



# ADVANCING LOCAL GOVERNANCE in Fragile Settings

## Evidence from Northeast Syria

MAY 2025

### Introduction

In fragile contexts affected by violence and conflict, effective local governance is critical for sustainable peace and building resilient communities. This is especially important since in settings where a central government authority is weak or absent, formal and informal local governance structures often fill the void. The absence of strong governance often exacerbates instability and conflict intensity. Yet, interventions to advance local governance come with significant challenges that affect the implementation and sustainability of such efforts. Every context has certain challenges and enablers that affect local governance efforts, including the existing formal and informal governance structures, the different social groups within communities, and the existing levels of trust, if any, between communities and government actors. Additionally, violence and the presence of armed groups can present further challenges to effective local governance.

Governance institutions that exclude or discriminate against some groups and favor others can exacerbate grievances and lead to more violence and instability.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, evidence suggests that more participatory and representative processes advance governance outcomes and improve legitimacy.<sup>2</sup> To achieve effective and sustainable local governance, all people must be prioritized, particularly groups like youth. Existing evidence suggests that more representative processes advance governance outcomes and improve legitimacy.<sup>3</sup> A number of obstacles can challenge youth participation in local governance, including social dynamics and mistrust in governance mechanisms. Moreover, there is limited evidence regarding the specific dynamics of youth participation and engagement in local governance in fragile and conflict-affected settings. More specifically, there is sparse research on the Syria context, and recent political shifts and emerging dynamics underscore the urgent need for new insights into how governance can be strengthened on the country's evolving path forward. By examining the role of youth in decision-making within the context of a governance and peacebuilding program in Northeast Syria (NES), this study offers valuable insights into the role of youth in advancing local governance.

Using the context of Mercy Corps' **Catalyzing Community Resilience in Northern Syria (CCRNS)** program, this research examines how the role of youth in governance programs can expand decision-making within at-risk communities. Additionally, the study examined how local partnerships and participatory approaches to governance programming shape community engagement and responsiveness to governance structures, particularly with fragile and evolving government structures as seen in Syria.

The CCRNS program embodied **CATALYSE**—A Mercy Corps' signature approach to community mobilization and participatory planning—which promotes inclusive civic engagement, decentralized decision-making, and supports at risk groups. This study examines the impact and efficacy of the CATALYSE approach on improving social cohesion norms and advancing participatory local governance efforts, even in extremely fragile contexts such as NES. Evidence from conflict-affected settings consistently shows that investments in strong local governance yield tangible returns for both stability and development. For instance, according to the UNDP, strengthening local governance can help reduce the risk of renewed conflict and safeguard donor investments.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, every dollar invested in effective local governance lays the groundwork for sustainable peace and long-term economic recovery.<sup>5</sup>

The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 marked a profound turning point for local governance in Syria. While the data and findings presented in this report were largely collected prior to December 2024, it is important to acknowledge this significant transformation underway in Syria's political landscape. The shift has created both opportunities and uncertainties for the community-level, inclusive governance structures that CCRNS sought to strengthen. In the immediate aftermath, local actors, including civil councils and participatory bodies, played a vital role in maintaining basic services as new national authorities focused on consolidating power and stabilizing institutions.<sup>6</sup> The evolving landscape emphasizes the importance of the governance structures CCRNS implemented. It remains important for the government to pursue

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<sup>1</sup> O'Neil and Sheely 2019; Olawole et al 2022

<sup>2</sup> O'Neil and Sheely 2019

<sup>3</sup> O'Neil and Sheely 2019

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Development Programme 2016

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Development Programme 2020

<sup>6</sup> Agha 2024

governance reforms even in the transition period, for durable reconstruction.<sup>7</sup> The findings below also present a pathway to improving governance, even as communities respond to new challenges brought by the political transition.

The rest of the report proceeds as follows. The first section provides an overview of the Northeast Syria context, where the study takes place, the CCRNS program that implemented CATALYSE, and background on Mercy Corps' CATALYSE approach. The next section is a discussion of the evidence and learning goals of this study and the gaps it aims to fill related to previous CATALYSE research conducted by Mercy Corps and to the broader literature on local governance in Syria. The following section presents the methodology for the study, followed by a summary of the demographics for the study participants. Then the report discusses the study's four main findings regarding the influence of the CATALYSE approach on youth's role in local governance efforts. The final section concludes with recommendations informed by the study's findings that target three main audiences – the CCRNS program participants, peer implementing organizations, and donors and policymakers supporting local governance initiatives.

## The Study Context: CATALYSE in Northeast Syria

The CCRNS program was a Mercy Corps implemented program funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) in Northeast Syria from 2022 to 2024 with four interconnected goals to foster cohesive and resilient communities that are better able to withstand conflict drivers and recover from crises. The program utilized Mercy Corps' community mobilization approach, CATALYSE, to empower communities to take charge of their development. Further information about the context of Northeast Syria, the CCRNS program, and Mercy Corps' CATALYSE approach will be discussed in this section.

### Northeast Syria

Raqqa Governorate in northern Syria—bordering Turkey—has experienced significant turmoil due to its strategic importance and history of conflict and has been a critical flashpoint throughout the Syrian civil war, which began in 2011 following the Arab Spring protests against the Assad regime.<sup>8</sup> As the conflict deepened, Northeast Syria (NES), including Raqqa, has been profoundly affected and has experienced protracted violence, shifting territorial control among various armed factions, massive destruction of public infrastructure, and ongoing humanitarian crises.

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<sup>7</sup> International Crisis Group 2025

<sup>8</sup> Kajjo, 2014; Reeves and Wittes 2017

In 2013, Raqqa City “became the first provincial capital to fall under rebel control” during the civil war.<sup>9</sup> Raqqa City eventually became a central hub for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) after the group captured the city and declared it the caliphate’s de facto capital in 2014.<sup>10</sup> After this takeover, communities in Raqqa were subjected to strict extremist rule and severe human rights abuses, severely eroding trust in any form of authority.<sup>11</sup> In 2017, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition primarily composed of Kurdish fighters and supported by the U.S.-led coalition, launched a major offensive to retake Raqqa.<sup>12</sup> The battle resulted in the liberation of Raqqa but it left extensive destruction in its wake, with much of the city in ruins and unexploded landmines posing risks to returning residents.<sup>13</sup>

In October 2019, Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring, a military offensive targeting areas in NES controlled by the SDF, with the aim of establishing a 30-kilometer-deep “safe zone” along its border. Turkish President Erdoğan proposed this zone to facilitate the resettlement of up to two million Syrian refugees from Turkey. However, territorial capture was limited due to concerns from the U.S. and other Western countries, leaving only a few refugees returning to the region due to safety concerns.<sup>14</sup> The security situation for this “safe zone” remains volatile with frequent attacks, including artillery shelling and car bombs that threaten the lives of refugees and lead to worsening humanitarian conditions.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the infrastructure in NES – including hospitals, schools, and essential services like water and electricity systems – has been severely damaged or destroyed with minimal resources to rebuild.



*An example of the condition of shops in Raqqa before receiving support from the CCRNS program.*

Photo Credit: Mercy Corps Syria

Against this backdrop, Mercy Corps Syria implemented the CCRNS program in the Al-Diriyah neighborhood in Raqqa City, a neighborhood of about 15,000 residents including both Arabs (about 90%) and Kurds (about 10%), many of whom live below the poverty line. This community also includes internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees with many of the returnees perceived by the community and local authorities to be affiliated with, or have been affiliated with, ISIS, which can fuel profound distrust.<sup>16</sup> Years of oscillating control of the government have produced overlapping legal systems and deep uncertainty over which rules apply. Households may also sometimes rely on cross-border remittances, including payments sent to—or by—relatives who once drew a stipend from ISIS and such transfers keep some families afloat but may also stigmatize recipients, reinforcing suspicions that “returnees” remain sympathetic to extremist networks. Tensions arise from these interrelated factors. The presence of IDPs adds further tensions and pressures, as they have to compete for scarce water, jobs, and other resources.

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<sup>9</sup> International Crisis Group 2021

<sup>10</sup> Kullab 2022

<sup>11</sup> Lister 2016

<sup>12</sup> International Crisis Group 2018

<sup>13</sup> Amnesty International 2018

<sup>14</sup> Uras 2019

<sup>15</sup> Human Rights Watch 2024

<sup>16</sup> Mercy Corps Syria 2023

Conflicts in Al-Diriyah often stem from unemployment, stigma, stereotypes, poverty, and high rent, particularly among youth. Major challenges in the area include limited employment opportunities, inadequate infrastructure (such as poor sewer systems, road networks, and electricity), insufficient access to water, substance abuse, and safety concerns. Trust between community members and local authorities is also minimal, reflecting a broader societal mistrust fueled by years of conflict and repression. Overall, the community in Al-Diriyah faced several significant challenges related to poverty, insecurity, and intergroup hostilities and mistrust, including strong mistrust of government actors.

Local governance in Raqqa since 2017 has revolved around the Raqqa Civil Council (RCC), an SDF-backed body co-chaired by an Arab and a Kurd and organized on a “joint-presidency” model. The RCC struggled to deliver services amid Arab-Kurdish distrust and severe funding gaps.<sup>17</sup> Ethnic tensions, challenges to traditional dispute-resolution mechanisms, overlapping claims of regime, and thin technical capacity complicated governance efforts.<sup>18</sup> While the “joint-presidency” model symbolically widens representation with the pairing of a man and woman at every leadership criterion, women still occupied only token positions. In addition to challenges with service delivery, Kurdish-Arab tensions complicated legitimacy as residents questioned responsiveness to Arab tribal grievances. A previous Mercy Corps report concluded that there was no silver bullet to build stability in fragile settings, but addressing good governance would be essential to addressing root causes of instability. Without a responsible and accountable governance model, the likelihood of instability increases.<sup>19</sup> Raqqa’s post ISIS- governance architecture was designed to be more inclusive than under previous structures, but its effectiveness and social reach were constrained by limited resources, contested authority, and uneven representation.

## The CCRNS Program

The CCRNS program was funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) from June 2022 through November 2024. Implemented by Mercy Corps Syria in partnership with the local partner organization Salam, the program aimed to advance community resilience in Raqqa through community-led governance efforts. Specifically, youth and other vulnerable groups were heavily involved in the program through participatory planning and local governance efforts that aimed to empower communities and provide



*A shop owner in Al-Diriyah who received support for her shop from the CCRNS program.*

Photo Credit: Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps

long-term, trauma-informed solutions for sustainable development.

The initial twelve months of the program focused on advancing the skills and competencies of members of the community structures. The skills training included trauma awareness, conflict resolution, and nonviolent communication.

To foster community ownership over the program's projects, community-led decision-making mechanisms were put in place. As a result, the community identified the following priority areas for the program: Water, Sanitation, and

<sup>17</sup> International Crisis Group 2021

<sup>18</sup> Yacoubian 2017

<sup>19</sup> Yacoubian 2017

Hygiene (WASH) activities, and Food Security and Livelihood (FSL) activities. The program created three youth committees – (i) WASH, (ii) livelihoods, and (iii) community mobilization<sup>20</sup> – that each consisted of about 12 youth members from the community and focused on a specific thematic area reflecting the community-identified priority areas for CCRNS. Ultimately, these committees served as a connection between the community and local government authorities.

For example, the WASH Committee helped facilitate the construction of water systems in the neighborhood, which provided access to clean drinking water for thousands of households and ultimately contributed to improvements in public health. Additionally, hygiene promotion sessions by the WASH Committee and Community Mobilizer Committee engaged hundreds of community members on safe water usage and disease prevention. The Livelihoods Committee also contributed to the community’s economic empowerment by helping facilitate the rehabilitation of 54 shops in the neighborhood, along with the provision of business skills training, apprenticeship opportunities, and cash-for-work programs. Ultimately, these efforts supported local businesses, created employment opportunities, and equipped community members with skills to navigate economic hardships.

Along with establishing and facilitating the youth committees, CCRNS also implemented trauma informed sessions and community meetings, which were both open to all community members and fostered positive behavior change throughout the community at large. Overall, CCRNS made important contributions to local governance efforts that encouraged behavior change among community members and enhanced community resilience.

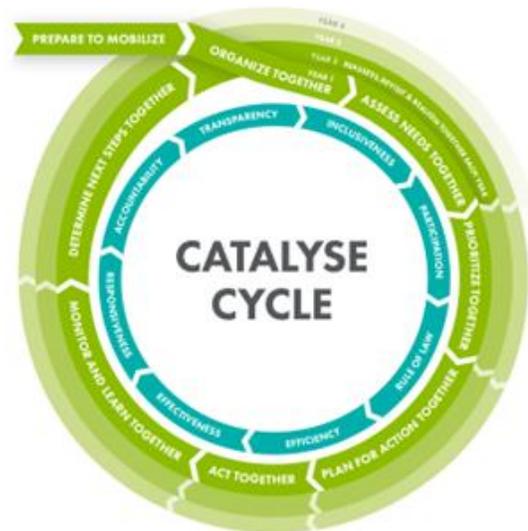
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<sup>20</sup> The Mobilizer Committee focused on promoting community health and hygiene awareness—including water conservation, access to clean water, and prevention of waterborne diseases. Key ideas covered during awareness sessions included proper handwashing techniques, the importance of clean drinking water, responsibly managing water resources, and preventing the spread of waterborne diseases. The Mobilizer Committee also provided updates to the wider community about the progress of the program activities and collected their feedback.

# The CATALYSE Approach

**CATALYSE**, Mercy Corps’ (MC) signature and field-tested approach to community mobilization and participatory decision-making, was the central framework for CCRNS. CATALYSE shares some features of community-driven development (CDD) and is rooted in the recognition that effective peacebuilding and good governance hinges on the ability of local stakeholders to identify shared priorities, mobilize resources, and collaboratively address challenges. CATALYSE guides program implementers in peacebuilding, good governance, and other sectors in designing, implementing, and evaluating community mobilization-focused interventions using tools, principles, and practices. CATALYSE focuses on the process of mobilizing communities and not just the outputs of the collaborative projects. CATALYSE can be adapted to any context and is essentially “the process we [MC] use to build a community’s capacity to identify and organize around collective priorities, mobilize resources, implement projects, and influence leaders,” as illustrated in the CATALYSE cycle in Figure 1.<sup>21</sup>

FIGURE 1. The CATALYSE Cycle



CATALYSE is applied in a myriad of Mercy Corps’ programs since it can be adapted to any context or program. The approach promotes ownership of decision making to be held by the communities themselves and advances their knowledge and skills to do so, as illustrated through the work of CCRNS. In Northeast Syria, CCRNS provided the first opportunity to apply CATALYSE amid a backdrop of protracted conflict, limited government capacity, and social cleavages. CCRNS embodied the core principles of CATALYSE through its activities and program approach. Regarding the CATALYSE principles, the program prioritized the equitable participation of vulnerable populations, including former ISIS-affiliated youth or youth perceived to be formerly affiliated with ISIS, given the community’s population with differing war experiences. To honor the CATALYSE approach of iterative, collective action, CCRNS took a unique approach to continuous collective action by the community through its design as a governance program with multi-sectoral activities addressing WASH and livelihood outcomes. Additionally, CCRNS’ support of change agents, particularly change agents from within the community who have the potential to take on important leadership roles in the future, advanced a core CATALYSE approach. CATALYSE’s focus on strengthening social capital and community cohesion was achieved through CCRNS in a number of ways, including through the transformation of certain social norms and behaviors between men and women, which was an unexpected outcome of the program. Overall, CATALYSE was critical in influencing behavior changes, strengthening resilience, and advancing community mobilization and community-level governance efforts within the Al-Diryah neighborhood.

<sup>21</sup> Mercy Corps 2018

# Advancing Evidence and Learning for Participatory Governance in Syria

Mercy Corps' efforts with local governance and community mobilization provide valuable evidence and learning for other organizations and stakeholders working in this space, particularly in fragile contexts. Mercy Corps has already conducted research on some of its programs utilizing CATALYSE, with this study on CCRNS in NES further advancing these learnings and discussions. This section of the report will discuss how the study advances previous studies and how it contributes to broader discussions in the literature on local governance and youth engagement in fragile contexts.

## CATALYSE: What We Know

To better understand the influence of CATALYSE on governance processes, Mercy Corps conducted several studies on CATALYSE in different program settings. Collectively, these studies show that CATALYSE process and principles shape local governance by influencing behaviors among different stakeholders and communities and by shaping program outcomes. Specifically, Mercy Corps' previous research identified CATALYSE's influence in four main areas that affect local governance.

**Influencing changes in norms for decision makers.** A Mercy Corps' [study focusing on a governance program in Myanmar](#) identified a relationship between norm change for local decision makers and the CATALYSE principles. Specifically, the research found that norm change in this context occurs through two main avenues – one is through role conceptualization (meaning the internalization of norms when making decisions), and the other is by implementing technical knowledge through decisions that honor normative values. Consequently, this study demonstrates the important role of good governance training in influencing people's governance norms and behaviors.<sup>22</sup>

**Influencing the level of trust between communities and decision makers.** Community trust in local authorities and decision makers is critical for advancing community well-being. One Mercy Corps' [study focusing on community trust in government actors during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) highlights the influence of levels of trust between communities and government actors on people's willingness to follow mitigation protocols, in this case the acceptance of the COVID vaccine. Vaccination campaigns can only be successful at scale when community members trust the authority figures – often health and leadership actors within the government – that provide and distribute the vaccine. This study validated that community engagement, particularly through broad-based planning meetings, is the foundational activity that helps build community trust in the government. Consequently, community trust would then lead to greater acceptance of the vaccination campaigns and thus help curb the pandemic in the long term.<sup>23</sup>

**Prioritizing community participation in governance processes through participatory approaches.** Another study, focusing on Ward Planning Committees (WPCs) in Kenya, highlighted how local communities can be empowered to assess their needs particularly through participatory approaches to local governance.<sup>24</sup> In this model, communities elect a WPC that includes members from multiple villages who

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<sup>22</sup> Hakimian and Sheely 2020

<sup>23</sup> Hill, Reid, and Sheely 2021

<sup>24</sup> Hakimian and Sheely 2023

represent men and women and different age groups to oversee implementation of a WDP and engage government actors. Through this approach, the WDP model empowers communities with skills to assess their *own* most pressing needs, and ultimately prioritize, plan, and implement their *own* development projects. This study found that this inclusive process at the local level led to several positive local governance changes, including assisting in the prioritization of government funding to address the communities' most urgent needs.<sup>25</sup>

Highlighting the **importance of implementing locally led approaches to governance from a program's inception**. A study focusing on the program adaptation experiences of participatory programs during COVID highlights how incorporating locally led approaches into programs from their inception enables them to more efficiently adapt in response to shocks that limit community access.<sup>26</sup> Specifically, this multi-country study found that two program adaptations used by several Mercy Corps teams worldwide assisted with the continuation of program activities – 1) elevating the role of committee representatives to serve as liaisons between the communities and Mercy Corps staff, and 2) adjusting ongoing programs to address emerging community needs resulting from the pandemic (such as awareness raising and providing masks). Ultimately, the study found that the existing prioritization of localization within these programs enabled them to adapt and continue their activities despite COVID policies that limited community engagement.<sup>27</sup>

## The Literature: Local Governance and Youth

In addition to research conducted by Mercy Corps, the broader academic literature also discusses the importance of local governance efforts in fragile contexts like Syria. The relationship between conflict and governance in settings like NES, with extreme shocks and stresses, has been prominently highlighted within conflict literature. For example, scholars argue that countries with existing good governance structures have less risk of the re-emergence of conflict, compared to countries with poor governance structures.<sup>28</sup> Other academics have discussed the importance of subnational governance structures as critical components within conflict mitigation and resolution mechanisms.<sup>29</sup>

Some of this literature focuses specifically on Syria. The Syrian civil war has led to government arrangements that vary by region and reflect the country's complex political, social, and historical divisions. Therefore, improving the country's governance requires a cross-cutting approach of economic resources, human resources, and relationship building.<sup>30</sup> The complexity of governance in Syria is further evident in the influence of sectarian dynamics, which manifests differently under varied administrative structures.<sup>31</sup> Other analyses link inadequate and poor governance—evident in corruption, absence of free and fair elections, and weak rule of law—to the onset of the conflict.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Hakiman and Sheely 2023

<sup>26</sup> Sloan, Radhakrishnan, and Sheely 2024

<sup>27</sup> Sloan, Radhakrishnan, and Sheely 2024

<sup>28</sup> Hegre and Nygård 2015

<sup>29</sup> Raleigh, Clionadh, and Linke 2018

<sup>30</sup> Khalaf 2015

<sup>31</sup> Hinnebusch 2019

<sup>32</sup> Karimi and Shafae 2018

Scholars have also highlighted the importance of community ties and social networks on the effectiveness of local governance efforts during Syria's civil war. For example, attempts at establishing local councils in opposition-held areas of northern Syria faced significant challenges, like resource constraints and security threats, but those with stronger community ties had greater resilience and overall legitimacy.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, research focusing on areas outside of government control shows that pre-existing social networks significantly influence the effectiveness of and community trust in local administrative councils.<sup>34</sup>



*A young boy outside of his home in Al-Diriyah.*

Photo Credit: Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps

In addition to the broader governance literature, it is important to also consider the participatory literature, which has grown within the good governance space. Specifically, participatory governance aims to complement representative democracies by improving the quality of social well-being and the state overall. This is illustrated through the creation of various new participatory institutions in certain weak states that have poor democratic structures.<sup>35</sup>

The city of Manbij in northern Syria offers a notable example of participatory governance during a brief period between 2012 (when the Syrian government forces withdrew from the city) and 2014 (when ISIS occupied the city). In this example, local revolutionaries established a grassroots political system that featured neighborhood councils, town halls, and specialized service committees that integrated both young activists and traditional leaders. However, this initiative collapsed in 2014 due to several key factors, including lack of resources, advances from ISIS, and tensions between revolutionary youth and traditional power structures.<sup>36</sup>

Despite discussions in the literature about local governance in fragile contexts like Syria, the literature lacks sufficient discussion about the role of *youth* in local governance in fragile contexts affected by violence and conflict. One of the most prominent pieces on this topic summarizes existing literature on the political and power dynamics that influence youth participation in formal and informal local governance mechanisms in fragile contexts.<sup>37</sup> However, this piece does not use primary data and acknowledges that there is an overall lack of research on youth participation in local governance mechanisms in fragile contexts.<sup>38</sup>

## Filling Gaps and Advancing Knowledge

The findings from this study on the CCRNS program advances both Mercy Corps' previous research on CATALYSE and the current academic literature on governance, including youth participation in local governance in fragile contexts like Syria. Overall, this study contributes to broader discussions in the literature around the power of changing norms to advance local governance efforts, the importance of trust

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<sup>33</sup> Khaddour 2017

<sup>34</sup> Awad and Favier 2020

<sup>35</sup> Wampler and McNulty 2011

<sup>36</sup> Munif 2017

<sup>37</sup> Oosterom 2018

<sup>38</sup> Oosterom 2018

building between communities and authorities, and the critical role of community participation in local governance processes. This study on CATALYSE within CCRNS fills existing gaps in the literature in two distinct ways.

First, it highlights the CATALYSE process and principles, and the overall local governance efforts, in a novel **geographic region and fragile context** that remains underexplored in the literature. Additionally, this study will contribute knowledge about current, local governance efforts in NES, and in Raqqa in particular, which have yet to be highlighted in the broader governance literature. As previously discussed, the communities in NES face a number of challenges to their economic, physical, and social wellbeing, which further illustrates the importance of establishing efficient governance structures that provide for basic needs and services.

The second gap this research fills is that it advances knowledge about the **role of youth in local governance efforts in fragile contexts**, particularly the experiences and influence of **youth as powerful change agents**. While previous research acknowledges the importance of local governance in fragile contexts, few studies capture the nuances of youth engagement. By highlighting this specific group within the Al-Diriyah community, CCRNS provides a compelling example of how *youth* have the potential to advance local governance efforts in impactful ways, particularly vulnerably youth who face different forms of economic, social, and educational marginalization. The youth committees in the CCRNS program are a powerful example of a concrete, community governance structure in a fragile context that has effectively advanced local governance efforts by prioritizing fairness and community participation.

Overall, these findings affirm that a carefully adapted approach to participatory governance can strengthen local institutions, build community trust, and empower marginalized voices even in the midst of instability and conflict, such as in regions like Northeast Syria.

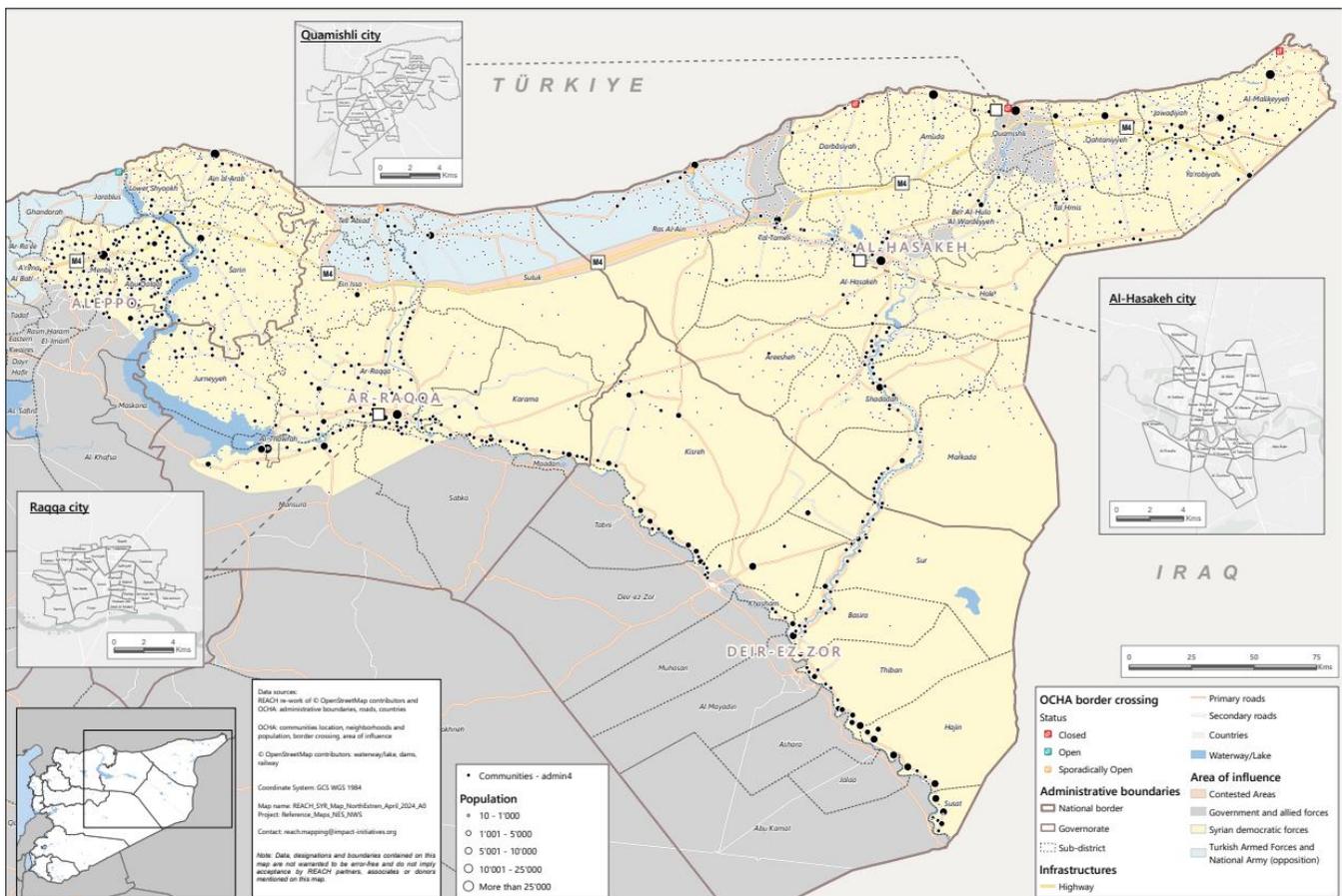
## Methodology

This study contributes new knowledge about the potential of youth as change agents for local governance efforts in fragile contexts. The CCRNS program provides a unique context to study governance programming in a sensitive and fragile setting that can be difficult to access and thus has not yet been highlighted in detail in the literature. For this study, we mainly use qualitative data. Qualitative inquiry is well suited to examine how power, norms, and behavior shift as it foregrounds participant perspectives.<sup>39</sup> The central research question guiding this study is: *How has the implementation of CATALYSE within the CCRNS youth committees helped strengthen community engagement and local governance— particularly through shifts in power and decision making--and advance behavior and norm changes within the communities?*

To answer the research question, we draw on data collected from the Al-Diriyah neighborhood in Raqqa City in Northeast Syria (in August 2024). Because of the community's skepticism of outsiders, Mercy Corps' local partner organization, Salam led data collection.

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<sup>39</sup> Guest et al, 2017



The two methods of data collection for this qualitative study were focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) with CCRNS program participants. All participants in the study took part in at least one activity within the CCRNS program, specifically one of the youth committees (WASH Committee, Mobilizer Committee, or Livelihoods Committee), community meetings, or trauma sessions. Purposive sampling was used to recruit program participants for the study according to the selection criteria, as outlined in Table 1 below.

A total of 10 FGDs were conducted with 7 to 9 participants in each group, leading to a total sample of 80 FGD participants (40 men and 40 women). Given the mixed-group nature of the committee meetings and other CCRNS program activities, FGDs included both male and female participants. Ten KIIs (5 men and 5 women) were conducted in total, with the key informants having participated in one of the five CCRNS activities listed in Table 1. When possible, male data collectors conducted interviews with male key informants, and female data collectors conducted interviews with female key informants.

TABLE 1. STUDY METHODS, SAMPLING, AND SAMPLING CRITERIA FOR PARTICIPANTS

Type of CCRNS Program Participant	Selection Criteria	Quantity of FGDs	Quantity of KIIs
WASH Committee Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Youth (age 18-35)</li> <li>✓ Male and female members</li> <li>✓ Active committee member</li> <li>✓ Lives within the Al-Diriyah neighborhood</li> </ul>	2	2
Livelihood Committee Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Youth (age 18-35)</li> <li>✓ Male and female members</li> <li>✓ Active committee member</li> <li>✓ Lives within the Al-Diriyah neighborhood</li> </ul>	2	2
Mobilizer Committee Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Youth (age 18-35)</li> <li>✓ Male and female members</li> <li>✓ Active committee member</li> <li>✓ Lives within the Al-Diriyah neighborhood</li> </ul>	2	2
Trauma Session Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Youth (age 18-35)</li> <li>✓ Male and female members</li> <li>✓ Attended at least one trauma session</li> <li>✓ Lives within the Al-Diriyah neighborhood</li> </ul>	2	2
Community Meeting Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Age 18 or older</li> <li>✓ Male and female members</li> <li>✓ Attended at least one community meeting</li> <li>✓ Lives within the Al-Diriyah neighborhood</li> <li>✓ Includes shopkeepers whose shops were rehabilitated</li> </ul>	2	2
<b>Total Quantity of FGDs and KIIs</b>		<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Total Number of Participants in FGDs and KIIs</b>		<b>80</b>	<b>10</b>

Note: Each FGD had 7 to 9 participants with male and female participants.

## Summary Demographics

Forty-nine percent of the study participants (90 in total) were male and 51% were female. The age range for the participants in the FGDs and KIIs ranged from 18 to 47 years old. Regarding ethnicity, almost everyone self-identified as Arab, with one individual self-identifying as Kurdish. A majority of the study participants (81%) had an elementary level of education.

## Limitations

While the qualitative methods employed in this study lead to valuable insights into the perspectives of these communities, some limitations are worth noting. First, the focus on these specific communities—and participants of the CCRNS program—means the findings are not necessarily generalizable to all of Syria and governance dynamics in other conflict-affected settings may diverge markedly. The small sample size also further limits some of the findings. Further, this study design is unable to establish direct causality. Despite these, the findings presented offer a robust starting point for understanding governance dynamics in conflict-affected and hard-to-reach settings. This study captures primary evidence with ground-level data on governance in communities with hardly any data. It also bolsters evidence on the CATALYSE approach in a volatile and fragmented context.

## Findings

The findings from this study highlight the impact of CATALYSE—specifically the community mobilization and participatory planning operationalized through the CCRNS youth committees—on recalibrating community-level governance in Al-Diriyah. Four key findings emerge about the influence of good governance programming on local governance, specifically—the empowerment of youth as change agents, shifting power back to the community, strengthening social cohesion, and transforming the involvement of women and girls in public decision-making. The study confirms that even in extremely fragile contexts such as in NES, approaches such as CATALYSE can improve local government responsiveness. The discussion that follows highlights each specific finding.

### **Empowering youth as change agents advances local governance.**

The evidence from the CCRNS program shows that when young people are engaged and equipped with practical skills, they can become credible actors who improve local governance. Guided by good governance principles, the CATALYSE approach emphasizes fairness and balanced participation of community members from all groups. The CCRNS program embodied the CATALYSE model and principle by focusing on one of the Al-Diriyah neighborhood's most vulnerable groups – youth. Various forms of challenges affect youth in this neighborhood, including social, economic, and educational marginalization. Nevertheless, the program recognized youth's potential to generate sustainable changes in their community and ultimately improve local governance mechanisms. Existing research suggests that meaningful youth participation can drive governance gains when certain conditions are met such as dedicated spaces for young people, capacity building, and formal channels to state actors.<sup>40</sup>



*A CCRNS youth participant who shifted his views to believe that "change begins within yourself."*

Photo Credit: Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps

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<sup>40</sup> Simpson 2018

CCRNS replicated some of these conditions and prioritized youth participation by creating youth committees that exclusively included the community's youth as members.

Further, following the good governance tools embedded in the CATALYSE approach, CCRNS included training activities for the youth committee members. Through peacebuilding training, the youth learned critical skills, like communication and listening skills, which enabled them to more effectively engage with local authorities on behalf of their community.

Different pathways emerged from the data to explain this link. Participants reported that these sessions replaced impulsive or confrontational reactions with dialogue-oriented engagement. Some youth saw changes in their personalities, such as moving from being impatient and more prone to violence to becoming more patient and less supportive of violence. One participant in an FGD said, "I was aggressive, and my personality has changed drastically; my mindset has improved." Acquiring important listening and communication skills led many of the youth to gain more confidence in themselves. As one program participant explained, "my self-confidence became high [when before] it was non-existent."<sup>41</sup> Gaining these skills strengthened their community engagement and awareness, which likely fostered more trust from the community and local government actors, as illustrated in the quote below.



***"I am now able to meet with the authorities, discuss with them, assess the needs of the neighborhood, and make decisions that benefit the neighborhood, me, and the Committee."***

— Key Informant (Female), Youth Committee Member, 11 August 2024

Once empowered, youth acted as brokers, serving as a bridge between their communities and local government actors. The youth committees spoke on behalf of their communities to advocate for their rights and needs to local authorities. Respondents mentioned getting to know the authorities and becoming able to demand the needs of the neighborhood and solve neighborhood problems as they arose. This type of brokerage function mirrors other regions like Kenya and Myanmar and can serve as a starting point for young leaders to help redirect local government budgets toward community-identified projects.<sup>42</sup>

This finding reinforces arguments that youth participation is not merely normative but instrumental. Empowered young people serving as change agents increases the likelihood that services align with actual needs.<sup>43</sup> Participants noted that community meetings have played some role in addressing some of the community's needs, such as repairs to shops, water lines, and the park project. In addition, it challenges accounts that view youth as only sources of instability. Rather, they can also be a stabilizing force in conflict recovery.<sup>44</sup> Exclusive youth spaces, practical skill-building, and connection with the authorities produced tangible shifts in the community. These suggest that empowering young people is a viable pathway to improving governance.

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<sup>41</sup> Key Informant (Female), Community Meeting Participant, 12 August 2024

<sup>42</sup> Touchton, McNulty, and Wampler 2023; Mercy Corps 2024; Search for Common Ground 2018; Hakiman and Sheely 2020

<sup>43</sup> Makhoul et al. 2011

<sup>44</sup> United Nations Security Council 2018; Schwartz 2010; Simpson 2018

## Shifting power to the communities builds trust between community members and local authorities.

Interactions between citizens and local authorities can be shaped by distrust, especially in fragile settings where state institutions have failed to deliver on basic service delivery.<sup>45</sup> The work of the youth committees in CCRNS helped build trust between the community and local authorities, which was almost nonexistent previously, and led to a shift in decision-making power back to the community. Through community meetings, the youth committee engagement with stakeholders—advocating on behalf of the community—and seeking feedback and validation from the community about these processes, citizens’ trust in leaders improved. This illustrates a key characteristic of CATALYSE: an *iterative* process that requires *collective action* among members of the community.<sup>46</sup> Through the CCRNS youth committees, CATALYSE provided the opportunity for community members to work together on a regular basis through collective action to identify and prioritize their neighborhood’s most pressing needs.

Specifically, CCRNS involved many awareness raising activities for community members focusing on such topics as water, sanitation, and neighborhood cleanliness. Through this education and awareness raising, community members better understood the concerns in their current living situation and shared them with the youth committees. The committees would then directly advocate for these identified community needs and priorities by communicating with the local authorities who had the power and resources to fix these issues. When the local authorities improved conditions in Al-Diriyah by directly addressing the community’s prioritized needs, this helped build trust between the community and government actors. This sequence of community deliberation and communication of needs and then response from the state contributes to higher trust in local government. Though there is some debate as to whether this kind of deliberative participation and community-driven projects increase confidence in the government, with some studies asserting that while such processes improve welfare of citizens, they don’t reshape institutions;<sup>47</sup> others have found that visible service delivery is a crucial step in rebuilding vertical trust because they reduce citizen skepticism.<sup>48</sup> This study adds to the literature and shows that when citizens perceive deliberative forums as representative and responsive, they are more likely to trust authorities.<sup>49</sup>

For instance, the community expressed concerns to the youth WASH committee about sewage and water. Specifically, there was a problem with clearing the sewage in the neighborhood and accessing water due to a water line break. When the committee brought these concerns to the local authorities, the government fixed both problems in a timely manner, leading to an increase in community trust in the local authorities.<sup>50</sup> This example demonstrates how the community has become empowered with the ability to decide for *themselves* the most pressing needs and concerns that need to be addressed within Al-Diriyah.

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<sup>45</sup> Denney et al. 2017

<sup>46</sup> Mercy Corps 2018

<sup>47</sup> Casey et al. 2013

<sup>48</sup> Fox 2015

<sup>49</sup> Goldberg and Bächtiger 2023

<sup>50</sup> Key Informant (Female), Youth Committee Member, 11 August 2024.



*“Local authorities are fulfilling their promises more than before, especially after they saw increased awareness among the people of the neighborhood and their knowledge of their rights and their demand for them through advocacy campaigns.”*

— Key Informant (Male), Youth Committee Member, 14 August 2024

Through this community decision making process, the youth committees have become the community leaders who directly voice the community’s concerns to the authorities. This reflects important improvements in trust not only between the community members and the authorities, but also between the community and the youth. As previously discussed, the youth in Al-Diriyah are extremely marginalized in multiple ways, some of whom had previous experience with violence, which can influence the level of trust and respect they receive from others. However, through the trainings and personal and professional development acquired through CCRNS, the youth committee members gained the trust of their fellow community members to speak on their behalf and represent their whole community to the local government actors. As explained by one CCRNS participant, “the presence of [the] committees has increased trust with the authorities [because] they communicate with them regularly regarding the neighborhood’s needs.”<sup>51</sup>

Additionally, the youth’s personal and professional growth through CCRNS led to greater trust in them by the local authorities to accurately represent and speak on behalf of their community. In fact, according to one female youth committee member, “the director of the Cleaning Department was proud of the presence of young volunteers to serve the Al-Dariyah neighborhood and praised that.”<sup>52</sup> Along with the Cleaning Department, other local authorities the youth committee regularly engaged with were the Economy Department and the Public Works Department. Communications between the committees and local authorities included regular, in-person meetings at the local government offices and routine communications on WhatsApp. Perhaps, such feedback loop contributes to the success of this kind of deliberative process whereas in other scenarios, no routine channel for follow-up was offered.



*Two participants in CCRNS speak with Mercy Corps leadership in Al-Diriyah.*

Photo Credit: Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps

Another way in which the youth committees contributed to trust building was through their collaboration with a Stakeholder Committee created under CCRNS. The Stakeholder Committee was composed of community leaders and representatives from the local authorities who provided the youth committees with guidance in areas such as mobilizing resources and aligning projects with community needs. Representatives from government actors at times attended meetings between the Stakeholder Committee and youth committees as guest speakers. This engagement with the

<sup>51</sup> Male, FGD with Community Meeting Participants, 15 August 2024.

<sup>52</sup> Key Informant (Female), Youth Committee Member, 15 August 2024.

Stakeholder Committee provided another avenue through which the youth committees could directly express the community's concerns to people in authority.

## Fostering fairness and engagement through CATALYSE strengthens social cohesion.

Al-Diriyah is an extremely fragile environment with a diverse group of individuals facing multiple forms of marginalization, including IDPs and individuals with former ISIS affiliations. Given such a complex setting, tensions and mistrust among community members are expected and as such social cohesion within this community was frayed. However, the CATALYSE approach helped strengthen social cohesion among community members. By treating broad participation as integral, CCRNS helped address these challenges and improve relations within the community through activities harnessing the CATALYSE approach.

Peacebuilding trainings provided to youth committee members and about one hundred additional community members in Al-Diriya fostered important communication and listening skills along with training in specific problem-solving techniques, all of which advanced community social cohesion. When equipped with the proper skills to patiently and peacefully strategize to solve a problem, it helps reduce tension and create better understanding among the groups involved. Contact theory research argues that prejudice reduces when interaction is structured around cooperative goals and equal status;<sup>53</sup> and more recent evidence shows that skills-based training programs and certain collaborative activities can increase trust.<sup>54</sup>

Participants in Al-Diriyah echoed these dynamics. The problem tree, for example, a common problem-solving technique utilized during the trainings was commended by many CCRNS program participants. Through this technique, the problem at hand is illustrated in a tree metaphor, with the causes of the problem as the tree roots, the problem itself as the trunk of the tree, and the branches and leaves as the resulting effects from the problem.<sup>55</sup> Another problem-solving technique was the use of “I” messages instead of “You” messages to foster more collaborative discussion between the parties that does not place blame, and express feelings to help them have more empathy. The box to the right describes the experiences of a mother applying this technique with her son.

In addition to skills received in the peacebuilding training, such as listening, communication, and problem-solving skills, the training also caused personal transformations in

### Spotlight: Problem Solving Example

*“After my previous experience with my son, I used ‘You’ messages with him and blamed him until he ran away and joined a Muslim faction. After the training, I started using ‘I’ messages, focusing on solving the problem and avoiding blame. We have become very cooperative, and he has become my support after the death of my husband, meaning my life with my children has changed radically.”*

— Key Informant (Female),  
Community Meeting Participant,  
12 August 2024

<sup>53</sup> Allport 1954

<sup>54</sup> Lichtenheld et al. 2021; Dawop et al. 2019; Lichtenheld et al. 2022

<sup>55</sup> Mercy Corps 2021

participants regarding their perspectives and approach to daily life. For example, participants explained how the training led people to start “treating all members of the community equally”<sup>56</sup> and that they “moved away from the idea of stereotyping.”<sup>57</sup> Some participants even explained how they experienced changes in their personality from being aggressive and more prone to violence to becoming “calm and wise.”<sup>58</sup> These trainings led to greater empathy and understanding among community members, including those from different groups, which then strengthened the community’s social cohesion, as illustrated in the quote below. These shifts align show how such trainings can transform “bonding” capital to “bridging” capital that spans social divides.<sup>59</sup>



*“I used to think that the displaced were bad people, but after attending the training with them, I discovered that they are people who suffer from problems similar to mine.”*

— Female, FGD with Trauma Session Participants, 11 August 2024

Through these training activities, community members acquired critical skills and knowledge about important techniques and principles that helped strengthen social cohesion within the community. By fostering empathy and understanding among members of different groups, the program activities shaped by CATALYSE has led to “a big and clear change within the community.”<sup>60</sup>

## **CATALYSE influenced positive shifts in societal expectations for women and men.**

Although the CCRNS program did not set out to reshape societal roles of men and women, its adoption of tailored approaches and the CATALYSE process had significant effects on changing perspectives on men and women's roles in families and the community, which began to shift some social norms in Al-Diriyah. From the start of the program, CCRNS prioritized equal representation of men and women among the membership of the youth committees to foster fair opportunities for women and men. Consequently, the committees served as positive models for the community by demonstrating the positive impact of men and women participating *together*. With male and female youth committee members working side by side, this went against prominent norms in that discourage the mixing of men and women who are not related in public spaces.

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<sup>56</sup> Female, FGD with Youth Committee Member, 12 August 2024.

<sup>57</sup> Male, FGD with Community Meeting Participants, 14 August 2024.

<sup>58</sup> Male, FGD with Youth Committee Members, 13 August 2024.

<sup>59</sup> Colletta and Cullen 2000

<sup>60</sup> Male, Youth Committee Member, 14 August 2024.



*Two members of the CCRNS youth committees in Al-Diriyah.*

Photo credit: Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps

Even though mixing of the sexes runs counter to entrenched norms in Al-Diriyah, women’s participation in the community still increased throughout CCRNS and the data from FGDs and KIIs illustrate this shift. One participant noted that “the community has become more accepting of women’s participation after society noticed the changes that occurred in the personalities of women participating in the training.”<sup>61</sup> This confirms some of the lessons from Phase I of the program as well as similar research that found that women’s demonstrated competence in village planning later translated into broader acceptance of their public voice in Afghanistan.<sup>62</sup>

***“[S]ociety has begun to respect me and take my opinion into consideration, especially after I acquired good communication skills... even my husband has begun to consult me [but before] he used to dictate his opinion to me in the past without taking my opinion or consulting me.”***

— Key Informant (Female), Youth Committee Member, 11 August 2024

Unlike the Beath et al. 2015 study where the changes from the program produced no change in entrenched female roles linked to family decision-making, the quote above reflects shifts even in household decision-making, confirming that public participation can expand women’s power in other spheres.<sup>63</sup> The shift was mediated by the skills trainings rather than by quotas alone, and CCRNS had a clear impact on participants. As other family and community members saw the positive effects of participation on individuals, including on their personality, attitude, and/or mindset, they became more supportive of their own female family members participating in CCRNS. One male FGD member said, “I have a relative who initially refused to have his wife participate, but after learning about our work, he allowed his wife to participate...”<sup>64</sup> Importantly, both male and female respondents imbibed this change in mindset. This reflects promising movement in the community’s socially held beliefs, and evidence for the power of role modeling new patterns of behavior.

Through their participation in CCRNS, the training received by all youth committee members fostered better communication, listening, and problem-solving skills, which ultimately led to more self-confidence and more respect from the community. Both male and female committee members experienced this increase in confidence and respect. This unexpected outcome further highlights CATALYSE’s potential not only to improve governance processes but also impact societal norms.

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<sup>61</sup> Key Informant (Female), Community Meeting Participant, 12 August 2024

<sup>62</sup> Beath, Christia & Enikolopov 2015

<sup>63</sup> Kabeer 1999

<sup>64</sup> Male, FGD with Livelihood Committee Members, 12 August 2024.

# Recommendations

The findings from this research lead to recommendations for different stakeholders regarding the implementation of CATALYSE in fragile contexts that aim to advance local governance through youth participation. The following recommendations are directed towards three audiences – 1) participants in the CCRNS program, 2) organizations and practitioners that engage in similar work, and 3) donors and policymakers within the governance space.

It is important to highlight that these recommendations are specific to the findings from this study that focused on the CCRNS program in the NES context. As a result, the recommendations below must be adapted to each specific local context before implementation.

## For CCRNS Participants

- **Continue community-wide information sharing.** Even though the CCRNS program has ended, community members who participated in the program should continue sharing the skills (such as communication, listening, and problem-solving skills) and principles (fairness, broad participation, empathy, and understanding) they learned with other members of the community who did not participate in CCRNS. This will ensure sustainability of the skills and principles taught through the CATALYSE approach and expand the reach of the program's impact. Additionally, this information will be particularly important to pass on to future generations who will eventually become the community's leaders.
- **Continue supporting the youth committees.** The community should continue its support of the youth committees established during CCRNS and if possible, institutionalize the processes. This includes supporting their regular communication with the local authorities. This will be particularly important so the committees can continue to advocate for the rights, demands, and needs of the community, and continue the sustainability of the local governance progress achieved during CCRNS. Perhaps, to further improve broad participation, the community could consider rotating committee membership within a designated timeframe while retaining alumni as mentors.



*A mother and her son in Al-Diriyah who benefited from the neighborhood's new water system through the CCRNS program.*

Photo credit: Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps

- **Continue supporting women's participation and representation.** The community should continue to support women's participation in governance efforts and their representation in local governance mechanisms like the youth committees. Community members saw the positive effects of participation in CCRNS on many individuals, including women, which led to the transformation of certain norms in the community. Women's continued participation and representation in Al-Diriyah's local governance can lead to their further empowerment and resilience in the longer term.

## For Peer Organizations and Practitioners

- **Prioritize youth as community change agents.** As seen through CCRNS, other organizations supporting local governance should prioritize youth as community change agents. Through the CATALYSE approach, CCRNS clearly demonstrated the value and impact of empowering youth to become leaders within their community by representing and advocating for their community's needs. Even though youth in certain contexts can be extremely marginalized like those in NES, organizations must consider how to harness the potential of youth to advance sustainable governance changes.
- **Provide training in good governance skills.** In programs that aim to advance local governance, organizations should consider providing training within their activities related to good governance. Such training could include skills in communication, advocacy, and problem solving, all of which would lay a strong foundation for greater collective action. Such training must include inter-group contacts to further advance gains in building trust across lines of differences.
- **Provide education and awareness on broad participation and equality.** Along with providing training on "hard" skills like problem solving, organizations should also consider providing education and awareness on core good governance principles, such as participation and equality. As seen in CCRNS, understanding these principles and applying them in daily life helps advance empathy among members of different groups, which lays the groundwork for strengthening community social cohesion.

## For Donors and Policymakers

- **Prioritize funding and support for community-level governance initiatives.** Donors and policymakers at the national, regional, and global levels should prioritize the provision of direct funding and support to initiatives that focus on community-level governance. CCRNS showed that the CATALYSE approach can strengthen local governance, even in extremely fragile contexts with marginalized groups like in NES. This prioritization can then help advance longer-term, sustainable peace in fragile contexts affected by conflict and violence.
- **Consider funding and support for multi-year, local governance programs.** While CCRNS had a strong impact on local governance in Al-Diriyah, these efforts could have been even greater if the program ran for more than two years. Donors and policymakers should consider providing funding and support for local governance programs like CCRNS for longer periods of time to expand program impact, both in scope and geographically, and strengthen sustainability.

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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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