

Participation Builds Trust In Conflict-Affected Environments

By Jennifer Norfolk

Giving marginalized people a voice in their communities is key to establishing social and economic stability in post-conflict or conflict-affected environments. In the post-conflict societies in which ACDI/VOCA works, women, ex-combatants, minorities, refugees and others play a role in our community stabilization and development projects, from restoring public services to creating effective systems of citizen-government interaction.

We place a particular emphasis on gender roles in our program design. During conflicts, women are often left alone to care for their households and are thus made more vulnerable to violence and social, economic and natural threats. Men frequently serve as combatants but are often left without resources to deal with their trauma afterwards and need to learn new skills and coping mechanisms to survive in a post-conflict society. In the process of political and structural rebuilding that follows a conflict, both must have a chance to represent their interests.

To respond to the challenges of conflict-affected environments, ACDI/VOCA's community stabilization and development portfolio uses a methodology that accommodates at each step the needs of marginalized people, including those who face discrimination based on gender.

» Social Marketing Before Project Activities

During our initial community selection phase, we conduct rapid assessments to determine where we can best achieve our objectives. Depending on the location and situation, important selection criteria can include the number of women-headed households and the percentage of the population made up of ex-combatants, refugees and internally displaced people. This information helps us ensure that marginalized groups are included as we launch our outreach activities. As we have seen in our projects in Timor-Leste, Bolivia and elsewhere, these directed social marketing campaigns have made a significant impact: They make marginalized groups aware of project activities that might affect them; and they show those groups that the project is committed to addressing their needs and will not

overlook them, which encourages their participation and buy-in.

» Initial Community Mobilization

Once we have selected our target communities, we begin a process of mobilization that draws people out of their homes and into the broader community to talk about issues that affect their daily lives, such as inadequate schools or health clinics. ACDI/VOCA works with community leaders and media that cater to a wide variety of groups to bring citizens together in community meetings. This process ensures that individuals from minority groups, women, the disabled, pensioners, etc., are included so that the resulting activities reflect the makeup of the community. In these initial meetings, individuals share what they consider to be the biggest issues—for example, health clinics, schools, paved roads—that need to be addressed. Our facilitation of this process varies by country and culture, but in each case we seek out the opinions of various members of the community to ensure that all voices are heard. After initial meetings, the community elects a small group, often called a community board or community action group, to lead the process forward.

» Community Board Selection

The composition of community boards differs from project to project, but most boards have a leader, a treasurer and other officers. Depending on the location, ACDI/VOCA requires that a certain percentage of community board members be women to ensure their often-marginalized needs are represented. In more conservative cultures, such as Iraq, the boards often designate a woman board member to be the “women’s representative.” She

is responsible for soliciting the views of women in the community, particularly those who are not able to leave their homes for family or cultural reasons, and communicating them to the board.

» Project Selection

Through the community meetings, citizens voice their interests and prioritize the projects that they want to undertake. The board then makes general outlines of a few project proposals from which the broader community can select. Once the field of projects has been narrowed down, the larger community group will vote on which project to implement first. We ensure that the voting group represents the whole community, including women and other marginalized groups. ACDI/VOCA observes a “one person-one vote” method of voting, which allows husbands and wives to vote individually.

» Project Design and Implementation

Once the community has selected a project, the engineers and designers draw up the specifications. ACDI/VOCA and the community board then give the specifications to various groups in the communities to review. As we have learned in a number of cases, particularly Bolivia, men and women use public resources differently, and the project must accommodate those different needs. For example, in one project, design adjustments were made to a public potable water station to install larger sinks to accommodate the large pots that women would need to wash there; in another, sidewalks were included on road-paving projects to ensure the safety of women walking to market. In yet another, we have been careful to design economic activities in a way that would appeal to male ex-combatants and give them a stake in the peace.

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During infrastructure construction projects, ACDI/VOCA works to ensure opportunities for both men and women in the short-term jobs being created. While heavy construction is still male-dominated, ACDI/VOCA seeks to maximize female employment in lighter construction activities, such as painting, construction site services and maintenance. Where possible, we include on-site child care for workers so that women can participate more easily.

» Training

Often, our projects include community training. ACDI/VOCA is careful to design trainings to be accessible to men and women alike, taking into consideration the time of the training, the venue, trainers, etc. Sometimes this means separate trainings for different audiences to ensure that all groups are accommodated. Wherever possible, we use qualified female trainers to help both women and men see that women can be capable partners in their endeavors.

» Project Monitoring

The community boards and project staff visit the construction sites periodically to review progress and identify problems. ACDI/VOCA encourages men and women from the community to participate in this continual monitoring. As much as possible, we disaggregate our project data by sex so we can monitor whether there is equitable participation.

» Project Completion and Maintenance

At the beginning of each community development project, during the project selection phase, the community thinks through how the infrastructure

will be maintained when ACDI/VOCA is no longer involved. Here too gender considerations are important. Usually, the community chooses a committee or a local government agency to maintain the infrastructure; we try to ensure that there is fair representation of women and marginalized groups on whatever body will be held responsible.

Better Communication Leads to Greater Stability

In many places where we work, our programs represent the first time anyone has asked women for their opinion on local issues. At each step, our community development process gives women—and other marginalized groups—a voice, helping them contribute as citizens and community members.

Further, we encourage women to take leadership roles, however appropriate. For example, in Iraq, we facilitate women's representation in decision making by actively promoting or requiring women's leadership on community groups and participation in leadership training. As a result, in our Community Action Program, women make up 20 to 50 percent of the board members on local community action groups, which are the central drivers of community initiatives under the program. As this process is replicated in other countries, we see new power dynamics and better communication between individuals in a community, leading to greater societal stability and cohesion.

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