

# PATHWAY TO POSSIBILITY: PEACE AND GOOD GOVERNANCE



## Evidence and Learning Agenda

JANUARY 2024

### Overview

#### Background and Purpose

Mercy Corps' 10-year strategy—[Pathway to Possibility \(P2P\)](#)—commits us to being an evidence-driven organization. As part of this commitment, we are developing Evidence and Learning Agendas (ELAs) to identify key knowledge gaps within each of the four P2P outcomes (Economic Opportunities, Peace and Good Governance, Water Security, and Food Security).

As such, P2P ELAs are intended to:

- Improve our responsiveness to the priority questions of diverse **evidence users** in Mercy Corps and among our major external stakeholders.
- Better align the full breadth of evidence coming from diverse **evidence producers** across Mercy Corps, including (but not limited to) research studies, literature/evidence reviews, technical assessments, crisis analysis, program performance evaluations, organizational outcome measurement, and ongoing program learning and adaptive management.
- Allow for better **knowledge translation and accumulation of learning** by enhancing coherence between evidence and learning priorities and activities at various levels of the organization.

This global ELA outlines the key questions we need to answer to further our impact, scaling, and influence related to the **Peace and Good Governance (P&GG) outcome**. The themes and questions articulated here were developed from July through December 2023 through a process of consultations with 46 team members from a diversity of global teams and a broad sample of regions, countries, and programs.

#### Peace and Good Governance ELA Priorities

Our priority learning themes and questions on Peace and Good Governance for the coming three years are:

1. **Effective and Empowered Local Governance:** How can good governance programming help to shift power and decision-making within and to communities?
2. **Inclusive Peace and Governance Processes:** How can peace and governance programming increase and center the voice, agency, and resilience of the most marginalized populations within communities?
3. **Peace and Resilience in Response to Shocks and Stresses:** How can peace and governance programming support local communities and institutions to cope, adapt, and thrive in response to shocks and stresses – especially from climate change and conflict?

As we accumulate evidence and facilitate learning across all of these themes, we will probe and draw focus to a number of cross-cutting concerns:

- **Under what conditions:** Examining how contextual factors shape the root causes and proximate drivers of problems and the effectiveness of peace and governance interventions.

- **For whom:** Assessing impacts on the resilience capabilities of different segments of populations such as women, youth, people living with disabilities, displaced persons, and other marginalized groups.
- **By who:** Understanding how locally-led approaches and partnerships shape the timeliness, scale, cost-effectiveness, and durability of peace and governance interventions.

## Priority Themes and Questions

### Theme 1: Effective and Empowered Local Governance Systems

**Key Question: How can good governance programming help to shift power and decision-making within and to local communities?**

#### Rationale

One of the objectives within the P2P Peace and Good Governance outcome is to support local governance processes that enable inclusive civic engagement and collective decision-making. Achieving this objective requires facilitating changes in norms and behaviors that enable shifts in local power structures, from governing elites to communities, and towards marginalized localities or population segments. Mercy Corps' governance approaches seek to support these kinds of behavior changes by facilitating inclusive participatory planning processes and by supporting the capacities of local decision-makers and civil society actors to support civic engagement, representation, and advocacy. These governance approaches drive outcomes across peace and governance programs as well as the other P2P outcomes.

Shifts in power, norms, and behavior are also at the heart of realizing Mercy Corps' organization-wide commitment to be locally-led. Within the workstreams that are advancing this commitment, Mercy Corps defines localization as the shift of power and decision-making to the communities where we operate. Our evidence and learning to date indicate that Mercy Corps' participatory planning and civil society strengthening approaches have an important role to play in efforts to decenter the perspectives and priorities of donors and INGOs—including our own.

Our learning priorities within this theme focus on building on our existing knowledge base on good governance and filling key remaining evidence gaps. The focus here will be on building further evidence about the mechanisms through which participatory planning and civil society strengthening shape norms, behaviors, and power dynamics, both within communities as well as between communities and international actors (sometimes at the same time). In addition, our evidence gathering and learning activities on these themes will also focus on identifying how contextual factors across a variety of country contexts inform local power dynamics and shape the effectiveness of governance interventions.

#### Participation and Community Mobilization

*The foundational components of Mercy Corps' governance approach include participatory planning and community mobilization, which prioritize the inclusion of all community members and the representation of diverse and marginalized groups in advancing development outcomes. Understanding the effectiveness of this participatory approach as well as its impact on enhancing community voice and decision-making vis-a-vis local authorities and international donors/INGOs will further strengthen Mercy Corps' governance and localization efforts.*

## Prioritized Learning Questions

- Are community mobilization and participatory planning (including Mercy Corps' [CATALYSE](#) approach) effective at making formal and informal governance actors more responsive, accountable, and equitable? How do contextual factors influence the mechanisms through which participatory approaches work (or don't) in practice?
- To what extent and under what circumstances can participatory planning, assessments, research, monitoring, and evaluation help center and elevate diverse local community voices and institutions vis-a-vis local elites, governments, INGOs, and donors?

## Partnerships and Civil Society

*Mercy Corps' governance efforts highlight the importance of local partnerships and engaging civil society, particularly through context-specific capacity strengthening efforts. In order to enhance this component of our governance approach, we need a better understanding of how these efforts affect the work of local organizations and movements, including how they reach their goals and promote equitable partnerships, and how efforts to support local civil society influence the overall relationship between communities and decision-makers.*

## Prioritized Learning Questions

- How does Mercy Corps' approach to civil society strengthening (including the [ASPIRE](#) approach) shape the effectiveness and agency of local organizations and movements with respect to achieving their goals and priorities?
- To what extent can locally-led capacity strengthening, such as supporting the operational, technical, and networking processes and skills of local organizations, help to promote more equitable and mutually-beneficial partnerships between local civil society organizations and movements with governments, INGOs, and donors?

## Theme 2: Inclusive Peace and Governance Processes

### Key Question: How can peace and governance programming support and center the voice, agency, and resilience of the most marginalized populations?

#### Rationale

P2P identifies Peace and Good Governance as a means towards supporting inclusive and resilient communities that improve and protect wellbeing across all of their members. A key path toward this vision is through supporting **inclusive peace and governance processes and systems**. Three of the key objectives of the P&GG outcome within P2P focus on supporting inclusive peace and governance systems and processes: "People live free from threats of violence and physical and psychosocial insecurity", "Youth have increased opportunities and viable alternatives to violence", and "Women and young people meaningfully contribute to formal and informal governance and peace processes" (p. 21).

Therefore, our learning priorities within this theme build and expand on our knowledge regarding best approaches for supporting cohesive, inclusive, and resilient communities. This cannot be achieved without meaningful involvement from a community's most marginalized populations. The learning priorities in this theme center around learning more about how to build the resilience, agency, and voice of communities' most marginalized populations: youth, women, individuals affected by trauma, persons living with disabilities (PLWD), and other relevant groups.

## Meaningful Youth Engagement and Violence Prevention

Central to youth participation in violence are governance grievances and deep feelings of exclusion and marginalization from decision-making processes. Furthermore, lack of educational and employment opportunities can lead to a sense of inequality and inequitable opportunity, increasing frustration with power holders and increasing the risk of participating in violence. Drawing on the resilience approach at the heart of P2P, meaningful youth engagement can help them [improve and/or develop the resilience capacities](#) that allow them to cope, adapt, thrive, and ultimately break free from cycles of violence in their own lives and communities while building up the [supportive systems and an enabling environment](#) that can integrate them meaningfully into their communities. In order to help youth break the cycles of violence in their communities, it is essential to implement research – including youth-led research—that builds the evidence base about effectively promoting meaningful youth engagement.

### Prioritized Learning Questions

- What combinations of interventions (e.g., economic, civic engagement, advocacy, nonviolent communication, interest-based mediation and negotiation, psychosocial support, mentoring) are most effective – and under what conditions – in promoting youth economic opportunities and agency as well as preventing youth participation in violence?
- How can social media and technology be leveraged for youth civic engagement and to counter hate speech, mis/disinformation and other online and offline harms?

## Women’s Meaningful Participation and Gender Norms

Many of the communities within which Mercy Corps works are located within areas of protracted conflict. In such areas, women and girls often face myriad barriers to meaningful participation in peace and governance processes, including, but not limited to, restricted movement and activities as well as increased risk of experiencing gender-based violence. These gender-based challenges and risks undermine the creation of inclusive peace and governance systems. Understanding the dynamics of gender norms in these contexts will be critical in achieving inclusive processes and will require a holistic gender and intersectionality lens implemented through a feminist approach to research and evidence use.

### Prioritized Learning Questions

- What approaches most effectively empower the participation of women in peace and good governance processes at the community level and in local governments?
- How do communities (and men and women specifically) experience and understand the intersections of GBV and inter-group conflict? How can our programming better address their linked concerns? What is the role of the digital space in exacerbating or mitigating gender inequalities and GBV in conflict contexts?

## Psychosocial Dimensions of Conflict

P2P acknowledges that cycles of violence and unaddressed drivers of conflict undermine the sustainability and longevity of developmental outcomes. Experiencing chronic violence results in collective trauma that deeply impacts individuals’ mental health as well as the general psychosocial wellbeing of individuals, community, and society. Unresolved trauma is a key driver of conflict that can lead to resurgence of violence as well as increased risk of becoming a victim of violence, thus furthering cycles of violence, including gender-based violence. Failing to address the psychosocial dimensions of conflict risks undermining the sustainability of other developmental outcomes. Therefore, building our knowledge around the effects of

*psychosocial dimensions of conflict as well as learning how to integrate mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) activities and trauma-sensitive approaches in Mercy Corps' programming, research, and MEL is essential for ensuring lasting impacts in our peace and good governance work.*

### **Prioritized Learning Questions**

- How can peace and governance programs work to better integrate trauma-sensitive MHPSS activities and approaches into their programming?
- How do trauma-sensitive approaches shape norms and behaviors related to Mercy Corps' governance and peacebuilding outcomes?
- How do psychosocial support approaches and activities affect peace and governance outcomes, as well as other outcomes and resilience capacities related to economic opportunities, food security, and water security?

## **Theme 3: Peace and Resilience in Response to Shocks and Stresses**

**Key Question: How can peace and governance programming support local communities and institutions to cope, adapt, and thrive in response to shocks and stresses—especially from climate change and conflict?**

### **Rationale**

P2P identifies conflict and climate change as the central challenges that will motivate our programming, partnerships, and influence over the next 10 years. [Addressing the intersections between conflict and climate change](#) has a distinctive focus area within our peace and governance programming. Through our programming and learning over the past several years, we have developed a tool for assessing climate and conflict risks as well as a flexible menu of interventions that can address the pathways linking climate change and conflict.

For the next three years, our learning priorities related to this theme will build the evidence base for how – and under what circumstances – our core programming approaches in peace and governance can help to reduce conflicts related to climate change while also strengthening communities' adaptation and resilience to the wide range of environmental, political, and economic shocks and stresses directly or indirectly related to climate change.

Additionally, achieving true long-term peace and governance outcomes in the face of climate change and conflict requires systematically working toward strengthening resilience capacities and supporting durable local institutions, practices, and norms. This requires understanding what it looks like for peace and governance structures and processes to be sustainable and durable as well as what programming activities are necessary for achieving that. Strengthening sources of resilience to shocks and stresses also entails fostering space for adaptation, both within our programs and local systems. While adaptive management is a central part of all of our peace and governance programming, we still have much to learn about how to facilitate adaptations that effectively respond to shocks and stresses related to climate change and conflict.

Finally, strengthening resilience to shocks and stresses also entails effectively layering and integrating peace and governance approaches into multi-sectoral programs that seek to strengthen other outcomes – economic opportunities, food security, and water security. In order to more effectively harness peace and governance approaches as part of our efforts to strengthen resilience, we need to start building the evidence

base about how and under what conditions these approaches contribute to all four of Mercy Corps' P2P outcomes over time.

## Addressing the Climate-Conflict Nexus

*An increasingly central part of Mercy Corps' foundation for peacebuilding and governance programs in contexts that are heavily affected by climate change is addressing the [climate-related drivers of conflict](#) and the [conflict-related barriers to climate adaptation](#). Learning about the effectiveness of specific programming entry points related to climate, governance, and peace will be essential to Mercy Corps' and the broader sector's success in tackling the greatest challenges facing the contexts where we work.*

### Prioritized Learning Questions

- To what extent are foundational peacebuilding approaches (in particular social cohesion strengthening, interest-based mediation and negotiation, and early warning/early response) effective at simultaneously reducing climate-related conflicts and strengthening communities' resilience to shocks and stresses?
- What are the most effective ways to implement and support sustained climate governance and natural resource management mechanisms, including participatory planning for climate adaptation, water governance, and advocacy for improved and more equitable access to resources?

## Durable and Resilient Peace and Governance Systems and Interventions

*Ensuring the sustainability and longevity of Mercy Corps' governance and peacebuilding work is essential for supporting communities to build toward a more inclusive, resilient future, but little is known about the specific elements of success. Similarly, Mercy Corps practitioners recognize a need to create a common understanding of what a durable and resilient peace and governance system or mechanism looks like, how we will know when we are supporting it, and what the necessary interventions are to ensure that peace and governance outcomes sustain in the face of future shocks and stresses.*

### Prioritized Learning Questions

- What makes peacebuilding structures and governance institutions and processes resilient to conflict and climate shocks and stresses? What are the most effective practices for program implementation in order to make peace and governance structures resilient and adaptive?
- To what extent does Mercy Corps' [approach to behavior change](#) increase the likelihood of durable changes in norms, behavior, and power relations in our peace and governance programming?
- How can foundational peace and governance approaches be effectively layered into humanitarian response and development programming across Mercy Corps' other P2P outcomes – food security, water security, and economic opportunities? What is the added value of integrating and layering these approaches with respect to strengthening resilience capacities?

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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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