

CASE STUDY



Promoting Transparent Development in Iraq: Unveiling Challenges and Cultivating Trust through Collaboration

THE IRAQ REGIONAL PROGRAM'S PATH TO SUCCESS IN IRAQ THROUGH COLLABORATING, LEARNING, AND ADAPTING (CLA)

October 2023 | Crispin Mbamba, Jennifer Simpson, Ammar Ahmed, and Bahar Aljammoor

About this Brief

This case study explores how the Iraq Regional Program II (IRP) is promoting partners' open reporting of challenges and failures by building trust, establishing collaborative learning platforms, and adopting techniques to be culturally appropriate. The study provides actionable recommendations on promoting transparent communication, relationship building, and contextualized programming to enhance stabilization outcomes.

Introduction

Several years after the end of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) control in Iraq, communities continue to grapple with scarce essential services and a deteriorating economic situation. The effects of ISIS include physical devastation and erosion of social cohesion among Iraq's diverse population. Rebuilding efforts have been particularly slow in marginalized regions, with restoration of infrastructure and basic services proving difficult.¹ The bleak economic landscape creates a discouraging environment for the approximately 1.4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return home.²

Returning IDPs face the burden of social stigma, making them susceptible to rejection by their own communities. This dire situation poses a significant threat to the stability of areas that were

“It is impossible to meet our goal if we are unable to work trustfully and respectfully with our partners and closely with the local communities that we seek to cohere.”

– IRP Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Manager

liberated from ISIS's grip. Reconstruction efforts are not enough to address the complex web of issues facing Iraq. IRP, funded by USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) and implemented by Chemonics, is working to enhance community resilience to facilitate community reconciliation, and tackle social stigma, and facilitate the voluntary return of displaced people, and strengthen social cohesion. Key focus areas for IRP activities include restoring municipal services, education, electricity, water, and inclusive public spaces with an emphasis on involving members of the community.

Drawing from key informant interviews, in this case study we describe how IRP collaborates to generate partner trust, increase engagement, and disclose existing challenges and failures.

A culture of silence impedes program outcomes

Without open communication among local partners, including government departments and civil society, stabilization programs cannot adapt optimally to complex and changing contexts, which hampers learning and accountability. When local partners do not feel comfortable reporting challenges, failures, and even successes, stabilization programs, such as IRP, lose access to critical on-the-ground insights. According to IRP's MEL officer, **“local partners' failure to**

¹ [Hard Lessons: The Iraq Reconstruction Experience \(nytimes.com\)](#)

² [Iraq Refugee Crisis Explained \(unrefugees.org\)](#)

report activities that have not worked is like operating in the dark because you do not know where to begin correcting something that didn't work."

According to IRP's program manager, several factors influence local partners inability or unwillingness to transparently report challenges and lessons learned:

- Fear of losing funding if they admit failures
- Local cultural norms that discourage open disclosure of problems, especially in communities with a strong ethos of "face-saving"
- Partners' lacking training and experience in MEL and transparent reporting
- Language barriers and inadequate communication channels

In such cases, stabilization programs must proactively address these root causes of silence through training, trust-building, improved funding policies, and better communication systems.

"Building trust between the team and the grantee is crucial. When they come to these MEL Hubs, we communicate clearly to them that we are with them on the same page, and whatever doesn't work doesn't mean it's a failed activity. Reporting challenges helps us redesign and make changes for activity success."

– IRP Program Manager

The MEL Hub: An essential platform for partner engagement

IRP's MEL team engaged with local program partners throughout Iraq to co-design a MEL Hub that brings partners together periodically to discuss program activities. So far, IRP has organized the MEL Hub on a quarterly basis, typically in-person with a few meetings held virtually. The number of attendees and type of partners attending each event depends on the partners' availability and IRP team needs. To communicate with partners about these meetings, the program team sends an invitation via an IRP-created WhatsApp group. Through this informal notice, which facilitates convenient and prompt responses, partners express interest in participating in the MEL Hub. The IRP team then makes logistical arrangements, including for transportation and per diem.

The MEL Hub is intentionally structured as distinct from regular after-action reviews, pause-and-reflect sessions, or funding and evaluation processes. The hub provides a platform for partners to share information freely without fear of repercussions such as reduced or terminated funding. The open sharing environment enables partners to discuss progress on activities and makes it

easier for IRP staff to collect data that has not been officially reported but would be beneficial in improving program activities, instead of calling partners separately to improve their services.

“Partners do not find it difficult to report challenges to the team because of the established trust and collaborative approach. The team communicates that challenges are normal and not indicative of failure. Instead, they use challenges as opportunities for improvement. By destigmatizing failure and framing challenges as opportunities for growth, the team encourages partners to be forthcoming about issues they encounter.”

– IRP Program Manager

“When we meet them [partners], we keep in contact with them, so they will be more attached to us. We initiate contact by calling them and asking if they want to volunteer on different things that we need help with, as opposed to things we want them to do for us, and they are usually happy to do so,” says IRP’s MEL officer.

Personal connections show partners they are valued and improve their investment in the process of reporting even the smallest activity, success, or failure. When partners feel heard and understood, they are more likely to disclose both challenges and successes, enabling the team to address issues promptly and capitalize on successful strategies.

“[Through the hub] I found out that partners feel more comfortable being frank with us. They were sharing some challenges they were facing with some of our activities,” notes IRP’s program manager.

An important function of the MEL Hub is its role in collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA). The MEL Hub directly contributes to building partner trust and breaking the culture of silence among local partners as well as increasing disclosure through improved reporting.

Building partner trust

Trust is the cornerstone of successful partnerships, and the MEL Hub plays a crucial role in nurturing that trust between implementing teams and grantees. To establish trust, it is essential to customize approaches that are comprehensible, familiar, and embraced within the specific implementation context. To IRP, adopting an open communication style — one “filled with frankness” and that expresses “a recognition of the professional worth” of partners — cultivates a strong relationship with partners and builds trust with the program team.

“When we meet them [partners], we keep in contact

Augmenting these arguments, the director of an Iraq women-led organization emphasized: “Based on our experience working with IRP, we found that the program is prepared to adapt to our feedback, suggestions, and needs. This is evident from their trust in the working teams, who have direct communication with citizens and the targeted groups.”

Improved partner reporting

According to IRP’s MEL team members, sometimes, partners may not report essential program activities, especially data on challenges in the implementation of program activities because they sometimes do not consider them important. Hence, the MEL Hub has become a space for in-depth discussions and a platform for several partners to freely discuss all the activities that were not included in the standard reporting formats. IRP’s team highlighted that these periodic gatherings allow participants to learn about the situation on the ground and adapt to support partners better. The team contended that because they are not always present in the field, several activities happen within the quarter (before a reporting period) that need rapid attention. Through the quarterly MEL Hub, the IRP team remains abreast with on-the-ground knowledge.

BUILDING TRUST WITH LOCAL PARTNERS

“There is an example where the Iraq Regional Program and locally known as ‘Ta’afi’ project adjusted its strategies or approach based on feedback from local partners. One of the suggestions received was that when providing support to government institutions, it would be beneficial to involve a local partner responsible for coordination, organization, and logistical arrangements. This local partner would also be responsible for raising awareness about the activities, leading to more significant facilitation of collaboration with international organizations and greater outreach to the community. Additionally, having a local partner involved would allow for daily access to the project site. Upon receiving this feedback, IRP recognized the value of this suggestion and incorporated a local partner into their approach. This adjustment resulted in smoother coordination with government institutions, improved community engagement, and enhanced implementation of the project’s activities.”

– Representative of a volunteer/youth civil society organization

The final report should be conducted face-to-face with IRP, rather than relying solely on the provided form, says the chair of the board of directors of the volunteer/youth partner organization interviewed. There is a wealth of information that may be forgotten or left undocumented. IRP has already implemented this approach, and the final report has become a face-to-face meeting.

“We propose that the MEL Hub involve a wider circle of local organizations and be held regularly, with rotating meeting locations. For instance, each meeting could take place in a different province, which could enhance the knowledge of local organizations about broader issues faced by Iraqi society rather than being limited to the scope of the local organization's presence.”

– **Chairman of the Board of Directors of a volunteer/youth partner organization**

Thus, the after-action review and MEL Hub helps fine-tune the reporting knowledge of new and old partners who can learn what information is most helpful to include in reports. Partners' capacity in reporting improves beyond what kick-off training could provide.

Additionally, because the MEL Hub convenes a diversity of partners and stimulates productive debates, partners encounter broad perspectives and learn about various activities from other partners. Such activities encourage partners in their own work. Bringing together partners with different backgrounds and views creates an environment where disagreements and alternative ideas can be voiced constructively. This diversity prompts greater information sharing as partners explain their reasoning and perspectives.

Due to how essential the MEL Hub has been, partners expressed desire for the activity to occur more frequently and in different provinces.

Lessons on planning culturally inclusive activities

Development practitioners must understand the cultural context, an essential learning component of the CLA framework, when designing programs to engage local populations.³ Well-intentioned designs from an outside perspective can overlook critical barriers to participation rooted in social norms, gender dynamics, daily routines, and privacy concerns. By taking the time to consult community members and understand cultural nuances upfront, programs can be designed to accommodate and work within the local context rather than against it.

³ [The Collaborating, Learning and Adapting \(CLA\) Framework | USAID | Basic Page | U.S. Agency for International Development](#)

Action-oriented recommendations

- **Promote open communication and disclosure.** Encourage local partners to openly report challenges, failures, and successes related to program activities. Overcoming the culture of silence is essential for effective development and stabilization. Emphasize the importance of sharing failures as a learning opportunity.
- **Establish collaborative learning platforms.** Create structured forums like the MEL Hub to bring program partners together periodically for discussions. These platforms should allow partners to share experiences, challenges, and successes openly. Such

“When conducting development work, it’s so important to take the time to understand the cultural context. I learned this firsthand during our consultation sessions in Mosul. Our team had designed mixed-gender sessions, but when we arrived, we found zero women in attendance. After investigating further, we realized several cultural factors prevented the women from participating — conservative norms, responsibilities like morning chores, discomfort with male facilitators, and concerns over photography during the sessions. This experience showed me how critical it is to consult the local community and learn about cultural nuances before designing programs meant to engage them. Based on what we learnt, during implementation, we usually design two-to-three sessions at different times to enable more people to attend. For the next session after the one with zero women, we immediately made it a women-only session, had a female MEL coordinator facilitate, and asked the grantee to prevent any photography or videography that might make attendees uncomfortable.”

– IRP Program Manager

interactions help build trust among partners and allow them to learn from each other's experiences. The hub should be separate from regular reporting and evaluation processes to ensure partners feel comfortable sharing without fear of consequences.

- **Cultivate trust and build relationships.** Build trust by establishing open and frank communication channels with partners. Initiate personal contact, acknowledge partners' professional worth, and involve them in decision-making processes. Personal connections make partners feel valued and invested, leading to increased transparency.
- **Tailor approaches to cultural context.** Recognize and adapt to the cultural context of the community and partners with which the program operates. Cultural norms, gender dynamics, and daily routines can significantly impact participation. Consult with local communities to understand their preferences and barriers before designing and

implementing programs. Design sessions that accommodate local realities, such as women-only sessions and female facilitators, to ensure higher community participation and engagement.

- **Broaden reporting options and learning.** Expand reporting beyond formal reporting styles. Using platforms like the MEL Hub to encourage partners to discuss activities not included in regular reports.

Conclusion

By engaging in effective CLA with partners and communities, development and stabilization programs can gain trust and overcome concerns or fears about disclosing challenges, which in turn helps programs be more responsive and effective. Lessons from IRP demonstrate that international development organizations should view challenges and failures as learning opportunities and not reasons for punishment.

Notes on data collection

The authors of this case study interviewed four program staff on the USAID/OTI Iraq Regional Program and two local IRP partners to understand their CLA approach to building trust and encouraging partners to report not only project successes, but also challenges and failures. The four IRP staff included two project managers, a MEL manager, and a senior MEL officer. The two partners were a volunteer-led youth organization and a women-led organization, and we are grateful for their candid and valuable feedback.

Prior to commencing interviews, the authors held a meeting with IRP's senior MEL officer to introduce the program team to the intended study to explore their interest and identify participants. After contacting them, only those who agreed to participate in the study were included as key informants.

The authors conducted virtual interviews via Microsoft Teams to gather data using a semi-structured interview guide. Interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes. All interviews with IRP's program team members were conducted in English while IRP's senior MEL officer facilitated the local partner interviews in Arabic and then translated them into English. The authors manually analyzed transcript notes from all six interviews to look for patterns in practices and identify emerging themes. The authors focused on identifying responses that highlighted the team's efforts in collaboration to build trusting relationships with local partners and communities, and how these contribute to promoting open disclosure of program successes, challenges, and failures. After carefully analyzing interview transcripts, the authors grouped emerging patterns

into two themes. The authors used verbatim quotes from key informants to support their arguments.

CONTACT

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For questions about this case study please contact EvidenceandLearning@chemonics.com.

Cover image caption: *A volunteer working with a local civil society organization painting murals on one of the schools in Baghdad to raise awareness around climate change. This photo was taken by the Iraq Regional Program II.*