

2.2.6 [14] Continuous Improvement

The evolution of the Integrated Community Security Programme (ICSP) into the Access to Justice and Community Security Programme (AJACS) offers donors, implementers and beneficiaries an opportunity to reflect on challenges and successes to date, and on the programmatic and conceptual changes that will need to take place in order to meet the programme's goal. These changes are necessary given that the situation on the ground in northern Syria has deteriorated significantly over the course of the ICSP programme, between regime territorial advances and its intensified use of scorched-earth mass terror tactics, and the rapid gains made by extremist groups including listed terrorist entities such as the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra. Caught between this hammer and anvil, the available operating space for security and rule of law actors in northern Syria has shrunk significantly.

ARK believes that to ensure the programme's continued relevance and safeguard its ability to respond to needs flexibly, AJACS should begin contingency planning for possible expansion into other areas of Syria, including but not limited to Hama, Daraa, and potentially the Kurdish areas. ARK has already programmed in these areas in the past. This would offer AJACS the ability to operate and test its theoretical bases in areas that are less violently contested by the regime and/or extremist armed groups, allowing for an assessment of the full potential of the programme in a range of conflict settings, to ascertain what factors impact on community resilience and inoculation from extremism. In addition, geographical expansion and flexibility would allow for more targeted interventions in those locations that have shown exceptional resistance to the encroachment of violent extremist groups, even where these areas sit closer to the fault line between opposition- and extremist-held areas.

This flexible approach would offer great potential to meet the key AJACS objective of helping the Syrian Interim Government (IG) and the moderate opposition develop its capacity to plan and prepare security and justice interventions so that it is able to act quickly to consolidate when opportunities arise. The IG has recently briefed friendly governments on its plans for a 'Back to Syria' campaign, which could involve the establishment of an IG presence within a secure area of liberated Syria. Such a move would be a welcome signal to Syrians that the IG is serious about asserting the legitimacy and sovereignty of the revolutionary movement in the face of many violent competitors. If realised, an IG move back into Syria would be a key opportunity for AJACS to demonstrate its relevance to Syrian communities in need of justice and community security, by bolstering the IG's ability to secure this nascent sovereign space, including potentially through support in the area of border management, which would potentially help address a pressing international concern, namely the easy movement of foreign fighters into Syria via the Turkish border. With ARK facilitation, discussions about the synergies between IG planning for policing and border management and ongoing internal policing programming have already commenced between Syrian stakeholders.

AJACS, while dependent on a permissive operating environment, is a key tool in countering extremist groups in Syria (and by extension, Iraq) due to its ability to offer credible governance alternatives to vulnerable civilians. ARK is well positioned to mobilise its expertise in the field of countering violent extremism derived from extensive work in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and the region. In August 2013 ARK proposed an integrated approach (*From Provide to Contest*) to countering the advance of extremists by surging humanitarian, stabilisation and service delivery support into targeted areas, and has already developed and delivered proposals within the ICSP that are grounded in CVE theory, such as the successful distribution of Ramadan packages in Aleppo in July 2014, which aimed to challenge extremists by supporting positive, unifying national narratives, as well as promote policing and justice services in a bid to create a viable alternative to extremist service provision.

Within the current parameters of the ICSP programme, the key to improved performance within AJACS rests primarily with the implementer. Monitoring the implementation and responsiveness of the programme to beneficiary needs and adapting to changing realities on the ground have been central to ARK's approach for all its Syria programming. ARK has a dedicated M&E team that

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ensures collection of information on the programmes, enabling learning from past experiences and continuous delivery augmentation. This objective assessment of the programmes informs strategic decisions with the aim of improving future performance. The research findings are fed back to the donor to inform and support proposals for future programme design improvements based on relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability.

In order to ensure continuous performance improvements, ARK will develop a formal quality assurance mechanism to integrate our delivery and corporate services departments and align behind agreed quality and performance standards. This will deliver administrative efficiency and maximise the usage of human and financial resources. In practice this means continuously monitoring adherence to and relevance of internal procedures and making recommendations for improvements and ensuring their application. The established Internal Audit and Compliance Department guarantees regular and effective internal reporting to the senior management team. By monitoring adherence to internal and external regulations ARK demonstrates continuous compliance, reducing the incidence of errors and need for remedial action and consequently producing efficiency savings.

As ARK further develops its relationships with local service providers and suppliers, it is able to obtain favourable rates and preferential service agreements, thereby demonstrating commitment to enhancing cost effectiveness. Such practices are examples of ARK's core principle of obtaining value for money.

ARK also invests in continuous professional development of its staff in a range of relevant skill areas such as languages, donor compliance, grant administration, audit and project management. This translates into a better quality of service as project personnel become effective and responsive to donor and beneficiary needs.