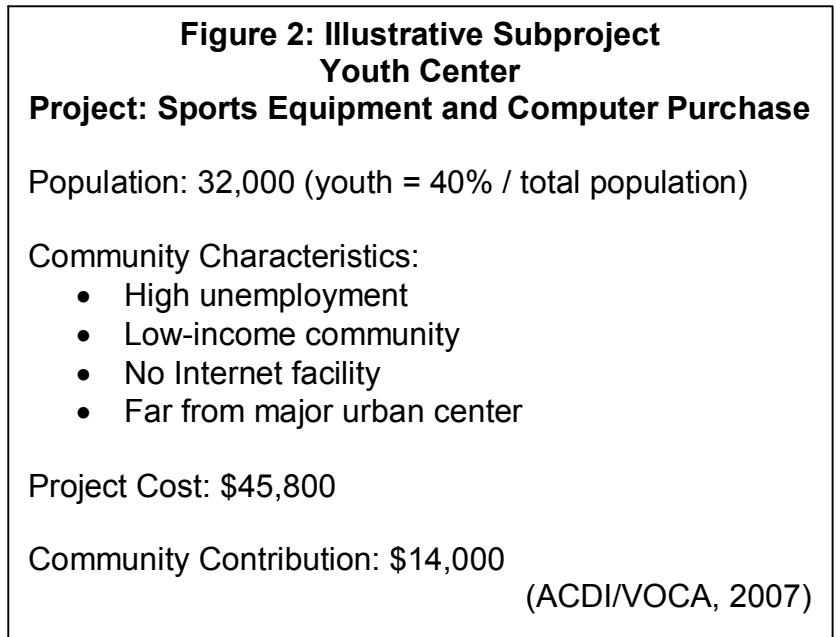
Youth Skills Building. ACDI/VOCA has been developing the economic potential of youth by increasing the relevance of post-basic education for work and life (e.g., communications skills, entrepreneurship skills, business skills, and technical skills). Among these initiatives is INJAZ, a program supporting entrepreneurship by building youth capacities through skills training and hands-on learning.

INJAZ, Junior Achievement's Program in the Middle East, is a program that prepares youth for the new economy through direct participation in the private sector. While many students do not see a future in present-day Iraq, INJAZ teaches them to look to the private sector for new opportunities. ACDI/VOCA, in conjunction with private-sector volunteers, has trained Iraqi youth ages 16 to 22 in the Company Program. Each class of 15 to 30 students has the opportunity to set up a business or service enterprise. The young people generate an idea, study its feasibility, sell stocks, divide into management teams, write the business plan, produce and sell a product, and liquidate the company with dividend distribution. Youth centers compete against one another for the most creative, profitable, and well-run project with the greatest community impact. INJAZ was initially implemented through schools but later was implemented primarily through business development projects. In cooperation with the Ministry of Education, CAP also implemented the Job Shadow Day Program, in which secondary school students are partnered with Iraqi professionals to learn about new career opportunities. Under CAP II, ACDI/VOCA is working with INJAZ to implement additional programs.

In addition, ACDI/VOCA provides support for vocational education and for youth and cultural centers, including skills-building workshops in carpentry and printing and graphic design, production of furniture, carpentry, computer repair and photography.

Youth/Cultural Centers Linked to Employment. ACDI/VOCA has established and reinvigorated youth centers throughout northern Iraq. This included many of the large youth centers established during the Hussein regime, many of which fell into disrepair by the end of the regime. The enthusiastic administration of one youth center even succeeded in linking with American schools to provide training program ideas and materials for youth in the community. Some of the income generated from the carpentry workshop will help support the activities of the center and will thereby contribute to its sustainability.

Similarly, in a small, conservative town, ACDI/VOCA provided materials and labor to help the community establish a cultural center to provide new opportunities for women and youth. The center now offers a full schedule of courses and activities that directly benefit more than 1,000 women and youth. Activities include instruction in sewing, computers, nursing, languages and handicrafts. After attending these courses, 35 trainees found a variety of jobs in the area, and 40 music trainees are now participating in local cultural festivals. Demand for these trainings continues to rise, and men are now also attending.



Support for vocational education has taken a variety of forms. In some cases, the project has supplied equipment; e.g., mechanical equipment for the industrial high school that specializes in welding and heavy-duty mechanics. In other cases, CAP has helped establish training workshops. For example, ACDI/VOCA established a carpentry workshop at a youth activities center, where young people learn to make furniture. The workshop is training about 15 youth per month and helping these previously unemployed youth learn valuable skills.

Finally, ACDI/VOCA also works through local organizations which help to provide vocational training. For example, CAP supported a Kurdish student organization that provides a variety of services, most notably general education courses, to its 500 members and others in the community. Through support from CAP I, including training, materials and support for premises, the organization has expanded its program to include vocational training such as carpentry. Future expansion includes courses in economic development, marketing and furniture making.

Youth Skills and Decision Making Capabilities for Meaningful Contribution

As Iraq continues in its struggle for sociopolitical and economic development, it requires the engagement of skilled young people who will act as catalysts for this change. Today’s Iraqi youth have known only authoritarian rule and are faced with limited employment, educational, and other productive activities, creating enormous hurdles for their participation in Iraq’s democratic development. To be productive, young Iraqis need to be educated about their role in shaping Iraq and to acquire the decision making capabilities to become strong and proactive leaders. To help youth achieve their goals, ACDI/VOCA has supported both academic and practical skill development through CAP.

Figure 3: Iraqi School Girls in an ACDI/VOCA-Supported School



Educational Opportunities. As part of USAID's larger efforts to bolster Iraq's educational system, ACDI/VOCA completed more than 120 projects to rehabilitate or supply schools and several universities and colleges (Figure 3). This included a major effort to immediately rehabilitate schools after the conflict in 2003 to prepare for the 2003 to 2004 academic year. Additional CAP educational projects included the establishment of kindergartens, rehabilitation of libraries, provision of school supplies and furniture, and school rebuilding after occupation by military forces. ACDI/VOCA also supported educational projects for disabled youth, such as the establishment of a small school at a rehabilitation center that will ensure that youth using the rehabilitation center do not fall behind on their early education. Finally, CAP has assisted out-of-school youth by working with an NGO to provide educational courses that help the youth pass final school examinations.

To support information dissemination more broadly, CAP has also supported radio stations, including one in northern Iraq that targets youth and women. The station broadcasts up to eight hours per day, covering local, national and international news events and offering music, English-language lessons and poetry readings by local artists. It also provides air time for disseminating public health information in cooperation with local health authorities. The station was created to give women and young people a powerful new voice in the region. It empowers women's groups about issues affecting their lives and encourages women and youth organizations to participate in on-air debates on issues about which they feel strongly.

Encouraging New Technologies. In addition to providing support to traditional educational institutions, ACDI/VOCA is providing computer equipment and training through youth institutions. Computers and training have been provided to NGOs working with youth, youth and community centers, orphanages and schools. In one governorate, ACDI/VOCA funded a voice laboratory at a youth center to help the young people learn English. Finally, to help youth access a wide variety of educational and extracurricular resources, CAP has supported the establishment of Internet centers and

provided equipment and training for Internet access in cafes, youth centers and schools throughout northern Iraq.

Perception of Iraq's Community Leaders: Youth as a Source of Positive, Constructive Energy and Leadership

As Iraq develops its democratic government, it will need to reach out to all sectors of society, but a special effort will need to be made to engage young people, who compose the majority of the Iraqi population. To help improve the perception of youth among community leaders, ACDI/VOCA is providing opportunities for them to participate in or lead productive community activities.

Community Leadership. One of ACDI/VOCA's key mechanisms for community engagement is the CAG, which helps the community identify and address their priority development needs. The groups receive training in participatory methods of surveying their needs and creating an achievable strategic plan for their development. They are also taught their democratic rights to advocate for their needs with the government and local organizations, which can help them meet their objectives. Engaging youth in CAGs has been a challenge because older community members are more likely to be elected into the group; however, approximately 45 percent of CAP I CAG members were under the age of 35. In addition to learning about community mobilization and advocacy, these young community leaders have also been trained in intercultural communication, facilitation, creative problem solving, and gender awareness, which will help them become more prominent and engaging leaders.

In CAP II, a more targeted effort will be made to engage youth in these CAGs by holding town hall meetings specifically for youth to explain the function of CAGs. In general, young people have been receptive to participation in community activities, and the experience has developed their confidence and leadership skills to continue work in productive development activities. For many, CAGs are one of the few opportunities for youth to participate in a forum where their opinions and input can have a visible and positive impact on their communities. These groups also provide alternatives to the numerous criminal and insurgent gangs that can become attractive to unoccupied youth.

Youth want to volunteer in the CAGs...it is the first time in Iraq for a person coming to them and listening to them and helping them to solve their problems. –ACDI/VOCA Community Development Staff Member

Conflict Resolution Training. Since inception, CAP has woven conflict mitigation and prevention throughout its activities. Since youth are vulnerable to becoming part of the violence in Iraq, ACDI/VOCA has targeted them in its educational campaigns on conflict resolution. Training in constructive and destructive conflict, conflict analysis and the relationship between community development and peace-building were key themes for training sessions provided to youth centers in 2006. CAP also supported the creation of

a network of Iraqi conflict resolution professionals who, in turn, trained youth in nonviolent communication techniques.

Such trainings have helped youth channel their energy into productive activities, such as advocacy. For example, ACDI/VOCA provided conflict resolution training to CAG board members in one city who were active in the local youth center. Not long after the destruction of a museum and monument in March 2006, the board members heard that the youth were planning another violent protest against the poor government services. Through a series of meetings, board members helped the youth discuss their issues and elect a delegation to work with the government to address their concerns. While this and other results of conflict resolution training are only anecdotal, they represent a step forward in a region that has experienced such violence.

Extracurricular Activities. CAP also provides youth the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities that provide them with a productive and constructive way to spend their time. The activities also allow them to take on leadership opportunities and to distinguish themselves with new skills. CAP has supported youth sports and art festivals, conducted art workshops, supplied sports equipment, provided musical instruments for an orchestra and constructed parks and sports fields (Figure 4). Sports activities have been particularly popular among youth, including the disabled youth population.

Figure 4: ACDI/VOCA-Supported Youth Soccer Team



Next Steps

Since June 2003, CAP has been successfully helping communities democratically identify their priorities and implement projects to address them. This process has created a grassroots constituency for a democratic Iraq while also rebuilding infrastructure, creating jobs and providing training in both democratic and economic concepts. ACDI/VOCA has worked in more than 150 communities, completing over 1,330 projects throughout northern Iraq. As youth under the age of 25 compose the majority of the Iraqi population, this vulnerable generation has been an important area of focus for the program.

Lessons Learned

After more than three years of working with communities in northern Iraq, ACDI/VOCA has learned several key lessons in its community development and youth program planning. First, while the creation of short-term jobs for youth provides immediate financial relief and some social stability, more emphasis must be put on long-term job generation. This can be difficult due to the uncertainty that comes with operating in Iraq, including security concerns, erratic and limited funding from both domestic and international sources, internal migration and an unclear economic growth strategy. However, this is a key element for long-term stability and must be a priority.

Second, youth need additional skills training and are eager to take part in it. Programs such as the Apprenticeship Program and vocational training workshops are popular, giving youth the skills to add value to the Iraqi economy and hope for change. ACDI/VOCA supports this principle even among its staff, providing continuous training to help them be effective.

Third, linking community groups with the local government is critical to help create accountability with the government and to support the long-term sustainability of the CAG in working with established Iraqi institutions to meet their needs. Including one or two government officials on community boards can ease the process of gaining government approvals (and ease suspicion and mistrust by government officials; although the officials often tend to dominate board meetings). For youth, linkages with local government also provide a window into the workings of government, a critical understanding for Iraq's future leaders.

According to a 2007 survey conducted for the CAP II Baseline Assessment, a large proportion of youth currently do not participate in any aspect of local governance (CHF International 2007). Of those surveyed, 86 percent had not participated in any local government or civic activity during the past year. However, all youth surveyed who served as CAG members reported that they participate in their CAG's decision making. Further, all reported that they perceive CAG decisions as "good" or "excellent," and two-thirds of those surveyed believe that the CAGs' engagement with local government is "very important" for their communities. The survey results further suggest that youth may, in fact, be more interested in investing in a civil-society organization than local governments.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The future of Iraq, and of the region, depends to a large degree on the opportunities that young men and women will have to help shape their country's development. It is clear that the educational, employment and social opportunities available to young people are inadequate. This will require a major expansion of efforts by both international organizations and the Iraqi government to engage youth in community-based development programs. These may include the following:

Links to Long-term Jobs. As Iraq's development continues, projects linking short-term job holders with newly created, longer term and more stable employment will be critical. These projects could include, for example, a database of names and skills held by Apprenticeship Program Certificate holders for future reference to possible employers. In addition, a follow-on program to the Apprenticeship Program will provide training on starting an income generation project, developing proposals, and applying for funding, such as through ACDI/VOCA's microfinance programs.

Expand Educational Opportunities. Despite the economic difficulties in Iraq, education about professional and economic opportunities continues to be a critical topic for youth who will be Iraq's next leaders. To support this, programs such as INJAZ should be expanded, with additional youth participating and expansion of program modules. INJAZ also helps link youth across borders, as there are many participants in Jordan with whom Iraqi youth can collaborate.

Support Vocational and Social Programs. Youth centers as well as vocational and technical schools provide youth with a safe place to engage in constructive activities. These institutions need more support with funding and technical assistance to reach a greater number of youth. Youth leadership programs, such as a youth network, are also important ways to engage youth.

Raise Public Awareness About Youth Participation. Youth interaction with local government and public youth activities helps raise public awareness of the intelligence and skills that Iraqi youth possess. Encouraging these activities through CAGs or other mechanisms will improve the perception of youth as leaders in the society.

Conclusion

Iraq may be where the youth bulge and U.S. interests collide most seriously. Iraq's burgeoning fertility is so great that its "bulge" does not yet show serious signs of relief in its growing population—even by 2025. Given the prospects of U.S.-imposed regime change and the massive political and social changes in the country that will emerge therefrom, the large Iraqi youth cohort can only complicate the problems of transition for a U.S.-run governance structure. This may include the release of intense pent-up pressures and heightened expectations. Only if the consequences of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein leads to dramatic improvement in

Iraqi life will there be a chance for marked change in attitudes toward America. The inauguration of serious long-term reform and liberalization will therefore have to be a key component for nation building in the aftermath of the war. (Fuller, 2003, page 34)

It is clear that Iraqi youth have been increasingly alienated and disenfranchised as violence engulfs their daily lives and there are few outlets for their vaulting energy and pent-up frustrations. In this transitional period in Iraq, international and Iraqi institutions supporting the country's development must make the engagement of youth in Iraq's future a top priority. While the increasing violence in the country has made this a bigger challenge, opportunities to support youth development still exist. To this end, ACDI/VOCA has successfully channeled youth in ways that maximize youth empowerment and reinforce positive self-development through programs that expand economic and social opportunities.

Given the complexity of today's Iraq and the fluid security environment, it is likely that we will have to continue to live with the fundamental questions for the near term: Will Iraqi youth have opportunities to contribute in economic sectors? Will Iraqi youth possess the skills and decision making capabilities for meaningful contribution? And will Iraq's leaders fully capitalize on young people as a source of positive, constructive energy and leadership?

As borrowers of communities from the next generation, Iraqi leaders, the private sector, and the donor community should be considering what more can be done to create conditions that enable youth to achieve their full potential for becoming positive agents of change. The urgency for reclaiming Iraq's most neglected resource—their youth—could not be greater. Continuation of community benefits from CAP and other major donor assistance programs into the indefinite future after project completions depend upon it.

ⁱ 16–25 years of age

ⁱⁱ A “community” can be defined in many different ways, but all definitions contain some reference to shared interests and location. In CAP, most communities are village groups or neighborhoods/districts within a larger town.

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