The secessionist movement in Thailand’s southernmost provinces is one of the oldest and deadliest sub-national conflicts in Southeast Asia. After more than a decade of dormancy, violence escalated in the early 2000s. The ethnic separatist insurgency has since claimed over 6,000 lives, injured almost 11,000 people, and continues to negatively impact the socio-economic and mental health of all residents in the area. Trust and confidence among people and institutions at all levels of society have been eroded.

An estimated 80 percent of southern Thailand’s population of two million is ethnic Malay and Muslim. The region, although not Thailand’s poorest, ranks below the national average on several key development indicators, particularly education, and is poorer than the immediately neighboring, predominately Buddhist provinces of Thailand. This long-standing conflict derives primarily from limited political voice, perceived economic discrimination, and the struggle of some Malay Muslims to maintain a distinct ethnic-religious identity and local autonomy. The Thai government has invested substantial resources, both civilian and military, in the conflict-affected southern provinces. Initial development investments consisted primarily of injecting capital through large infrastructure projects to improve logistics and integrate the region’s local economy into the nation. Since 2005, the Government has focused its efforts towards winning the “hearts and minds” of the local population through village development and community-level livelihood activities, victims’ compensation payments, education assistance, and skills and capacity development programs. These additional investments have stressed the capacities of local level institutions.

In response to a request by the Government, the World Bank mobilized grant financing through the State and Peace-Building Fund to first study and then pilot ways to deliver local assistance in Thailand’s southernmost provinces. The Piloting Community Approaches in Conflict from 2009 to 2013, sought to develop culturally appropriate approaches to local development that created opportunities for increased interaction among conflict-affected communities and between communities and the state apparatus through collective action to strengthen the foundation for peace. The project was deliberately designed as a learning activity to test and refine effective local-level approaches that could potentially be mainstreamed in local government operations.

The conflict-affected region comprises the three southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat and four districts of neighboring Songkla province.
The findings of the project’s Peace-building Partnership Fund (PPF) component are covered in a separate, complementary knowledge management note.

Expanding Community Approaches in Southern Thailand

This note is one in a series of brief, operationally relevant pieces meant to inform a broad range of stakeholders – including government, civil society and international institutions – about the design, implementation and results of the project as partnering organizations strive to adapt and adopt the approaches piloted and inform the government’s local development efforts. Based on evidence from project progress reports, supervision missions, the project’s database, and a qualitative evaluation conducted in March/April 2013, this note presents both an overview of emerging findings from the first phase of the project’s Community Block Grant component and their influence on the follow-on Expanding Community Approaches in Conflict Situations (ECACS) project currently being implemented.²

CACS Project – Community Block Grants

Informed by analytical work on conflict dynamics in southern Thailand, the Community Approaches in Conflict Situation project was an innovative attempt to employ lessons learned from successful community-development programs in conflict-affected contexts. To achieve its goal of increasing interactions among local-level actors, the project financed grants through two facilities or ‘windows’. Block grants were made to villages for local development activities identified through a participatory, community-driven development process. This area-based approach was complemented by issue-focused Peace-building Partnership (PPF) grants to civil society organizations and their networks for innovative approaches and partnerships that promoted trust, peace and development. The Community Block Grant component, implemented by the Local Development Institute (LDI) with support from the World Bank, delivered over US$2 million to 27 villages in six participating sub-districts (tambons) and three municipalities, three each in the provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat. Multiple rounds of block grants (either two or three per village) ranging from 250,000 to 300,000 baht (US$7,000-10,000) financed 107 separate activities identified, proposed, and implemented by beneficiaries themselves. Recognizing the erosion and fragility of relationships caused by protracted conflict, the approach to deliver this assistance was carefully designed in its initial phase to help build social cohesion through increased interaction among groups within communities.

The CACS CDD pilot aimed to deliver assistance to conflict-affected villages. The amount of funding available and the need to introduce and test new procedures before considering more large-scale adoption necessitated selecting particular areas to participate. Sub-districts and initial communities were identified during the research phase based on the following criteria: dynamics of violent incidents, urban/rural characteristics, population demographics (ethnicity/religion), level of violence, feasibility of conducting applied research, and the distribution of resources. Spread across the three provinces, the communities represented a mix of rural and urban areas, and comprised various proportions of ethnic Malay and Thai people in both rural and urban settings where other agencies were unwilling or unable to work effectively. The wealth of data gathered during the research phase, the strength of relationships built, and valuable inputs provide by the communities argued for returning to the same communities to conduct pilot activities.

²The findings of the project’s Peace-building Partnership Fund (PPF) component are covered in a separate, complementary knowledge management note.
Villagers used a six-step participatory process to determine how grants were implemented (see Figure 1).

Project facilitators employed by LDI met with local officials and villagers to introduce and explain project objectives and operations. Community volunteers were recruited to conduct participatory surveys of village assets which were then used by community members to identify key issues, priority needs, and reach consensus on which activities to develop into subproject proposals.

A Village Implementing Committee (VIC), comprising 10-15 members selected from the community, developed proposals that were endorsed at village meetings. A committee of local technical experts and the LDI management team reviewed proposals. Once approved, the VIC managed implementation of all activities and retains responsibility after completion.

**Findings and their Application**

The CACS project’s Community Block Grant component sought to contribute to outcomes in three main areas: delivery of local assistance, improved relations within communities, and enhanced society-state relations (see Figure 2).
Although it disbursed grants only at the community level, the CACS CDD pilot began to lay the groundwork for improved relations across neighboring villages and between villages and their local governments through extensive information dissemination and inclusive and collaborative knowledge-sharing events.

I. Delivering Assistance

Alignment with community priorities. Key among the principles upon which CDD programs operate is demand-responsiveness. Experience has shown that with clear explanations of process, access to information and appropriate support, community members can effectively organize to identify and address community priorities. The CACS CDD pilot introduced a participatory village analysis process to develop an overall village development plan that identified needs. Following the community volunteer-led needs analysis exercise, proposed activities were discussed and prioritized at community meetings and, after the review and input of local technical specialists, assessed and approved.

Findings. Project processes resulted in the identification and selection of subprojects that addressed community needs.

- The vast majority of investments corresponded to priority needs as outlined in participatory village development plans.
The processes used to select priority investments in the CACS CDD project marked a significant departure from those employed in other government projects.

Trained facilitators play an important role in ensuring the integrity of the selection process, and their responsibilities should be clearly articulated and communicated to community members.

**Applied learning.** Recognizing the critical role of village facilitators, particularly in conflict contexts, the new project includes additional training as well as the development of conflict-sensitive facilitation training manuals. Furthermore, to help build capacity for mainstreaming participatory processes in other areas, young field staff from the Ministry of Labor and the Southern Border Province Administrative Center (SBPAC) will shadow facilitators as part of their ‘learning by doing’ training.

**Accountability.** As suggested above, local governance and the perceived lack of accountability of government programs are important grievances that fuel the conflict. Local development initiatives are closely linked to perceptions of governance. Several key factors supported accountability in the CACS CDD pilot. The structured, participatory subproject selection process, the defined procurement procedures, active facilitation and LDI oversight, and the relatively modest size of block grants enhanced transparency and limited the potential for the diversion of funds.

**Findings.** These measures contributed to confidence in the project operations, but room for improvement remains.

Given communities’ experiences with other projects that prioritize disbursement over quality, communities have limited expectations for accountability of government funds.

- Over 80 percent of participants surveyed reported being highly satisfied or satisfied with access to information and the transparency of the work of Village Implementing Committees.

- Wide access to relevant project information, beyond VIC and implementation team members, remains a key factor in transparency and accountability as well as an important difference from other local development projects.

- Complaints handling mechanisms have not been adequate to contribute substantially to subproject accountability.

- Balancing the roles of emerging and traditional local leaders remains challenging.

**Applied learning.** Recognizing that a lack of awareness and understanding underlies concerns and possible suspicion, the new ECACS project emphasizes expanded access to information through continued emphasis on communication at all levels and additional socialization activities, and requires that community displays of project-related information be made permanent.

**Uses of funds.** Underlying the CDD approach is the degree of choice granted to project beneficiaries. CACS procedures allowed for significant flexibility in the types of activities eligible for funding. The pilot offered an open menu that allowed communities to choose to invest in private and/or public goods.

Findings. The pilot phase financed a total of 107 activities in 27 participating communities benefiting 16,667 people – 61% of the total population in the target areas.

- More communities chose livelihood activities over public goods (e.g., basic infrastructure) reflecting their preference for meeting immediate needs.
51% of the total number of subprojects, accounting for 37% of block grant investments, was allocated to livelihood activities benefiting women and youth and agricultural inputs.

The economic livelihoods subprojects provided small but important contributions to incomes (including through off-season activities).

Community shops and savings groups commanded an additional 19% of the budget.

22% of block grant investments financed infrastructure subprojects.

The sustainability of livelihoods activities requires careful monitoring and technical support from LDI and local technical specialists. For the on-going maintenance and operation of basic infrastructure, linkages with the local authority are critical.

The highest levels of satisfaction were recorded in communities where funds were used for common goods and infrastructure benefiting the entire community.

**Applied learning.** The new project retains the use of the open menu approach, and includes a critical review of livelihood subprojects to assess their viability, sustainability, and contribution to project objectives with a view to possibly expanding support.

**II. Improving social relations within villages**

**Participation and capacity.**

Participatory governance and enhancing local capacity underlie the project's approach. Participation in project meetings and processes was a key tool for improving relations among members of participating villages. Decisions about who would be involved in project activities were made by villagers themselves. The inclusiveness of the decision-making processes was crucial to success, but the devolution of such decisions risked the voices of those disadvantaged would be ignored. Active facilitation was required to ensure wide participation and representation to prevent specific interests from exerting undue influence. Training, site visits and other knowledge-sharing and learning events were provided to enhance the capacities of participants to responsibly carry out their roles.

**Findings.** The CACS CDD project engaged significant numbers of people in its participatory processes, particularly women, and enhanced their capacities to engage in the development of their communities.

The project mobilized a total of 2,262 community volunteers and VIC and subcommittee members.

The numbers of CACS project participants appear to exceed those involved in other local development activities.

Women played active roles in all aspects of subproject selection and implementation.

The involvement of men at the community level in general is constrained by their need to avoid the intense scrutiny of authorities. This reduces their roles in income earning, public participation and community social interaction. As a result, women risk bearing a disproportionate burden in terms of working, supporting their families, and participating in community activities.

Implementing the participatory approach was more challenging in urban areas where residents had less free time and experience with collective action.

As in CDD programs elsewhere, the extent and quality of participation, particularly by typically disenfranchised groups, depended on the quality of facilitation.
The influence of local politicians and conflict in select communities negatively affected participation.

The project provided training and other learning opportunities to almost 5,000 community leaders.

Involvement in project processes (e.g., community data collection and analysis, proposal preparation, procurement and project management) as well as training, site visits and study tours improved the capacities of community members to plan and implement local development activities effectively.

Almost all (98%) VIC members surveyed reported gains in capacity, particularly in working as a group and ability to analyze and use data for planning and decision-making. Proposal writing remains a challenge given generally low education levels.

Applied learning. In addition to continued investments to enhance the capabilities of facilitators and community members, the ECACS project provides for special capacity building for poor and vulnerable groups to ensure they effectively participate in the planning, prioritization and implementation processes.

Strengthened interaction. Through participatory project processes, the pilot project focused first on strengthening the interactions between groups within communities. In line with project objectives of increasing social capital, subproject eligibility criteria emphasized socially-inclusive preparation and the equitable distribution of benefits.

Findings. The project’s results on enhancing social cohesion are mixed.

Different subproject types engaged and benefited different parts of the community.

The financing of facilities’ construction benefited all community members, and thus attracted broad community participation. These communities reported the highest levels of beneficiary satisfaction.

Economic livelihoods activities involved and benefited smaller numbers of people.

Encouragement to expand the distribution of livelihoods benefits to larger numbers of people in order to further community acceptance must be weighed against the risks to the sustainability of such groups.

Subprojects that financed community shops and savings groups potentially benefited all members of a community, but had to first prove their effectiveness.

Community contribution totaled 26% of total cost – significantly exceeding the 10% requirement – a positive sign of community ownership.

86% of respondents reported that the project created social interactions among local residents within their community.

Applied learning. The ECACS project will expand the coverage of village development grants from 27 to all 43 villages in the six participating sub-districts as well as provide additional grants directly to the sub-districts. This will help deepen the relationships with the original communities and sub-districts and consolidate gains.

Trust. CDD is predicated on the assumption that bringing people to work together for a common purpose not only increases their capacity for collective action, but also builds trust and confidence which help form the foundation for peace.
Findings. Project participants reported high but not necessarily increasing levels of trust.

- 89% of respondents said they could trust their fellow community members; but only 54% reported increased levels of trust after project implementation. Participation in successive rounds of grant-making indicates that villagers progressively gained confidence in working together as they tackled more complicated local development activities. Overcoming entrenched divisions within villages requires additional efforts over an extended period of time.

Applied learning. The ECACS project is focused more actively on confidence-building. Establishing and strengthening partnerships with local government agencies and officials and select UN agencies, as described below, is critical to the achievement of this objective. The new project’s results indicators include the increase in levels of trust, satisfaction and confidence within communities (and between community members and the state) necessitating continued attention and measurement.

III. Improved State-Society Relations

As originally designed, the CACS project envisioned increasing interactions not only within communities, but also among communities and between communities and the state apparatus. The contribution of the block grant component to this objective was to be through the funding of sub-district level grants and related inputs. As a result of the mid-term evaluation, however, disbursements were restricted to village-levels grants only, thereby limiting the achievement of this objective. However, recognition of the need over time to move beyond ‘horizontal’ social cohesion issues at the community level to include ‘vertical’ integration with local government yielded promising results.

Findings. Despite reduced attention, over the course of the project engagement with government strengthened and the pilot began to lay a foundation for improved relations among villages and between villages and local government structures.
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Applied learning. The ECACS project commits itself to contribute to confidence-building between communities and sub-district authorities in the six participating sub-districts. The current project reintroduces the financing of sub-district level block grants – three rounds for each of the six participating sub-districts averaging $20,000 to implement cross-village activities that also foster local authorities’ engagement with communities. It seeks to enhance the capacity of local authorities to undertake participatory local development activities by establishing partnerships, codified in memoranda of understanding, with key central, regional and local government agencies, including the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Labor, Ministry of Interior (its departments of Local Administration and Community Development), the Human Rights Commission, SBPAC, the National Economic and Social Development Board, the Prince of Songkhla University and LDI. Partnering organizations will participate in training, shadowing opportunities, site visits and other learning exchanges. Governors in each of the three southern provinces agreed to chair local Technical Working Committees. Potential collaboration with UN agencies, initially with UNICEF, to provide capacity-building to local communities and agencies in agreed areas such as early child development and gender equality is being explored.

- Although modest, some local government authorities contributed resources (e.g., budgetary support, personnel input, land or spaces) to subproject activities in select areas.

- Examples of government replicating the participatory approach in other development programs are emerging. Local government agencies have committed to adopting elements of the CDD approaches in their respective programs.

- Awareness and understanding by sub-district officials of the participatory development approach – an indicator of the potential for their adoption – was reported to be high by the majority of those surveyed. Budget and time constraints hinder the involvement of local government agencies.

- There remains resistance from some government officials and traditional local leaders to the idea that villagers can themselves initiate and manage local activities. Awareness only will be insufficient to adjust these entrenched attitudes.
Conclusion

The Community Block Grant component of the CACS pilot project demonstrated the value of inclusive community development approaches that present a viable alternative model of community development distinguishable from other local-level government programming. The project proved that it is possible to engage communities in identifying their priorities and working together to address those needs in the most conflict-affected areas in southern Thailand. The follow-on Expanding Community Approaches in Conflict Situations currently being implemented extends community block grants across all villages in participating sub-districts and finances sub-district level grants while refining processes and providing adequate support. In the context of a middle-income country with significant resources, the project aims to inform government’s approach to local investments with a view to improving their effectiveness and legitimacy in the eyes of the people as the country transitions towards peace.

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