

Delivering is never remote: NGOs' vital role

by the FMR authors

The plight of Iraqi refugees is grave but is the tip of the iceberg of Iraq's gathering humanitarian crisis. The (grossly under-reported) plight of those still in Iraq is even more worrying. Despite the insecure environment and numerous constraints, humanitarian intervention in Iraq is on-going, possible and greatly needed.

Evidence gathered by the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI)¹ – a network of about 80 international and 200 Iraqi NGOs – shows that Iraq – once the Middle East's most developed country – today has benchmarks and indicators normally associated with developing countries. Personal security, health care, education and public services – including access to clean water, electricity and sewage – are non-existent or, at best, a fraction of pre-war standards. Only 32% of Iraqis have access to safe drinking water. The state health system is collapsing. Attacks on health workers are affecting their morale and commitment and many have fled abroad. Health facilities are being occupied or destroyed by belligerents and drug distribution systems have broken down. The sewage system has almost collapsed and only 19% of Iraqis resident in Iraq have access to a functional sanitation system. Some suburbs of Baghdad lack electricity for days on end, a torment in blistering summer temperatures. In some areas up to 90% of children are not going to school. In February UNICEF estimated that 4.5 million children are under-nourished, one child in ten is under-weight and one in five short for their age. Iraq's Public Distribution System (PDS) – the centralised mechanism which for decades has met the food needs of vulnerable Iraqis – is inefficient and close to collapse in many areas.

Violence is a critical, all-pervasive characteristic in the lives of people in many parts of Iraq, with devastating humanitarian consequences. While attacks by insurgents and counter-

insurgency operations continue and religious, political and criminal violence deepens and spreads, it is civilians who are paying the price. 90% of those who die violent deaths are men, leaving huge numbers of widows and orphans without support. Millions have been injured and psychological trauma is widespread. Exposure to violence, constant stress and lack of stability are compromising the mental health of large segments of the population, especially children. Psychosocial interventions are urgently needed.

The scale of the crisis is belatedly being recognised. The recent UN Strategic Framework² suggests that eight million people – one Iraqi in three – are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, half of them displaced inside or outside Iraq. The remainder may still be in their homes but have become chronically food insecure. Analysis of the humanitarian crisis is constrained by the insuperable difficulties of collecting data that can be vouched for by all parties. The Government of Iraq and those international agencies embedded within the Green Zone have a limited perception of the situation on the ground and have lost the opportunity to access those in need. International agencies have over-focused on building the capacity of the government of Iraq at a time when its ability to administrate and guide the country has steadily declined. In the short term there appears to be no way to address the protection vacuum in much of Iraq. Multinational Force Iraq (MNF-I)³ and Iraqi Security Forces are incapable of protecting

civilians, while the Iraqi authorities cannot access many of those in needs. Most major international agencies – with the notable exception of the Red Cross/Crescent – have failed to adjust their responses to the evolving context. Their credibility with Iraqis is compromised, after years of international sanctions against Iraq, by their dependence on the MNF-I for logistics and security.

Defending humanitarian space and role of NGOs

A number of organisations are implementing other agendas under the cover of providing humanitarian aid. These are agendas that can be political, religious or military. There are bogus local and international NGOs. The fact that non-humanitarian actors – Coalition and Iraqi military forces, private companies and non-state armed groups – present some of their activities as 'humanitarian' blurs the line between the military and civilians, reinforcing misperceptions and compromising the security of legitimate humanitarian aid workers. It is essential that humanitarian space is maintained and expanded for relief to be provided.

Prior to 2003 the few INGOs operating in Iraq were labelled as spies by Saddam's regime. The concept of NGOs and the culture of a free civil society were alien. In 2003 the arrival en masse of NGOs reinforced the popular perception that NGOs are inextricably linked to the Coalition Forces. In the current atmosphere of mistrust this misperception is still widespread. It must be challenged. NGOs that adhere to the Code of Conduct (CoC) for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief⁴ need to distinguish themselves from other types of agencies and to emphasise their neutrality and impartiality.

It is important for NGOs to remember and to remind others that there is a hierarchy within the principles of the CoC. At the top of this hierarchy is the absolutely non-negotiable affirmation that “the humanitarian imperative comes first”.

The international media often suggest that humanitarian work is impossible and that there are no NGOs present in Iraq. This is far from the truth – there are still 70 INGOs and hundreds of Iraqi NGOs that are active. They are playing a vital role providing support to affected people. NGOs are amongst the only humanitarian actors still able to intervene on the field, sometimes far from international and global standards but always concerned to improve the quality of aid. They are still able to access communities and represent a large part of the last humanitarian actors and witnesses on the ground. Currently, NGOs have adapted to the current climate of distrust and uncertainty in Iraq by being very conservative in the information they share and in being careful with whom they are publicly associated. Aid workers working for or in partnership with international NGOs do not advertise where the aid is being brought from or who their partners are, nor do they communicate information on their programmes or interventions.

NGOs’ ability to respond is often constrained by a lack of neutral and flexible funding that supports their staff and other core costs as opposed to specific time-bound and donor-defined activities. There is a risk that withdrawal of some donors and limited funds may significantly decrease the number of active NGOs at a time when humanitarian needs are at their most acute. The strategies of many humanitarian stakeholders are elaborated at headquarter level without an adequate knowledge of realities on the ground. There are many guidelines, administrative requirements and rigid frameworks which can end up hampering the ability of fieldworkers to devise the creative, flexible and pragmatic interventions which are required.

Insecurity in central and southern Iraq has forced most foreign NGOs to adopt remote programming strategies and complicated the ability of Iraqi NGOs to develop relationships with

international actors. This imposed distance has raised a number of concerns with respect to the quality of the aid delivered, NGO accountability and donors’ ability to appreciate and respond to the needs on the ground.

Once established, humanitarian space cannot be taken for granted but has to be developed and sustained on a daily basis. Most access points have already been identified. Local facilitators have to be helped to improve, create and maintain access. A cadre of talented, creative and adaptable managers able to deal with unpredictable obstacles is vital. They need to have diversified teams but cannot build them without adequate funding.

NGOs are showing that it is still possible to address humanitarian needs inside Iraq through flexible locally-based approaches. NGOs are building a field-based emergency network that will improve the quality of aid responses by centralising and securing information on existing networks, improve field linkages and ease access for aid workers. Despite their presence on the ground and their capacity to deliver, NGOs cannot independently provide all the solutions nor respond to all the needs. A coordinated, global and inclusive strategy with locally-based approaches is needed with all the stakeholders involved in order to provide appropriate responses to the humanitarian crisis in Iraq. NGOs offer a range of recommendations.

The UN, member states and international leaders must:

- acknowledge the challenges of the humanitarian crisis inside Iraq and give increased support to NGOs, as neutral and impartial key actors on the ground
- mobilise qualified senior staff with strong experience in war-torn areas to deal with the complex Iraqi emergency
- provide greater and readily accessible, flexible, neutral and needs-based emergency humanitarian funds
- achieve a better balance of funds for Iraqis displaced outside Iraq and those inside in order to avoid

the risk of creating a pull factor (ie incentives to leave Iraq)

- develop mechanisms to ensure that NGOs, including Iraqi NGOs, can receive funds in a timely manner
- work with NGOs to better understand remote management and mechanisms for monitoring and verification
- investigate cross-border or cross-boundary corridors into areas of greatest need: this may involve non-military air drops of assistance where there is no other means of access
- promote stronger civil-military coordination through a high-level UN Civil Military Coordinator with a civilian and humanitarian background.

The Government of Iraq needs to:

- acknowledge the humanitarian crisis inside the country
- allocate available funds, human and technical resources, and basic goods to meet the needs
- accept and facilitate alternative response mechanisms to compensate for the difficulties that hamper the current centralised distribution systems for food and medicines
- facilitate the movement of aid workers in order to deliver non-militarised humanitarian aid
- support civil society through transparent legislation and processes for registering NGOs which recognise their rights and independence.

All stakeholders need to ensure that International Humanitarian Law is always and fully respected by:

- reinforcing protection mechanisms for Iraqi civilians
- acknowledging that ongoing human rights violations are a crime against humanity
- advocating respect of human rights

- ensuring all allegations of violations of international humanitarian law and human rights are transparently investigated
- ending the state of impunity through adequate judicial mechanisms.

It is vital to increase communication and exchanges of information between the UN, NGOs and other stakeholders. All humanitarian actors must work together to develop indicators and a verification mechanism to identify priority needs

and to ensure that comprehensive mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation are in place. It is vital to develop the capacity of Iraqi aid workers and local communities, especially in the areas of quality of assistance, fundraising, conflict resolution, reconciliation, networking and information sharing. Donors must recognise that coordination of NGO humanitarian operations is neither an add-on nor a luxury.

This is a summary of NCCI's May 2007 report 'Iraq Humanitarian Crisis Situation and NGOs Responses'⁵. For operational reasons, this summary

has been prepared by the FMR editors and does not necessarily reflect the views of either the NCCI secretariat or its members. For further information about the work of NCCI, email: ncciraq@ncciraq.org or contact NCCI's Amman office.

1. www.ncciraq.org
2. www.ncciraq.org/IMG/pdf_Strategic_Framework_for_Humanitarian_Action_in_Iraq.pdf
3. www.mnf-iraq.com
4. www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/57jmnbb?opendocument
5. www.ncciraq.org/spip.php?breve719