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Commentary: 'Reverse eyes' on Iraq

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As the United States determines a new strategy in Iraq, it is extremely unfortunate for the Iraqis and for the US standing there and throughout the region that any extensive overhaul of reconstruction efforts is unlikely at this critical time.

One reason is that very little money is now being appropriated toward reconstruction. As the Iraq Study Group report explains, of the \$21 billion to date that has been appropriated to the Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund (IRRF), \$16 billion has been spent and the remaining funds have been committed. The administration requested \$750 million for 2007, and the trend for subsequent years "appears downward."

With a democratic congress soon to take control, and the administration saying it is willing to reassess the situation with "fresh eyes," there may now be an opportunity to finally apply widely in Iraq the basic lesson learned from experiences worldwide, of how to implement successful development and reconstruction projects. The lesson is: local community members in rural villages and neighborhoods need to identify and self-manage development projects that meet their priority needs.

Although this principle has guided the reconstruction work of some development agencies in Iraq, it is by far the exception, with billions of dollars wasted, projects not completed or sabotaged, and rampant corruption.

Last November, the *Washington Post* reported on CHF International, a Silver Spring nonprofit organization, which successfully applied this bottom-up community-based approach in Iraq. Its Middle East director, Bruce Parmelee, observed after completing hundreds of projects on small budgets that "people won't attack projects that they feel ownership of."

Community projects require smaller budgets because of lower management costs and in-kind contributions from local people, such as labor. Corruption is diminished because the entire community is involved, so everyone sees everything, making it nearly impossible for an individual or group to walk away with project funds.

Sadly, the United States hasn't supported consistently this bottom-up approach. Funds from the IRRF have been largely disbursed to private US firms. And their top-down management style, combined with security concerns, has led them to make reconstruction decisions with little or no

consultation with Iraqi community members. The enormous involvement of US firms is developmentally counterproductive and difficult to justify.

The United Nations report evaluating Iraq's reconstruction from 1991 to 2002 concludes: "Iraqi personnel can implement any reconstruction project with little or no onsite help from foreign contractors."

There is an erroneous tendency among policymakers, which appears also in the Iraq Study Group report, to separate reconstruction efforts from the process of achieving a political settlement and reconciliation. In fact, bottom-up reconstruction is a federalist democratic process: it strengthens the ability of localities to make their own development decisions and in an inclusive dialogue-based way.

If the central government supports (logistically, financially, etc.) this empowering approach to reconstruction, localities will not want to completely sever their ties to the national government. This can provide the basis for the local and regional relationships with the central authority that the Iraqi people are struggling to create.

In addition, operationally, bottom-up reconstruction and reconciliation overlap. Both require direct dialogue among community members, recognition among participants of each other's experiences, needs, and interests, and both are processes that use third-party facilitation to ensure a constructive experience. Further, in successful reconciliation models, once the parties to a conflict acknowledge each other's pain and suffering and express regret, the process moves to joint development efforts that helmet local people's basic needs.

Reconstruction and reconciliation, therefore, are opposite sides of the same coin, and for either to be achieved, both must be advanced, as what happened, for example, in Morocco.

In 1999, Morocco was the first country in the Arab world to create a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which brought to light serious past injustices for national discussion. Consistent with a genuine reconciliation process, Morocco also launched the National Initiative for Human Development - a perpetual project promoting local development and self-reliance.

The Iraq Study Group report suggests that "Egypt should be encouraged to foster the national reconciliation process in Iraq." I suggest that because Morocco has more experience, it should play a key role.

In a situation where time is so crucial, one may question if bottom-up reconstruction would make a significant difference in the short-term. But unlike top-down approaches dependent on foreign contractors, the bottom-up approach relies on local know-how and materials, thus permitting immediate implementation if funding is available. To begin, local third-party facilitators need to be trained. They catalyze and assist community meetings where local people determine which new projects to establish.

Effective training can be done in groups of 20 (including teachers, government and non-government personal, local politicians, and citizens) over a two-week period, using the progressive "experiential" pedagogy. A commitment by the United States and the international community of \$5 billion for bottom-up reconstruction should enable more than 10 million Iraqis to reap profound socio-economic benefits, with significant results in just a few months.

A Senior Advisor for Economic Reconstruction in Iraq, as called for by the Iraq Study Group - reporting to the president and with a broad mandate to coordinate reconstruction among US agencies and Iraqi counterparts, can significantly expedite bottom-up reconstruction.

We have seen the ineffectual and corrupt outcomes of top-down reconstruction, and now we need to turn to what we know works, the bottom-up community approach. More so than "fresh eyes," reverse eyes are needed to turn around and implement successful development.

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[Return to the index](#)