

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION IMPACT EXAMPLE SERIES

GEORGIA

CAN MOBILIZATION WORK IN AN EMERGENCY?

Imagine fleeing your home and having to leave all that you possess on a moment's notice. Imagine having small children, elderly relatives or disabled family members with you. This was the reality faced by tens of thousands of Georgians as they fled their homes in the midst of the August 2008 conflict. Is there a role for community mobilization in such a context? The Mercy Corps-Georgia team thought so.

Mobilizing Communities for Early Recovery

Following several weeks of initial food and non-food item distribution to meet the most urgent needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Gori City as well as those who remained in villages under Russian occupation, Mercy Corps recognized the need to help people prepare for the coming winter. Given that the IDPs fled during the height of summer, they were badly prepared for the oncoming cold Georgian winter. Mercy Corps began by forming 'initiative groups' of IDPs, who coordinated the process of identifying winter clothing and bedding needs and acted as liaisons between IDPs and Mercy Corps staff. An open and transparent tender process was carried out to ensure the procurement of optimal quality clothing and bedding at an acceptable price. Initiative group members were part of the tender committee and helped select vendors. Finally, with the procurement process completed, the initiative groups managed distribution of clothing and bed linens to over 3,000 IDP families.

MOBILIZATION TOOLS USED IN EARLY RECOVERY

- Rapid Assessment
- Action Planning meetings
- Community Initiative Group formation and division of responsibilities
- Transparency Boards posted in the community for information dissemination

Transition to Long-Term Recovery

The loss of harvests and destroyed livelihoods was the next major challenge faced by IDPs and other conflict-affected communities. Mercy Corps initiated a small grants process to facilitate village-level projects aimed largely at economic recovery. Community Initiative Groups (CIGs) were established, many involving IDPs from the original initiative groups, and chose projects addressing community-identified priorities such as rebuilding irrigation systems, a market renovation, the purchase of small agricultural equipment for residents, and provision of drinking water. All together these projects have positively impacted the lives of over 28,000 villagers.



In Action Planning workshops, CAG members, both IDPs and residents from host communities, map and prioritize issues of common concern.

Photo: Thatcher Cook/Mercy Corps, 2008

The theory underpinning the use of the mobilization approach in an emergency is that communities, even in emergency situations, are best able to lead their own development. What was unique about community mobilization in the Georgia context is that it was a core component of the emergency response. As Mercy Corps' Country Director in Georgia, Irakli Kasrashvili, said, "Using community mobilization approach, Mercy Corps was able to quickly bolster livelihoods and demonstrate tangible impact in areas of moderate to high vulnerability and need. Mercy Corps designed and facilitated the integration of its comprehensive community mobilization approach through the entire program, to ensure that

communities quickly and efficiently self-select(ed) inputs that met their most immediate needs as well as had a flexible response mechanism that could easily be expanded to meet the evolving situation in communities."

Hallmarks of the approach designed by the Georgia team include:

- A community project selection process that engaged older people and youth;

- A “starter toolkit” for quick impact projects that built trust between IDPs and host communities;
- Guidelines for participation, accountability, and transparency within the mobilization process;
- IDPs playing the role of liaisons between Mercy Corps staff and community members and posting updates on community transparency boards, including schedules and budget and tender documentation.

Lasting Economic Opportunity

Like most villages in the area, those of Shavshvebi suffered significantly during the conflict. Though damage to people’s homes was less than some other villages, virtually the entire population fled during the conflict, resulting in lost harvests and serious economic hardship in this agricultural region. As a result, during Mercy Corps’ community assessment in October of 2008, people cited the need to get their agricultural livelihoods back on track as a priority. Upon further consultations with the community, the high cost of processing wheat, the region’s dominant crop, emerged as a particular problem.

The region’s deputy governor supplied the building where the mill was built and reflected: “The flour mill project in Shavshvebi is one of the most significant community projects aimed at enhancing economic development in recent memory. Furthermore, this project was chosen by the people themselves, and represents a real community priority. This project is particularly important because with harvests lost during the August conflict, people are struggling to get by even more than usual.... With the thousands of IDPs we must now deal with in the aftermath of the August conflict, the government is struggling to assist families as they try and meet their basic needs.”

The mill is run by a non-profit users association made up of people from each of the area communities and includes both ethnic Georgians and ethnic Ossetians in an attempt to revitalize good inter-ethnic relations in multi-ethnic Shavshvebi. The association has undergone a training program in topics ranging from business development to conflict mitigation and developed a detailed business plan. The plan includes how the community will pay for periodic renovation of the mill’s machinery. Moreover, the mill has created jobs in a place where employment is scarce. The influx of IDPs increased competition for work, so jobs at the mill are helping avoid potential tensions.

While the difficulties that residents faced in the aftermath of the conflict were immense, the new flour mill is already having critical impact on local communities as they work together to regain their economic livelihoods.

Building on Years of Community Mobilization Experience

The fact that the Mercy Corps’ Georgia team knew the community mobilization approach very well was helpful in adapting it to the emergency situation in 2008. Years of experience finding strategies to overcome the challenge of participation in decision-making, versus the Soviet era culture of problem identification and resolution being the responsibility of the government or other specialists, helped the team encourage people to quickly get involved and help lead decision-making processes. Irakli Kasrashvili remembers that “Community mobilization was implemented in rapid way and (the) cycle was shorter and more intensive, requiring more active role of (the) project community mobilization team.”

Mercy Corps Georgia staff are also skilled in helping communities identify and leverage their own resources for development – a particularly challenging task in the middle of an emergency where communities can feel they have no resources at their disposal. As one program manager wrote, “Program staff should always remember that the community is full of possibilities and creative ideas. Many of the capacities in a community are not recognized. One of the main tasks of a community mobilizer is to help the community find these assets and ideas and build relationships within the community to enable the mobilization and utilization of assets.”

Not every Mercy Corps country has a legacy of community mobilization work to leverage when a crisis or emergency hits. Country teams in the same region that do have such experience make excellent advisors or can provide temporary in-country support for rapid program design and post-crisis transition planning. Regional colleagues can also help mobilize resources.

This Community Mobilization Impact Example is one of a series included in Mercy Corps Guide to Community Mobilization Programming (2009). It was written by Irakli Kasrashvili, Country Director for Mercy Corps-Georgia, with Ruth Allen, Global Advisor for Community Mobilization, Governance and Partnerships.

**You must be the change
you wish to see in the world.**

~ Gandhi



Be the change