

Iraq and Rehabilitation Lessons from Previous Evaluations

by
Rob van den Berg and Niels Dabelstein,
Chair and Vice Chair of the OECD/DAC Network on Development Evaluation¹

Iraq is not Afghanistan and it is not the Balkans, but lessons need to be learned from these two recent touchstones of humanitarian experience. There are similarities to Afghanistan in the expanse of the country and the regional socio-political dynamics. On the other hand, there are also similarities to the Balkans in the need to address a crisis with a relatively urbanised, highly educated and (formerly) well off population. Some instructive parallels to Kosovo, and to the earlier Iraq crisis, also suggest themselves.

Iraq is slightly smaller than France; its population is thought to be about 26 million. The principal language is Arabic, but for approximately 20% of the population, the Kurds, it is a second language. The population is predominantly urban, but there is substantial agricultural production, particularly in Lower Mesopotamia. Iraq's oil has long been its main export, but, before sanctions, it was a considerable exporter of carpets, fruit and nuts. Levels of literacy are somewhat below those of the industrialised world, but well above those of most developing countries; there is a substantial educated and professional middle-class. Saddam Hussein's profligate acquisitiveness, his increasingly expensive repression, the war with Iran and the Gulf War weakened the country's economy and the subsequent sanctions came close to completely destroying pre-existing socio-economic structures. The invasion by Coalition Forces, have further reduced an already crumbling urban infrastructure.

The current climate, characterised by a justified sense of urgency among aid agencies to maximise the impact of aid and avoid the recurrent problems of the past, provides a real opportunity to put into place effective mechanisms for getting the relief and reconstruction effort in Iraq "right". At the same time, a number of political issues and impasses remain to be resolved before assistance and protection efforts can hit their stride.

First and foremost is the role of the United Nations itself. As of early May, the United Nations humanitarian agencies are, for the most part, waiting in the wings. Following their withdrawal in advance of the war, they were conspicuous by their absence throughout the country for a six-week period. In the vacuum, humanitarian interests were left principally to the International Committee of the Red Cross, which functioned with courage and determination. In the aftermath of the war, negotiations between the UN system and the coalition forces have not yet succeeded in allowing the agencies to play their mandated role. While a role for the UN in emergency relief and protection activities has been seriously delayed, the UN's involvement in rehabilitation and reconstruction activities has been questioned by the United States.

There is little indication to date that historical experience will provide much of a guide to policy and programme planning for the Iraq crisis. The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has made an effort to bring recent experience to bear on the current challenges. Its sidelining, however, has mooted its capacity to inform operational work with

¹ This note has been prepared in their personal capacities; it has not been discussed by the OECD/DAC.

earlier experience. Meanwhile, US-led reconstruction is starting out in something of a historical vacuum. Asked in an interview before leaving for the region about possible precedents to inform coalition strategy, US General Jay Garner replied: "I don't think we are using anywhere as our example". In more recent days, General Garner has been replaced by the appointment of a civilian head of reconstruction efforts, Paul Bremer, who reports to the U.S. Secretary of Defence.

While certain aspects of the current crisis in Iraq certainly are unique, many elements and their likely evolution still bear comparison with previous crises and the international responses to them. Key international actors should consider how to ensure that the lessons from previous operations are built into the planning and co-ordination mechanisms for aid to Iraq and how to institute the necessary actions and safeguards. Such arrangements need to take into account relevant lessons both at the international level as well as at the regional and national levels.

The following lessons are based on a review of recent evaluation reports - the most important of which are listed in the annex. They were compiled with the support of an expert group and of the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP)². They take as point of departure an earlier effort in late 2001³ to bring to bear some of the lessons of experience on the design of a relief and reconstruction programme in Afghanistan.

1. Humanitarian Assistance

In determining a response to the humanitarian situation in Iraq, it is necessary to look at any comparable examples. Comparisons with post-conflict situations in predominantly rural Africa are for the most part inappropriate. This is because Iraq occupies a pivotal position between the West (primarily Europe) and West and Central Asia, it has massive deposits of oil and is, despite the damage, a relatively developed, urbanised country. In terms of social circumstance, perhaps the closest parallel is former Yugoslavia and, in terms of what follows a large-scale military intervention by foreign forces, the parallel must be Afghanistan. Major evaluations, from which lessons may be drawn, have been made for both⁴.

These evaluations show that one of the cardinal principles of humanitarian assistance is that it should be, and be seen to be, *neutral*. Humanitarian organisations have 'nothing to say about the justness of the conflict or the legitimacy of armed force.'⁵ Their purpose is to ameliorate the effects of armed force on a civilian population, without regard to individual political allegiances; they must respond in proportion to the degree of suffering involved, that is, they must be *impartial*. For neutrality and impartiality to become a reality and for ameliorative action to have a long-term positive effect, the humanitarian organisations and workers must be *independent*. Neutrality, impartiality and independence are principles built on international conventions and agreements, including the Geneva Conventions, and the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*. All three principles are necessary conditions for the full effectiveness of aid and, incidentally, for the safety of humanitarian workers.

² Ian Christophos, Sweden; Shep Forman, Center for International Cooperation, USA; Phil O'Keefe, ETC, UK; Larry Minear, Tufts University; John Mitchell, ALNAP; and Peter Walker, Tuft's University. A draft of this note was commented on at the biannual ALNAP meeting on 2 May 2003.

³ *Aid Responses to Afghanistan: Lessons from Previous Evaluations*, Paris: OECD/DAC, December 2001.

⁴ See, for example, *Evaluation of Danish Humanitarian Assistance, 1992-98*, Copenhagen: Danida, 1999.

⁵ *Humanitarian Principles and the Conflict in Iraq*, HPG Briefing Note, ODI, 2003.

Following the battles, the job of external military forces – in the language of international humanitarian law, the Occupying Power - is to provide protection and assistance for the inhabitants of, and the humanitarian workers in, the places they occupy. In functioning as an occupying power, coalition forces in Iraq should assume certain administrative responsibilities which should not be confused with humanitarian tasks – or government. As in Kosovo and Afghanistan, the conduct of “hearts and minds” activities by the military, with an acknowledged political purpose needs to be kept separate and distinct from humanitarian work, which is, as indicated above, neutral and impartial in character.

All relief work, government, charitable, voluntary or otherwise, must be subject to central coordination and direction, a lesson that has been demonstrated as much by its absence as by its presence. Neither effective humanitarian action nor secure relief operations benefit from random, uncoordinated activity. Policies for humanitarian assistance must be coherent and be created by the agencies in response to the exigencies of the theatres of operation. Once the parameters have been established, it is inappropriate for governments lending support to humanitarian agencies to attempt the micromanagement and control of such activity in the field.

While the immediate needs of the Iraq population may not be as massive or as multi-sectoral as predicted, geographical and sectoral pockets of severe humanitarian needs do exist, both in terms of physical needs such as food and shelter and protection needs of ethnic or religious minorities relocated under the previous regime. This requires location-specific and impartial needs assessment. As always, coherent and co-ordinated policies are crucial. This means that control of humanitarian assistance must be made the task of a single, impartial body, probably in association with the United Nations or the Red Crescent/Red Cross Movement. This will enhance coherence and ensure neutrality. It is noteworthy that a number of NGOs and coalitions of NGOs have requested the UN to assume such a role.

Because Iraq is normally a net importer of food (up to 65%), some food aid will be necessary until the economy is re-established. The Food for Oil programme poses a particular problem. Created to mitigate the effects of the UN sanctions, its resumption and phasing out should be carefully designed so as not to undermine a future local food production and commerce (distortion of market prices) as has been seen in the wake of earlier emergency humanitarian food distribution⁶.

2. Post-Conflict Rehabilitation

A large proportion of its internally displaced persons, most of whom are sheltering from war in other areas of Iraq, will be able to return to family networks and to housing, damaged or otherwise, without encountering major ethnic or religious difficulties. It follows from this that the common preoccupations of humanitarian assistance and reconstruction aid – large scale famine relief, capacity building, the re-establishment of livelihoods, the creation of suitable institutions, and even, up to a point, dealing with refugees must all, to some degree, be adapted to the needs of an urbanised society facing the remains of a sanctions and war damaged infrastructure. Humanitarian assistance remains essential, but not always in its most familiar forms. Even in the early stages, it appears that significant water supplies have been reconnected and the prognosis for this year's harvest is good; these circumstances do not seem to require the traditional quantity or quality of relief work. In this sense, the challenge faced by the

⁶ *Food Security, Nutrition and Food Aid Minimum Standards*. Chapter in *The Sphere Handbook*. Geneva, The Sphere Project, in-press- 2003..

international community is, in broad terms, the result of a political, security, and development crisis rather than, in the first instance, of emergency humanitarian needs.

The distinctions between humanitarian assistance, rehabilitation and development are frequently and necessarily blurred, particularly between the first two. On the one hand the point of change is often difficult to discern and, on the other, donor governments, determined to control costs, seem only able to do so if the categories are fairly rigidly observed. The model is based on long experience of catastrophe, particularly in Africa, but also in other places where there is a substantial rural hinterland, a large refugee population in need of resettlement and, frequently, serious ethnic conflict. Matters in Iraq differ more than most from the generality.

Despite the depredations of Saddam Hussein, the ravages of sanctions, the more recent collapse of the oil for food programme and invasion, Iraq's urban culture and the necessary expertise and professional competence are all present, even if very thinly spread and in great need of augmentation. The infrastructure for clean water and effective sanitation, for medical and public health services, for transport and communications and so on may be seriously damaged by sanctions and war, but it still exists. This means that meeting many of the first humanitarian demands will, in practice, be rehabilitative. As in the case of the restoration of Sarajevo's water pumping station⁷, aid agencies working in the health sector are faced with rehabilitating and refurbishing hospitals and restoring their electric power before they are in a position to deliver healthcare services. In order to be responsive to such needs, spending decisions, subject to adequate monitoring and evaluation, should be delegated to organisations co-ordinating assistance in the field, with flexibility encouraged.

Efficient monitoring and evaluation systems should operate continuously and be organised in advance. Donors must be reminded that evaluations after the event are important for learning and for the justification, or otherwise, of the intervention to the parliaments of their own countries, but useless in correcting policies in the field at the time correction is needed. Operational agencies need to be able to use monitoring to improve their performance in 'real-time'. Monitoring must be increasingly qualitative as well as quantitative – in effect it must include continuous and contemporary evaluation.

Recurring problems in post conflict situations have been the diversion of aid resources from other humanitarian or reconstruction efforts and the discrepancy between pledges, commitments and disbursements. While the latter may be a lesser problem, considering Iraq's oil revenues, the former is an acute probability. Both must be resisted and controlled. While a major relief and rehabilitation is required in the wake of the war against Iraq, it would be tragic if that effort threw off-balance assistance efforts in scores of crisis settings worldwide.

3. Protection, Peace Keeping and Peace Building

Protection and peace keeping is necessary on two fronts: many ordinary people are trying violently to make up for the poverty into which Ba'athism and sanctions have forced them. They, and others may try to settle old scores– this must be prevented pending the emergence of suitable judicial structures in which to try them, or until appropriate authorities refer cases to the ICC. Attempts by groups similar to the 'Mafias' of the Balkans or the 'War-lords' of Afghanistan to seize control must strenuously be resisted. The costs of ensuring that such groups do not take

⁷ Danida, 1999.

root will be considerable, a clear lesson from the Balkans and Afghanistan. Another lesson from the Balkans is that the long-term cost of a failure to stem the emergence of such mafias is even greater.

A major and intended consequence of the military action is to clear the space for others to rebuild a civil, rather than a military, administration and society and it is in this sphere, in the normal political process, that assistance from governments and, in particular, from the UN will be called for. While the challenges of building an efficient administration in Iraq may be less overwhelming than in Afghanistan, rebuilding civil society and a sustainable, inclusive government will be as difficult. But both require deliberate and careful choices of Iraqi partners.

Peace may be said to have been 'built' when the restored state is able to rule and administer itself. This is not an abrupt moment and a variety of kinds of assistance may be necessary for several years. Since such a protracted and complex process does not fit easily with donors' aid budgets and time horizons, it constitutes another argument for UN involvement. It is also the area in which indigenous 'ownership' is all-important. Any attempt in Iraq at the premature installation of a government, runs the risk of reproducing the exclusiveness of the former regime – a state that enriched a ruling circle and impoverished the greater part of the populace.

4. Co-ordination and Connectedness

Co-ordination of effort and policy is a necessary, but frequently absent, condition for relief and rehabilitation. But its importance is considerably greater in the extremely volatile circumstances of Iraq. A structure for humanitarian relief and for rehabilitation must be agreed and its powers accepted internationally. Governments and their agencies must refrain from prosecuting what they see as their own national interests in the region in favour of a co-ordinated policy that speaks with a single voice. Similarly, whatever central authority is empowered to administer, first relief and then rehabilitation, must be given the power to co-ordinate and determine the activities and competence of agencies and NGOs engaging in the field. It must also resolve the problems raised for co-ordination by the military, or quasi-military, powers that have taken control of local administration.

A recurring problem in crisis after crisis has involved the "foreignness" of the international peacekeeping and assistance apparatus to the local scene. Most recently in Afghanistan, the promised "light international footprint" soon gave way to an externally dominated aid effort that was resisted at critical points by the newly elected authorities. At the same time, the premature handover of authority and resources to a fledgling government involves a set of problems of its own.

A major survey of a large number of evaluations has pointed to two areas in which connections have significantly not been made⁸. Both of them are of central importance in any assistance given to Iraq. The first is the lack of connection between the process of rehabilitation and politics. The tendency is to attempt the former as if the latter did not exist, with predictable consequences. The second is the lack of connection between military action and humanitarian assistance. While it is important to insulate humanitarian from military efforts, it is not constructive for both to behave as if the actions of the other did not affect their own decisions.

⁸ *Humanitarian Action: Improving Performance Through Improved Learning* London: ALNAP/ODI, 2002.

5. Regional Consequences

Iraq is a secular Muslim state largely surrounded by other Muslim states ruled by religious, or quasi-religious, oligarchies. In general terms two problems are often mentioned as regards the introduction of a free democratic government in these states. Firstly, the oil revenues allow many states to provide public services without heavy taxation, which decreases the involvement of the population in public issues and the government. Secondly, popular sentiment in most of these states could possibly lead to democratic decisions to install Islamist regimes. Since oil makes it, potentially, one of the richest states in West Asia, the outcome of these processes in Iraq in the coming years will have profound consequences for the region. If Iraq is not supported in the introduction of a free democratic government, then its former instability will return and the instability of the region will be multiplied. If it does succeed in this endeavour, then the pressure for change in the surrounding theocracies will be overwhelming.

There can be little doubt that the future of Iraq is, at least, a regional issue and that any failure to treat it in this way will result in a fractured and unsustainable state. Assistance must be given to the normalisation of relations with adjacent countries, particularly Iran, Turkey, Kuwait and Syria as well as solving the Palestinian problem. This means that whatever the difficulties, consultations and exchanges with the neighbouring states are essential. It is obvious that such arrangements would also influence the political directions taken by other states in the region.

6. The Need for United Nations Leadership

In the month since the conclusion of the Iraq war, many observers have been alarmed by the lack of prompt and effective action to address the humanitarian and rehabilitation needs of the Iraqi people. In the first instance, the Occupying Power has the responsibility for ensuring that those needs are met. However, international humanitarian law also stipulates that if the Occupying Power is unable to meet those needs, it is obliged to enlist the assistance of impartial humanitarian agencies. In this instance, the Occupying Power has neither moved quickly on the humanitarian front nor welcomed assistance from international humanitarian organizations.

The situation on the ground in Iraq contrasts sharply with that in Kosovo, where in the aftermath of the war, the United Nations and non-governmental groups, with the agreement of NATO, promptly resumed operations. In the first Iraq war, too, the prompt hand-off from the U.S. military to UN and NGO agencies drew favourable notice. While in Kosovo the delegated operations took some time to hit their stride, the expertise of the professional humanitarian agencies proved useful both on the humanitarian front and to help stabilize political gains. There is also a necessary role for the UN to play in the monitoring of human rights abuses and of the health and well-being of the civilian population.

Evaluations of earlier experience do not conclusively demonstrate that multilateral assistance is always more effective than bilateral, or that assistance by civilian organizations is more effective than its military equivalent. However, operations in places such as Afghanistan, the Balkans, and East Timor underscore the value that United Nations-related efforts add in enlisting the wider participation of nations and in conferring an element of international legitimacy. In this regard, the prompt engaging the United Nations in programmatic and monitoring roles can benefit the efforts of coalition members.

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