

Despite Disparities, Recovery Programs in Iraq and Serbia Share Community-Centered Approaches

By Anne Johnson

ACDI/VOCA is refining its expertise in a special type of program: community-driven reconstruction and revitalization. ACDI/VOCA draws upon general community development practices and adapts them to countries recovering from crises. Devolving responsibility and authority to community members most affected is central to this approach.

Despite very different regions and political situations, the USAID-funded Community Revitalization through Democratic Action (CRDA) program in Serbia and the Community Action Project (CAP) in Iraq are two examples of community-driven responses in countries undergoing difficult transitions.

Since September 2001, ACDI/VOCA has implemented the CRDA program in 21 central Serbian municipalities (see “A Road can Mean Life’ – Fueling Economic Recovery under Community Development,” page 13). CRDA provides a framework for transparent, community-level decision making leading to concrete successes in a short time period. This approach has helped community members play a part in recovering from many years of international sanctions, economic stagnation and political debasement under the Milosevic regime.

ACDI/VOCA began implementing CAP in northern Iraq in June 2003. Through the project, ACDI/VOCA now supports efforts of 74 Iraqi communities in eight governorates north of Baghdad to rebuild their economic and social infrastructure after decades of wars, sanctions and repression.

As community development director for CRDA from 2001-03 and likewise during the start-up phase of CAP, I noted that despite the dissimilarities of the cultures and circumstances, community-driven approaches worked well in both environments. Both are successful in raising interest amongst large numbers of citizens to participate in

development planning. And in both cases planning processes stimulate dialogue across ethnic, age, gender, political and sectarian lines and help people articulate what they think would be best for the whole community. I think facilitating an inclusive process for community groups to plan together for a better future distinguishes these programs.

Mobilization starts with organizing public town hall-style meetings where priorities are discussed, working groups formed and community board representatives chosen by their peers. Several thousand community members join CRDA and CAP community boards and working groups each year and volunteer their time to design, implement and monitor hundreds of projects. Over 400 have been completed to date in CRDA and over 250 will be completed in the first year of CAP implementation alone.

However, CRDA and CAP do have differences related to their time frames and circumstances in their host countries. While CRDA is a five-year program in a peaceful country with functional municipal governments and infrastructure, CAP is currently a one-year program in a country daily struggling with ongoing conflict and an absence of much basic infrastructure. Because of the longer time frame, project staff and local partner organizations in Serbia can offer training to community groups in increments, building skill levels year by year. Networks of relationships between community boards, local NGOs and advocacy groups are given time to grow naturally. Excellent cooperation with municipal level governments has meant leveraging 68 percent of project investment in community projects. In Iraq, banking systems remain in disarray and the general security situation prevents many citizens from fully participating in project activities. In spite of the very considerable security risks of working in the Sunni Triangle of Iraq, ACDI/VOCA CAP staff and partners have achieved remarkable accomplishments to date, even exceeding the ambitious first-90-day targets by completing 72 small-scale projects.

One notable similarity between CRDA in Serbia and CAP in Iraq is the well-earned pride in accomplishments by project staff and community partners that is clearly evident and shared in both programs.

Anne Johnson served as community development director in both Serbia and Iraq.



The ACDI/VOCA-assisted orphan center in downtown Chamchamal, Iraq, welcomes orphaned children after school or on holidays and allows them to play games, watch TV and videos and learn computer skills. Aram Borham (shown at left) has been coming to the orphan center for the last three years. A baby when the Iraqi army took away his mother and father, he was raised by his father's parents. His grandfather is too old to work in the fields anymore, so Aram brings in a little

money by carrying loads for neighbors. “I want to be a doctor,” he says. “I want to help people and improve the community. Computers will teach me the sciences.”

Community Development approaches common to CRDA and CAP:

- Mobilizing citizens to play a central role in planning projects that are priorities in their communities. Mobilization includes traditionally underrepresented stakeholder groups such as youth, women and minorities.
- Facilitating partnerships between community groups and local government to jointly address needs.
- Increasing community groups' skills to manage development projects

Community Priorities Drive the Process in Both Serbia and Iraq:

Women Take the Lead in Kirkuk, Iraq

Early ACDI/VOCA activities in northern Iraq began in Tamim governorate, including the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, which is ethnically mixed, with large numbers of Kurds, Turkmen and Sunni Arabs as well as Chaldean and Assyrian Christians. It also includes many conservative regions where women and young people play a limited role in public decision making. CAP



staff looked for informal associations that could help organize participation from these underrepresented groups, especially women, youth and minorities. Organizing equitable participation from these associations in the planning sessions translated into broader participation from diverse groups in the public meetings. As a result of this approach, many town hall meetings in Kirkuk were attended by a high percentage of women. Several women were elected to community boards, giving them a greater say in project design and approval. As a result, the community board has approved a large income-generating sewing project for women.



Enabling Citizens Collaboration—the Open Door Club in Arandjelovac, Serbia

Two residents of Arandjelovac in central Serbia recognized a need for a facility for social interaction for the nearly 200 developmentally challenged children residing in the area. They contacted an ACDI/VOCA-trained community board representative, who encouraged them to present the problem during a town hall meeting. Other meeting participants endorsed the idea and formed a working group that approached both the municipal government and the state-run Center for Social Welfare for support. They succeeded in obtaining a donation of 90 square meters of space and financial support to offset costs related to opening the new Open Door Club, the first of its kind in Arandjelovac.



Increasing Skills in Home-care Services for the Elderly in Vrnjacka Banja, Serbia

Vrnjacka Banja is a central Serbian municipality with a high percentage of elderly and chronically ill people with no family members living near enough to care for them. Concerned neighbors were well aware of the problem, and during a town hall meeting, a working group was formed to improve the situation. Working in partnership with the local municipality and a nongovernmental organization with experience delivering home-care services, they learned how to design a program to assist solitary house-bound residents. Vrnjacka Banja now has a program that organizes help from volunteers and also employs trained nurses who visit the elderly in their homes to provide medical care, physical therapy and help with household tasks.

