



PROGRAMMING RESPONSES TO POWER GRABBERS IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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CENTER FOR SECURE & STABLE STATES

DAI's fragile states work, led by the Center for Secure and Stable States, builds on our global reputation for innovative post-crisis assistance to support political transition, ensure short-term stability operations, prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE), and lay the foundation for long-term development in fragile, crisis-stricken states.

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Executive Summary

In times of crisis following a natural disaster, political upheaval, or a global pandemic, the social contract between citizens and government can fray, particularly in illiberal democracies that do not have the foundational civil liberties in place to support their citizens. Government actors are forced to respond with limited data, intruding external actors are prompted to participate, and vulnerable groups are increasingly exploited. Power-grabbing in times of crisis can vary—from domestic oligarchs protecting the status quo, to informal gangs seeking economic profit, to insurgent groups hoping to perpetuate panic and disorder. In the aftermath of natural disaster, as illustrated by post-earthquake Haiti, a flood of international organizations can create a feeding frenzy for funding injected into the local economy. Following the fall of Al Bashir in Sudan, new political alliances positioned themselves to fill gaps and respond to the unmet needs of society, while attempting to facilitate peace and stability. Of further concern is the growing authoritarianism in Asia in the wake of COVID-19, where the Malaysian national government has attempted to suppress reporting on the pandemic and amended parliamentary seating for political advantage, and in the Philippines, emergency legislation has greatly expanded executive power. [As noted in Foreign Affairs](#) in June,

“The pandemic has mostly reinforced existing negative democratic trends, supplying illiberal governments with an incentive and an excuse for repressive tactics.”

The pandemic has conveniently served as a mechanism to silent dissent, reallocate funding and perpetuate fear. Elsewhere, nonstate actors and insurgent groups have exploited the pandemic for their nefarious ends, as evidenced in Mozambique where a violent extremist group known locally as Ahlu Sunna wa Jama is providing cash and goods to local communities hit hard by the economic impacts of the COVID lockdown.

However, this is not a new phenomenon. As the international development and humanitarian sectors analyze impacts of and responses to COVID-19, it is prudent to consider lessons learned from past incidents of natural disaster and other destabilizing events. This document serves to illustrate key learnings from former crisis borne, power grabbing to inform programming responses in the post pandemic environment.

01 | Disaster Management in Pakistan

As Pakistan confronts the impact of COVID-19, the virus has stirred underlying sectarian and religious tension.

The clerical establishment refused to ban prayers or enforce social distancing at places of worship, putting thousands at risk.

It is widely believed that the original entry and spread of COVID-19 into Pakistan were from individuals returning from religious pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia and Iran, and other mass religious gatherings within Pakistan. The clerical establishment refused to ban prayer services or enforce social distancing at places of worship, putting thousands at risk. Banned extremist organizations such as Ahl-e-Sunna Wal Jamaat (ASWJ) distorted the situation and blamed Shia pilgrims returning from Iran, while downplaying evidence that the infection had entered Pakistan via multiple routes. This narrative was picked up in popular discourse, resulting in increased hate speech against minorities, including Shia. ASWJ and others also targeted members of the federal government who are Shia, accusing them of bringing Shiite pilgrims into Pakistan as part of an Iranian conspiracy against the country.

Discrimination also affected relief efforts in other religious communities. Eyewitness accounts suggest that welfare organizations in Karachi refused to provide relief packages to Hindu and Christian communities that are based in some of the most underprivileged areas of Karachi. Other conservative elements termed ration drives as being “anti-Muslim” and punishable because of a false association with the controversial Ahmadi sect of Islam. These incidents provide striking examples of how in the time of economic and health crises, uncertainty and fear has fostered distrust and prejudice, providing extremist groups a ripe opportunity to [deepen societal divides in furtherance of their own agendas](#).



CASE STUDY 01

Programming Responses

As a response to the exploitation of COVID-19 to fuel sectarian hatred, DAI's Community Resilience Activity-South (CRA-S) designed and implemented five small grants to mitigate these narratives. CRA-S is a \$52 million small grants program funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) that partners with civil society organizations, young people, universities, and schools in targeted areas of Pakistan to promote tolerance, acceptance of diversity, and support initiatives that counter violent extremism (CVE) among some of the most vulnerable groups in Pakistan.

The five grants engaged community leaders—including prominent clerics from the already established inter-faith forums under CRA-S; journalists; media personalities; and politicians to counter the violent extremism (VE) narratives of division through messages of tolerance, and against false narratives being propagated by VE groups. This initiative was done through community gatherings; media, including print, radio, and TV shows; public service messages on local radio channels and local cable networks; and the distribution of information, education, and communication materials.

This is far from the first time that Pakistan has had to confront extremist groups that use disasters to further their own agendas. The earthquakes in 2010, annual flooding across the country, and mass displacements caused by military operations and the region formerly known as FATA have all been manipulated by extremists. Historically, they have employed two main strategies to do so: first, by spreading narratives that create fear and deepen societal divisions by characterizing adverse events as the wrath of God “un-Islamic” behavior, by both the state and citizens. The second is to establish charitable wings of their organizations that collect money and provide relief to affected communities in the wake of these disasters. Charitable acts build community support for extremist groups, while emphasizing that the state is unable to deliver needed services to its citizens. These charitable groups operate openly in Pakistan, with many people unaware that they are associated with organizations that are ostensibly banned by the government. Similarly, those who give are also unaware that some of their donations may be used not for relief efforts - but to fund nefarious activities of the extremist group.

CRA-S has also addressed this issue through public service campaigns and educational sessions that emphasize practicing “safe charity,” to ensure donations are given to the most deserving. These initiatives are targeted around major holidays in the Muslim calendar, such as Ramazan and Eid-ul-Azha, when charitable giving peaks. These initiatives have increased charitable giving practices and ensured donations are going to support people who are truly in need. CRA-S’ successes thus far in mitigating opportunities for powergrabbing by extremist groups is due to a programming model that emphasizes local, community-based responses, from trusted interlocutors, that use an asset-focused approach to bring about change. Despite differences local dynamics, this framework is applicable for practitioners working to address power-grabbing across contexts.

02 | Supporting Community Resilience During Continued Ethnic Violence in Burma

Balancing programming across competing interests in 2020 in Myanmar requires a thorough understanding of past and present alliances and a focused eye on current events.

60+ years of war as the Union Government fought to subdue ethnic separatist organizations and anti-military actors.

Burma's more than 60 years of contested governance across the country involves numerous armed actors (state and nonstate with various affiliations) in overlapping geographic areas. After a stagnant peace process, the Union Government continues to fight to subdue ethnic separatist organizations and anti-military actors. Furthermore, the myriad of ethnic, religious, and concomitant communal tensions have escalated while armed actors' actions continue to exasperate the situation on the ground. Power grabbing has been particularly chaotic in Burma, where 150 recognized ethnicities, 128 registered political parties, 15 ethnic armed organizations, and innumerable state aligned militias all seek rights, justice, security and political power. As seen in Burma's recent elections, impartiality in an emerging democracy further amplifies the risks in decision making.

Meanwhile, further destabilizing factors are contested governance and service delivery (primary and secondary providers in mixed-control areas) stemming from perceived Union Government preference for the Bamar majority and a malevolent "elder brother" treatment of ethnic minorities who advocate for self-determination. In addition to diverse illicit economies (human trafficking, opium, methamphetamines, unregulated jade, gold, and rare earth mining), the central Union Government (who hold an ethnic and religious majority) constantly competes with the ethnic and religious minorities over political influence, economic access that perpetuate social grievances. This was most recently seen in Rakhine state where Rakhine and Rohingya minorities maintain a constant armed confrontation against the Union Government which has heavily restricted movement and information flow in northern Rakhine.



CASE STUDY 02

Programming Responses

DAI activities in Burma through the USAID Community Strengthening Project (CSP) work to strengthen community participation and local ownership of essential services, community development initiatives, and peace and reconciliation efforts. A Kachin State activity addresses limited skills among emerging female leaders working to advance community peace and reconciliation priorities by providing capacity building training, and local initiatives to increase participation in decision making processes. Another activity across northern Shan and Rakhine aims to strengthen the capacity of local civil society organizations to effectively work with communities impacted by large-scale infrastructure projects to effectively advocate for their needs to government officials. Across the portfolio, activities support community participation and reconciliation as a means to counter-act the often violent interplay between local and national, state and non state actors.

CSP aims to enhance trust and reconciliation between communities and local governance actors to counteract power-grabbing opportunities. A Northern Shan State activity is addressing youth leaders' limited exposure to diverse communities in conflict-affected locations to promote social cohesion in their communities. Another activity is creating opportunities for representatives from ethnic Rakhine, Buddhist, and Muslim communities and other ethnic and religious minorities to meet in a safe and neutral environment to constructively discuss violence in their state, design concrete steps towards peaceful coexistence, and learn advocacy skills. An activity in Rakhine state is expanding and consolidating intra- and inter-community networks through sustained engagement with community influencers on early warning and early response systems to respond to situations of inter-communal conflict as a mechanism to stabilize the region.



DIVERSITY OF ACTIVITIES

Programming within these diverse and multi-faceted power struggles requires a multi-tiered approach, balancing diverse perspectives and points of engagement. Activities need to be as diverse as the perspectives on the ground to effectively promote cultural sharing, economic opportunities, and collective decisionmaking. All staff involved in designing, managing and evaluating these types of initiatives must be thoroughly versed in the operational constraints and contextual analysis. CSP has a formal “Research Into Action into Understanding” process that works to improve understanding of conflict dynamics and early recovery strategies for conflict affected communities. The team works collaboratively with USAID and a local research partner to design and conduct research and analytical activities to inform strategic decision-making, allow for adaptive management, and contribute to the learning and knowledge base for stakeholders working in vulnerable communities.

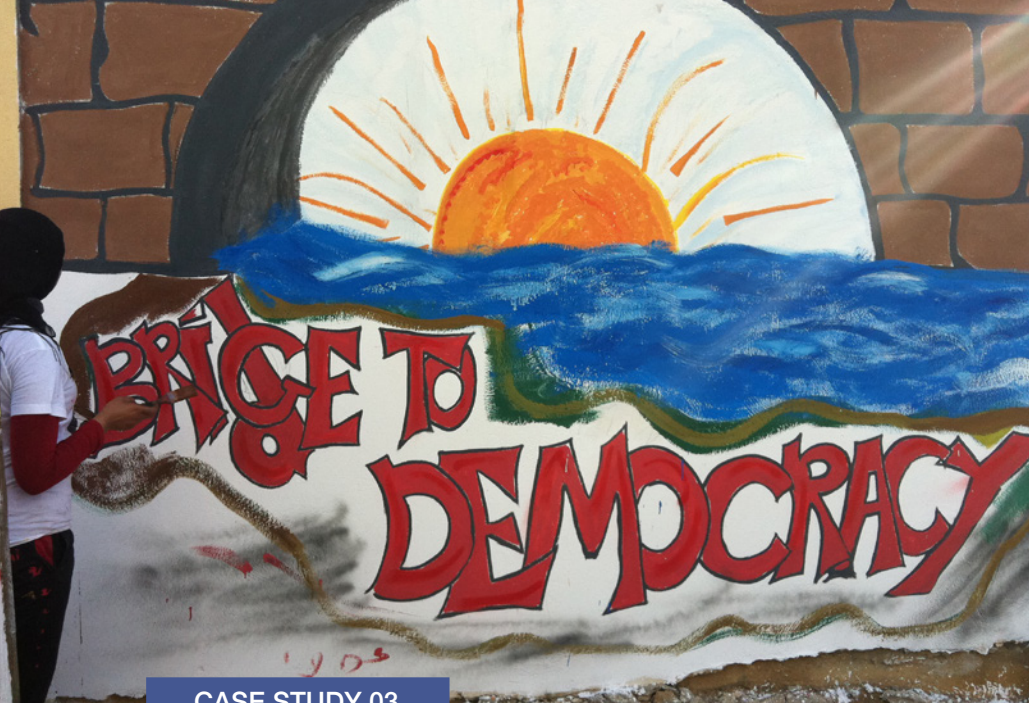
CSP consistently assesses potential unintended consequences of programming before implementation. In particular, CSP focuses on the possible impacts of an activity on community-level power dynamics that could reinforce or reignite grievances that perpetuate conflict. Periodic internal learning discussions on challenges and best practices are organized so lessons can be documented, disseminated, and integrated into future activities. CSP’s process ensures programming is continually collecting and analyzing contextual information and adapting based on evolving politics.

03 | Tunisia's Political Transitions and Power Vacuums

Nearly 10 years after the Arab Spring, lack of direction and absent transitional powerbrokers and can have equally negative consequences as those of power grabbers in conflict contexts.

Programming responses since 2011 have been sporadic and lacking in coordination, not to the scale or need of the dynamics on the ground.

Following the events in January 2011, President Ben Ali, ruler of Tunisia since 1987 resigned and fled to Malta. His government was heavily criticized for its repression of political opposition. The change in leadership in Tunisia led to a long period of uncertainty, characterized by lack of direction, political infighting, and lack of transparency. While Tunisia's democracy has made progress, it has been a slow road, and institutions still have practices that are reminiscent of the former regime. The Tunisian government's response to COVID-19 highlights its inability to mitigate the crisis, starting with underestimation of the threat, slow movement to pursue preventive measures, followed by stringent restrictions and poor case management. Once the ministries participated, their approach illustrated a dangerous lack of coordination and absence of operational headquarters or national emergency information system, resulting in contradictory civil orders and internal domestic chaos. Extremist spillover from Libya and the region and the terrorist events of 2015 have further influenced heavy-handed approaches from the Tunisian security apparatus. The Tunisian approach is seen to fundamentally undermine human rights and civil liberties, particularly at times of crisis. This was evident with the oppressive series of measures and travel restrictions that were seen as efforts to target individual rights and free speech.



CASE STUDY 03

Programming Responses

A new strategy would be similar to many other newly transitioning governance structures. Early direction and engagement in the context of popular civil resistance could be better supported. The decision of programming and investment in such cases needs to be specific and directed based on the needs of local governance structures, and importantly, context driven. Previous programming lacks coordination, struggles to institute western principles of democracy, and often fails to address the destabilizing, and perhaps unpopular, nature of mass institutional reform. Constantly assessing the local context should be a fundamental pillar of initial engagement. The lack of political capacity of how to engage in a transitional process of governance, as well as the need to bring stability and prevent spiraling conflict, all played a part in leading to where Tunisia is now. Key recommendations include:

- Acknowledge the difference between stabilization in politically charged civil resistance versus armed conflict and therefore use different models of engagement.
- Contextualize the approach.
- Consider institutional reform as long-term engagement matched by a foreign policy that supports this.
- Engage beyond the movers and shakers in capital cities.
- Consider that vacuums of power—the lack of power-grabbers can be equally detrimental to long-term stability.
- Policies aimed at creating increased stability need to be weighed and measured with those that restrict human rights and civil liberties.



EARLY SUPPORT AND DIRECTION

Tunisia like many other mid-range developing countries of the Arab Spring, has continued to be less of an international donor priority, due to in large part to the magnitude of problems elsewhere in the region. Programming responses since 2011 have been sporadic and uncoordinated, not to the scale nor meeting the needs of the dynamics on the ground. Civil society was a priority focus early on to support civic engagement that had been previously restricted, and has proved to be beneficial as a primary tool of government accountability in the absence of strong institution structures. Institutional reform has also been a priority but trying to dismantle 25 years of dominant institutional ideology without a consultative, inclusive process has proved to be beyond the ability of any one donor. Traditional power-grabbing was not a predominant feature of the post-Tunisian revolution; instead, citizens called for transparency and participation in determining the roadmap for the country.

Those catapulted to power, either by design or happenstance, characterized by uncertainty or hesitation for fear of upsetting the delicate stability in the country. Transitioning from authoritarian rule, which masked weak state capacity to systems of pluralism, does not in itself fix state capacity and corruption. By failing to make decisions and provide direction, the Tunisian government and population continue to tread water towards real progress, as seen in the lack of seemingly unpopular but much-needed reforms, fragmented political parties, dissatisfaction with political representation, a multiplicity of civil society organizations lacking purpose and therefore legitimacy.

04 | The Enduring Presence of Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The Ultimate Power Grabbers

Al Shabaab is considered by the national government and international actors as the primary exponent of violent extremism in East Africa today.

SNA/AMISOM offensives and local community efforts to dislodge the group from the areas, the percentage of Somalis living under Al Shabaab dropped from 55 percent to 5 percent between 2011 and 2016.

Al Shabaab's durable presence in Somalia illustrates the group's ability to evolve to maintain influence and relevancy. Despite more than a decade of concerted international investments in the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) and the Somali National Army (SNA), Al Shabaab is still a potent security threat to Somalia and beyond.

Al Shabaab arrived on the scene in 2007 as an offshoot of the Islamic Courts Union—a short-lived governing coalition of clans and Islamist groups that was dislodged after neighboring Ethiopia invaded and briefly occupied Somalia. As popular indignation at the presence of Ethiopian troops in the country, Al Shabaab saw its ranks swell as it positioned itself as the defender of Somali people against a foreign occupier. Between 2008 and 2011, the group controlled major cities and towns in south and central Somalia including most of the capital, Mogadishu. As a result of SNA/AMISOM offensives and local community efforts to dislodge the group from the areas, the percentage of [Somalis living under Al Shabaab dropped](#) from 55 percent to 5 percent between 2011 and 2016. In spite of the contraction in territorial and administrative control, the group is a formidable force with the capacity to disrupt movement between towns, wage complex attacks, and enforce extortion and tax payments on many businesses in the across the region. [According to Somalia-based think tank](#) Hiraal Institute, Al Shabaab collects up to \$15 million in “tax” payments monthly from business in the nation's capital.

The continued existence of deeply entrenched structural grievances with complex clan and community dynamics remain fundamental to the group's survival. In this context, the choice of communities or individual membership in the group is more a pragmatic decision than an ideological one. The most significant structural factors that fuel support for Al Shabaab include:

- A weak and co-opted justice sector that privileges powerful clans and elites.
- Widespread lack of accountability of formal and informal security forces.
- Weak capacity and pervasive corruption at every level of government.
- A deeply held sense of political and economic exclusion among minority clans.
- Unresolved inter and intra-clan conflicts.



CASE STUDY 04

Programming Responses

Given the Somalia context, it is macro-level factors and community dynamics that play a dominant role in mobilizing youth and communities in support of Al Shabaab or other VE groups. As a result, the programming options should focus on investments in areas specifically addressing many of the factors described above that underpin support for Al Shabaab. Those can include:



Expanding investments in the justice and rule of law sector that seek to establish functional systems and empower citizens to use them.



Linking assistance to the security sector with transparency and accountability reforms.



Facilitating political dialogue to address the issues that have contributed to the alignment of aggrieved and marginalized communities to al-Shabaab.



Strengthen local government capacity to build stronger citizen-state relations and contribute to social cohesion.



LESSONS LEARNED

The traditional emphasis of some CVE programs on addressing individual pull/factors isn't appropriate in rural contexts where communities (as a whole) make decisions to align with Al Shabaab. Young men from (some) minority clans join AS to protect their community's interests, primarily to increase their influence in relation to larger, more powerful clans which are perceived to monopolize government and security institutions. In this context, membership of the group is more a pragmatic decision than an ideological one. Therefore programs that seek to engage with the religious community or use religious language to counter AS are not effective. Counter-messaging often ends up inadvertently reinforcing the message from Al Shabaab.

Addressing overarching political and security concerns of marginalized communities have the best chance of limiting Al Shabaab's ability to nestle within and receive support. It is no coincidence that where Al Shabaab still maintains influence and presence is where there is domination by powerful clans in the political sphere. This is not an area where small-scale programming can make a meaningful dent. However, activities that build on recent gains (where political/peace agreements have been made) that emphasize consensus building can go a long way. USAID's Transition Initiatives for Stabilization in Somalia, implemented by DAI in 2011-2016, led local governance capacity support, community infrastructure and community engagement activities that yielded meaningful results.

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