



Sons of Iraq members recite oath during validation ceremony in Kirkuk Province, Iraq, 2008

Reconstruction Leaders’ Perceptions of CERP in Iraq: Report Overview

BY STUART W. BOWEN, JR., AND CRAIG COLLIER

The Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) has accomplished a number of audits and inspections over the past 8 years that focused on the Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP). To complement those previous oversight efforts, SIGIR recently conceived and produced a special report entitled “Reconstruction Leaders’ Perceptions of the Commander’s Emergency Response Program in Iraq.” This report was based on a SIGIR-developed and -administered survey of unit leaders in Iraq who had first-hand experience using CERP. The survey provided a plethora of new and revelatory data, allowing deeper insights into the effects of CERP use in Iraq.¹

A wide range of reconstruction personnel responded to the survey. Along with former U.S. Army battalion commanders (the primary CERP users), we surveyed former U.S. Marine Corps battalion commanders, State Department Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) leaders, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) PRT members, and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) officials. Taken together, these groups constitute the primary U.S. Government bodies responsible for the nomination, execution, and subsequent monitoring and evaluation of almost \$4 billion in CERP projects accomplished during Operation *Iraqi Freedom*.

The CERP survey asked:

- the extent to which commanders used CERP and the time required to manage CERP projects
- the outcomes commanders tried to achieve with CERP and the relationship between intended outcomes and the types of projects to which funding was dedicated
- the measures of effectiveness commanders used to assess whether projects were meeting intended outcomes and the perceived efficacy of projects executed at different times and in different areas

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- the effectiveness of coordination among commanders, their higher headquarters, and other U.S. Government agencies involved in stabilization and reconstruction
- the degree of fraud and corruption in CERP projects.

Of the 390 survey responses received, 194 came from Army battalion commanders, 14 from Marine battalion commanders, 27 from officers from USACE, 128 from State Department personnel (including 28 PRT leaders), and 27 from USAID employees. The breadth of this civilian and military cohort ensured a wide array of testimony about the effects of CERP projects in Iraq.

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There is no simple answer to the question “Was CERP a success in Iraq?” But survey data did reveal much about CERP’s actual use and usefulness. The open-ended comments that respondents included yielded particularly sobering insights into the challenges associated with executing stability and reconstruction operations in a nonpermissive environment.

The Use and Usefulness of CERP

Commanders used CERP in Iraq chiefly to increase employment and improve economic development, reduce violence, improve government capacity, and create goodwill toward coalition forces. Some used it for reconciliation among Iraqi sectarian factions. Many commanders noted that, regardless of project type, their ultimate goal in the use of CERP

was to reduce violence and, hence, casualties. Several commanders cited “building relationships” as another desired outcome, although that was not one of the authorized uses of CERP in the “Money as a Weapons System (MAAWS)” handbook.

Several survey respondents criticized the poor engagement by CERP planners with the Iraqi government and local populace (see figure 1). One commander noted that “too many unwanted projects were done with no [government of Iraq] buy-in or [operations and maintenance] funding to sustain the project after completion.” Another was similarly critical, observing that “too much money was thrown away on American good ideas, as opposed to Iraqi real needs.” Survey data provided an evidentiary connection between the degree of local involvement and project effectiveness. That is, for 9 of the 19 different CERP project types surveyed, there was a significant relationship between commanders’ use of government or citizen input and the perceived effectiveness of the project.

Commanders generally found CERP to be a useful tool in their arsenal for combating the insurgency, protecting and improving the lives of Iraqis, and fostering good Iraqi governance. Of the 19 categories of CERP projects, the most effective was the over \$300 million used for the Sons of Iraq program (somewhat disingenuously lumped under “temporary contract guards for critical infrastructure” in order to be considered a legitimate use of CERP), followed by water and sanitation and then agricultural projects (see figure 2). Civic cleanup activities were rated the least effective. Most of the categories received mixed responses. For example, while about 22 percent considered “battle damage repair” effective, another 12 percent considered it ineffective.

Figure 1. Percentage of Commanders Ranking Iraqi Government and/or Iraqi Citizen Requests as Among the Most Important Considerations When Nominating CERP Projects by Time of Deployment

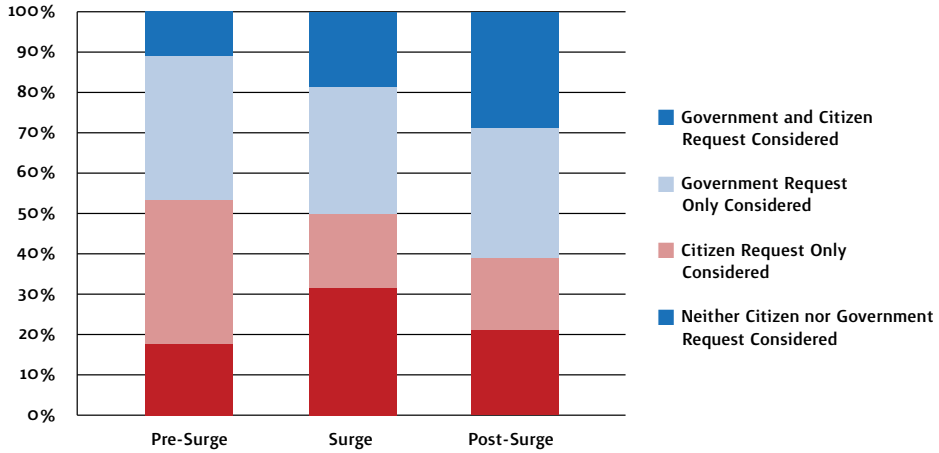
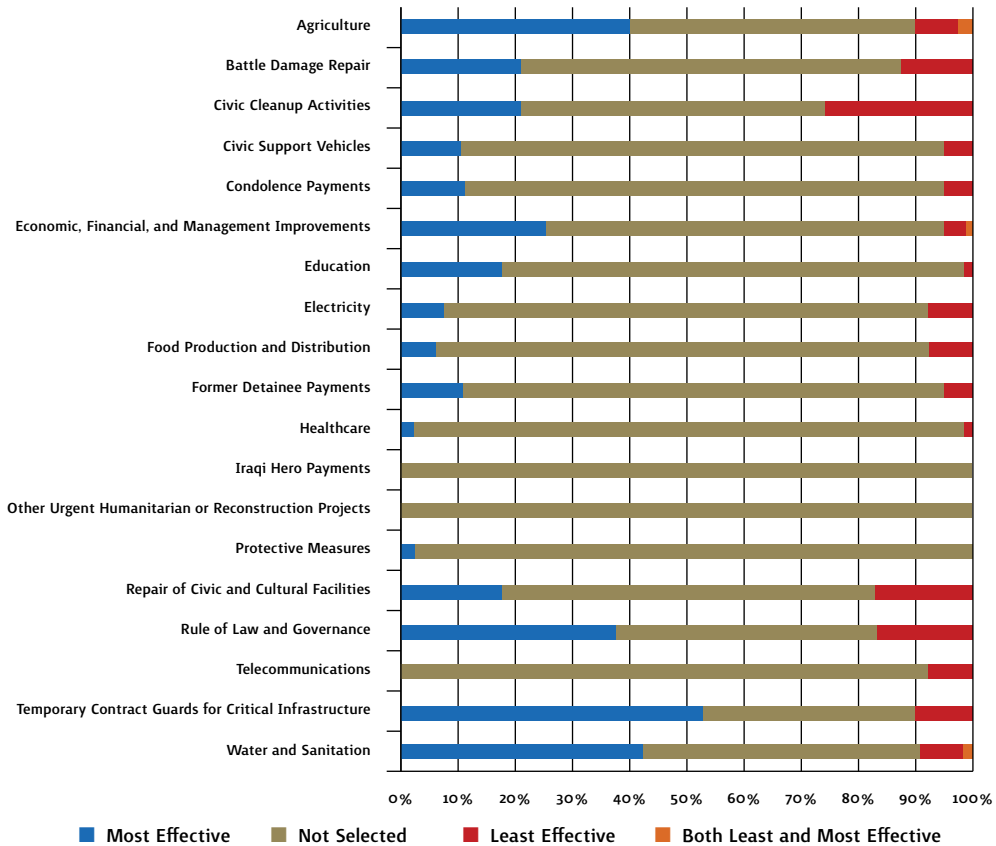


Figure 2. Battalion Commanders' Evaluations of CERP Project Effectiveness by Project Type



Measuring CERP Effectiveness

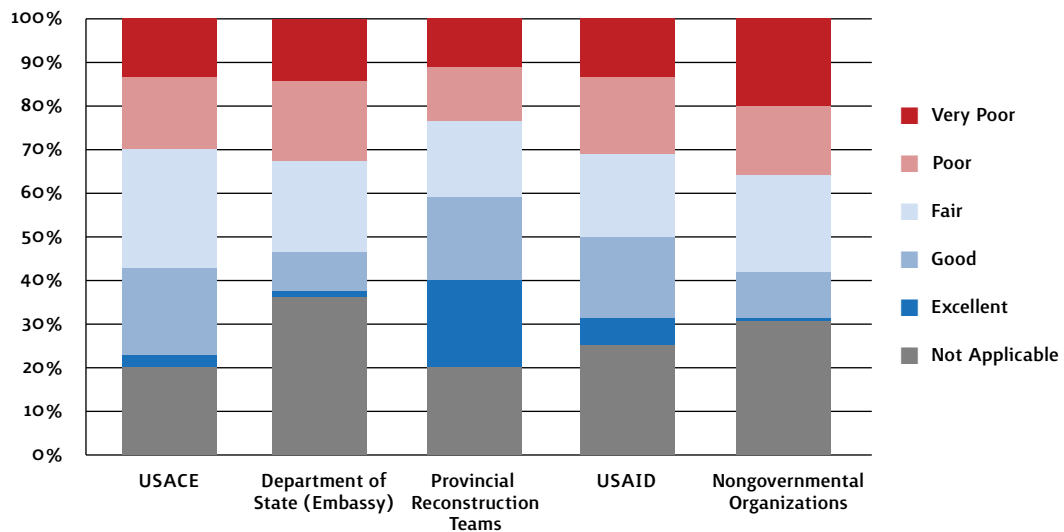
Between 30 and 40 percent of battalion commanders used general levels of violence as the chief metric for a CERP project’s success. For instance, “CERP is a critical tool for commanders on the battlefield . . . [and] imperative for security of U.S. forces” was a typical comment. One-fifth of the commanders considered specific levels of violence against U.S. or coalition forces as the most important indicator of whether a CERP project was successful; about 10 percent specifically considered the level of sectarian violence in their evaluations of project impact.

Not all commanders agreed on the effectiveness of CERP in reducing violence. One commander noted that “[the idea that] Projects/Services alone equates to a reduction of violence and better security is a nonsensical idea.”

Interagency Coordination

Comments from military and civilian personnel underscored persistent structural impediments to effective coordination between and among agencies. Less than half of the commanders viewed interagency coordination on CERP projects as either good or excellent (see figure 3). About 30 percent of commanders rated their coordination with USACE as poor or very poor, and 32 percent rated coordination with USAID as poor or very poor. One commander’s observation was typical of many responses: “USAID started huge projects and did not supervise the work through to completion. They started projects in areas they were unwilling to go out into and thus did not understand the environment enough to realize they were being taken to the cleaners and in some cases actually increasing the civil violence. Same can be said for USACE.”

Figure 3. Percentage Distribution of Battalion Commanders’ Assessments of Interagency Coordination Within and Outside the Military



Fraud and Corruption

About three-quarters of those surveyed estimated that at least some CERP money was lost to fraud and corruption. Twenty-eight percent said they believed that the amount lost to fraud and corruption equaled less than 10 percent of funds spent; 35 percent estimated that between 10 and 25 percent was lost; 10 percent estimated that between 25 and 50 percent of the money was lost; and 3 percent estimated that more than 50 percent was lost to fraud and corruption. The highest levels of fraud and corruption reported were in Baghdad before and during the surge (see figure 4).

Some commanders perceived corruption as simply the price of doing business in Iraqi culture, while others believed that corruption needed to be fought because it significantly impeded U.S. goals. There was general agreement, however, that corruption in Iraq was endemic. "Corruption is an integral feature of Iraqi society and politics," wrote one

commander, going on to say that "Battling corruption in the Iraqi system is a Sisyphean task. . . . It was generally understood and accepted as common practice."

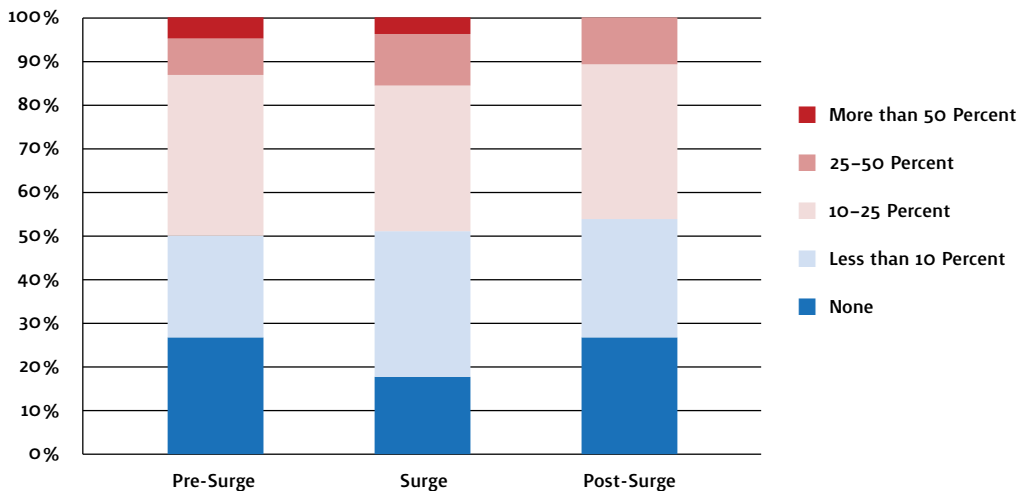
Several respondents believed that CERP project funds had been illegally diverted to benefit insurgents. A commander who served in Diyala Province claimed that "There was substantial evidence that the local authorities (Government/Security and Military Forces) were stealing right off the top. Additionally, [Iraqi] governors were offering insurgents money that was to pay for CERP activities to NOT attack certain CERP-funded programs."

Lessons

Based on the broad range of experiences reported by those who responded to the CERP survey, SIGIR identified 10 lessons for consideration.

1. Reduction in violence can be a useful and manageable tool for measuring CERP effectiveness. Reducing violence was the

Figure 4. Percentage of CERP Funds Lost to Fraud and Corruption by Time of Deployment



primary motivation behind most CERP projects, with an improvement in security the most frequently used metric for determining success.

2. Insufficient metrics and poor project selection complicate CERP effect on capacity-building. Where the reported CERP project goal was to increase government capacity, respondents provided little evidence of a causal connection between what battalion commanders were trying to accomplish, what they spent money on, and the outcomes achieved. If the intent of a project is something other than force protection, CERP managers should ensure the use of metrics that yield measurable results regarding the project's effect.

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3. CERP projects can strengthen relationships with the host country. CERP was useful in Iraq in strengthening relationships between U.S. forces and community leaders. Of note, using CERP for relationship-building is not a purpose mentioned in MAAWS.

4. Limiting CERP's overall programmatic scope produces a more manageable program and better outcomes. Projects are more likely to be successful when fewer projects are implemented, projects are smaller in scope, and the projects can be completed quickly. This is consistent with SIGIR's previous recommendations to match the size, scope, and number of projects to a unit's ability to provide adequate oversight.

5. Involving national and local governments in project selection increases project success rates. Iraqi governmental support for

CERP projects increased the likelihood of success. Iraqi government involvement was important not only to ensure that Iraqis would find the project useful but also to improve the chances that the Iraqis would sustain it. Of note, battalion commanders who reported involving local Iraqi government officials in selecting projects found lower levels of corruption.

6. Insufficient interagency integration in planning and execution limits CERP effectiveness. The lack of coordination among reconstruction agencies limited unity of effort, reducing the efficacy of the overall reconstruction plan. Military and civilian leaders commonly criticized their counterparts for insufficient oversight.

7. CERP projects should be executed in secure zones. Poor security conditions limited oversight, management, and monitoring of projects. Although security is a prerequisite to ensuring the completion and continued monitoring of reconstruction projects, many were implemented in areas that were insecure. This needlessly strained manpower and physical resources, thus limiting the degree of project success.

8. Fraud and corruption within CERP limit program effectiveness. Fraud and corruption were endemic in Iraq. Some respondents viewed this reality as simply the cost of doing business, but others saw it as a significant impediment to U.S. objectives. Respondents' descriptions of corruption embraced a broad variety of circumstances, ranging from outright bribery (such as government officials taking money) to more complex fraud (such as contractors colluding to inflate bids). Although not as widespread, fraud on the part of Americans in Iraq was acknowledged by some respondents.

9. Capping the financial size of a CERP project increases the likelihood of its success and can reduce fraud. Focusing efforts on projects that are smaller in size and scope can reduce levels of fraud and corruption.

10. Poorly monitored CERP projects can cause a loss of funds to insurgents. Poorly managed reconstruction funding can also result in funds ending up in the hands of insurgents.

Conclusion

The SIGIR survey yielded a wide range of opinions on CERP, stretching from enthusiastic support to sharp criticism. One battalion commander stated that “As a method of facilitating non-lethal efforts coupled with lethal targeting of the enemy network, I believe CERP changed the outcome of the battle for Iraq.” At the opposite end of the spectrum, another noted, “Fellow Soldiers lost their lives pursuing ill-conceived and poorly managed schemes to improve the lives of Iraqis. Repeating this model in future wars will stand out as our nation’s biggest failure.”

When asked what metrics the Embassy used to measure effectiveness, a PRT member responded: “This question is laughable. The Embassy had NO idea what we were doing. We might as well have been on the dark side of the moon. This is understandable as they had to feed the Washington beast every day.” An Army battalion commander similarly observed: “Division Headquarters? Didn’t know they ever left the FOBs [forward operating bases]!”

The complete set of survey responses amounts to a rich repository of useful insights about CERP from those who worked closest to the sharp end of stability and reconstruction operations in Iraq. We have posted all of the responses (edited where necessary to

protect respondent anonymity), along with the full text of the special report, on our Web site. Future leaders interested in improving the effectiveness of stabilization and reconstruction missions might be able to distill further lessons from the survey’s results. **PRISM**

Note

¹ The full report is available at <www.sigir.mil/publications/specialReports.html>.