

## Good Governance Impact Example Series

## Global Citizen Corps: Youth Civic Participation for a Better World

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Civic participation, civic education and youth leadership development are at the heart of Mercy Corps' Global Citizen Corps (GCC) program. GCC inspires and supports an international movement of young people, helping them build the knowledge and skills they need to turn their passion into meaningful action on critical local and global issues. If the world is to successfully tackle immense challenges, such as lifting the "bottom billion" out of poverty or reversing climate change, we must harness the energy and creativity of youth. And we must support young people in developing the capability and opportunities that will enable them to be responsible citizens working effectively with communities and governments to bring change. GCC is doing exactly that.

**Key governance themes:** civic participation and voice, inclusiveness, advocacy, leadership

Since its inception in 2007, GCC has grown to involve more than 11,000 youth in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and the West Bank/Gaza, connecting with one another and peers in the US and UK. The GCC program is shaped by Mercy Corps' international expertise and networks, matched with our on-the-ground presence in countries in transition. GCC engages youth through a three-tiered process of training, action-taking, and dialogue. In-person and online trainings help youth build critical life skills and leadership capabilities, while also providing them with the multi-media, communications, advocacy and organizing skills necessary to successfully educate and mobilize their peers and communities. Participants also learn about critical global challenges and explore how those issues relate to problems in their own countries.



Photo: Mercy Corps. Iraq, 2010.

After assessing and prioritizing needs in their communities, young people design and manage action projects that directly address local concerns. Projects typically focus on awareness-raising, advocacy, or community service. At the same time, young people from around the world connect with each other through the GCC website ([www.globalcitizencorps.org](http://www.globalcitizencorps.org)), social networking sites, video-conferences, and in-person gatherings to share their experiences and action plans. This youth-to-youth dialogue is structured to increase empathy and understanding among youth in different countries, bridging physical and cultural divides, while also creating the sense that they are all part of a larger global movement of youth.

As GCC participants develop a greater sense of awareness of the important issues that confront their communities as well as the broader international community, they often find that the best way to effect change is to lobby or work in partnership with local and national governments to reform policies, institute new laws, ensure that existing laws are enforced, or carry out joint initiatives that directly address community concerns. The examples below illustrate how GCC leaders in Iraq, the US and Lebanon are taking action in the areas of the environment, health and education and ensuring their voices for change are heard by national and local governments.

### Iraq – Advocating for Health through GCC

GCC has been particularly popular in Iraq, where young people have suffered from repression and isolation and where they continue to have limited opportunities for self-expression or activism, whether through volunteerism, recreational activities or political participation. Mercy Corps has found that providing training in leadership skills and multi-media literacy, while at the same time fostering meaningful interactions with the rest of the world, can transform feelings of victimization and desperation into a powerful desire to make a difference.

More than 500 young Iraqis in five governorates across Iraq gather weekly in youth centers, computer labs and classrooms to learn about local and international issues. Online dialogue and video-conferences allow the youth to exchange ideas and information with their peers in other countries. Like GCC leaders elsewhere, these Iraqi youth are continuously transferring their global learning into local action.

In Khanaqeen governorate, GCC youth learned there were over 90 patients with severe blood disease staying at a hospital without sufficient equipment and capacity to care for them properly. The young leaders decided that action must be taken to improve the conditions of these patients. They travelled several hours to Erbil to advocate on behalf of the patients at the Ministry of Health and UN. Their efforts resulted in a pledge from the Ministry of Health to address the needs of the hospital. This example from Iraq shows how GCC youth are not only serving their neighbors directly but are also succeeding in influencing government policies to bring about more significant, longer-term impact on their communities.

### **GCC in the US – Global Campaign for Education**

“We are all here, united, to urge congressmen and women to fulfill this promise and pass the Education For All Act,” declared Fay Chan, a GCC Leader, who held the floor at the Global Campaign for Education Press Conference. Camera flashes illuminated the room as she spoke to a packed house, her fellow GCC Leaders behind her.

It was April 2008; GCC Leaders were in Washington, D.C. Their mission: to lobby Congress to sign the Education For All Act, a bill ensuring all children receive a basic education. Cameras rolled as Chan and others advocated on behalf of the millions of children who lack access to education.

Before trekking to Capitol Hill, Mercy Corps equipped GCC Leaders with the tools they needed to get their message across. At a role-playing exercise, Chan practiced her persuasive skills on a fellow GCC Leader acting as a congressman. “We’re gaining an in-depth understanding of education and public policy and how to really make things happen,” said Kathy Zhang, another GCC Leader.

A day before GCC Leaders tested their advocacy skills, Mercy Corps President Nancy Lindborg fired them up. “Don’t underestimate the power of your voices on the Hill tomorrow,” said Lindborg. Fay Chan was ready. “I’ve got this confidence, that, yeah, I can change the world,” Chan smiled, nodding her head confidently.

The big day arrived. Cameras also captured Tanya Padilla of Texas speaking passionately to Congressman Henry Cuellar’s staff, “We feel that it’s a human right for everybody in the world to experience at least a primary education.” Padilla and other GCC members flooded over 70 congressional offices with their message. “I feel extremely accomplished, like I did something,” said Padilla. And they did do something – as a result of their efforts, two additional members of Congress signed on to the bill.

### **Lebanon – GCC and Youth Municipalities**

Traditional power structures based on client-patron relationships have alienated many Lebanese youth and undermined their faith in their ability to change society. Mercy Corps has a history of helping youth in Lebanon participate in the local decisions that affect their lives. In the ongoing *Local Governance through Youth Municipalities* project, Mercy Corps is setting an example of transparent and accountable local governance. The initiative seeks to inspire the next generation of leaders to create political systems of vision free from social, economic and political corruption and favoritism. The project cultivates youth leadership and a sense of identity by engaging 150 young people in five areas of Lebanon to undergo an election process to create and manage five Youth Municipalities. The Municipalities function as “shadow” city councils and develop comprehensive agendas for youth in their communities.

Youth campaigning to be elected by their peers are taking advantage of the GCC network to develop campaign platforms and outreach programs. They seek to demonstrate their ability to find local solutions to global issues. For example, Youth Municipality candidates developed their knowledge of global climate change through the GCC website, exchanged views through the site’s discussion board and drew tips from the “Take Action” section to design community projects. These projects mobilized the participation of broad groups of young people who selected the best projects.

Youth Municipality leaders in Lebanon also appreciate the networking benefits of GCC in the areas of governance and advocacy. GCC provides a means of peer-to-peer learning across cultural boundaries. Youth in Lebanon, Iraq and the US participated in an 8-week dialogue to discuss local elections in each country and mechanisms to promote transparency and accountability. The student leaders debated different definitions and forms of governance. This example illustrates how GCC encourages youth to act locally while thinking and talking globally.

*This Good Governance Impact Example is one of a series included in Mercy Corps’ Guide to Good Governance Programming. For more information, please contact Ruth Allen, Director for Community Mobilization, Governance and Partnerships at [rallen@bos.mercycorps.org](mailto:rallen@bos.mercycorps.org)*

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