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FPIF Commentary

Reconstructing Iraq

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The new strategy of the United States in Iraq does not include an extensive overhaul of reconstruction efforts at this critical time. Very little money is now being appropriated for reconstruction. As the Iraq Study Group Report explains, of the \$21 billion to date that has been appropriated for 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 President Bush's new proposal is to add \$1.2 billion to that.

This failure to address Iraq's economic needs in a new way is extremely unfortunate for the Iraqis and for U.S. standing there and throughout the region.

However, with a Democratic Congress now in control, and the Bush administration saying it's willing to reassess the situation with "fresh eyes," the United States still has the potential to finally apply in Iraq a basic lesson about how to implement successful development and reconstruction projects. Local community members in rural villages and neighborhoods need to identify and self-manage development projects that meet their priority needs. This bottom-up approach should borrow from the lessons of experience of Morocco.

A Tale of Two Approaches

The current reconstruction experience in Iraq is overwhelmingly negative. Billions of dollars have been wasted. Projects have gone uncompleted or sabotaged. Corruption is commonplace. Funds from the IRRF have been largely disbursed to private U.S. 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 U.S. firms is counter-productive and difficult to justify. The UN report evaluating Iraq's reconstruction from 1991-2002 concludes: "Iraqi personnel can implement any reconstruction project with little or no onsite help from foreign contractors."

Part of the new U.S. strategy in Iraq is to expand American reconstruction teams. First there is the challenge of recruiting volunteers. Then there is the expense of providing them with administrative infrastructure and the much higher cost of helping to ensure their security. In the past, security cost as much as 30% of project funding. A new "key tactical shift" to deal with the security of the reconstruction teams is to integrate them with military combat teams. However, the mission of the reconstruction teams is more of the same. Their expansion is not essential for the promotion of the locally empowering bottom-up approach to reconstruction.

Although an exception, the bottom-up community-based approach has guided the reconstruction work of some development agencies in Iraq. CHF International, a Maryland-based nonprofit organization, has been particularly successful. Its Middle East director, Bruce Parmelee, [observed](#) after completing hundreds of projects on small budgets: "People won't attack projects that they feel ownership of." Community projects require smaller budgets because of lower management costs and contributions from local people, such as labor. With the entire community involved, creating great accountability and oversight, corruption is diminished.

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There is an erroneous tendency among policy-makers, which appears also in the Iraq Study Group Report, to separate reconstruction efforts from the process of achieving a political settlement. In fact, bottom-up reconstruction is a federalist democratic process. It strengthens the ability of localities to make their own development decisions in an inclusive, dialogue-based way. If the central government provides financial and logistical support for 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. Joseph Gregoire, leader of a Provisional Reconstruction Team in Iraq, [recently suggested](#) in *The Washington Post* that "projects tend to overcome sectarian differences."

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Bottom-up reconstruction and reconciliation also overlap operationally. 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 help meet local people's basic needs.

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The Moroccan Example

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Reconstruction and reconciliation, therefore, are opposite sides of the same coin. 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 to promote 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 propose that Morocco, with more experience, should play a key role.

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Embarking on a reconciliation process while Iraq is experiencing daily, murderous sectarian violence presents challenges well beyond what Morocco faced when it moved forward on its own national reconciliation. To be sure, many Iraqis may feel fearful about participating in reconciliation dialogue out of personal safety concerns. The important advantage, however, to connecting reconciliation processes to locally driven reconstruction is that these processes are decentralized and not highly visible targets for those who oppose them. Therefore, while community-based reconciliation and reconstruction are very effective and empowering processes for their participants, they are also dispersed and don't present the conspicuous targets that insurgents often choose to maximize the level of fear among the Iraqi public. Furthermore, U.S. military commanders understand that "counterinsurgency" involves cultivating popular support. Reconstruction projects supported by the United States that are based on the self-defined interests of local Iraqi people are powerful acts of public diplomacy and further marginalize extremists.

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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 a

progressive “experiential” pedagogy.

A range of technical specialties among members of Provisional Reconstruction Teams, which makes recruitment even more cumbersome, is not what is needed. The necessary technical skills required to operate specific projects are available locally. Rather, Iraq needs trainers in participatory tools that can help communities design, implement, and manage their own projects. These trainers would be knowledgeable in negotiating consensus and participation within communities. President Bush’s new strategy does indeed include increased “quick response” funding for local reconstruction projects. Such funds can help implement projects that local members of communities determine for themselves. But the bottom-up approach needs a greater financial boost.

A commitment by the United States of \$5 billion for reconstruction, an amount called for by the Iraq Study Group, if applied in the bottom-up way could 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 who reports to the president and with a broad mandate to coordinate reconstruction among U.S. agencies and Iraqi counterparts – a recommendation from the Iraq Study Group as well – can significantly expedite bottom-up reconstruction.

We have seen the ineffectual and corrupt outcomes of top-down reconstruction. Now we need to turn to what we know works, the bottom-up community approach.

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