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Peace needs a community touch

February 7, 2005

By Jason Ben-Meir

In order to promote political and economic stability in Iraq during this critical time, the United States should ensure that local communities are involved in the design and implementation of development projects.

Lessons from around the world have shown that development agencies that do not listen to the experiences and concerns of local populations have invested tens of millions of rands in projects that are ineffective, ignored, and even resented by the target beneficiaries.

On the contrary, when communities are engaged and projects respond to their self-described needs, important socio-economic benefits become apparent in a remarkably short time.

Indigenous reconstruction has been enormously successful in communities around the world because local people have a strong incentive to maintain projects that address their needs, such as in education, health, business, agriculture and environmental conservation.

In most cases, communities form local associations to create and manage projects.

New tiers of co-operation form as neighbouring communities join together to establish projects beneficial to their entire area.

This "bottom-up" development approach is based on pluralist democratic procedures.

Two fundamental elements of a pluralist democracy are the dispersion of power towards the interior (localities) and the inclusion of all social groups in decision-making.

Broad participation in the reconstruction of communities is pluralist democracy in action, because it strengthens the capacities of local people to manage their own development.

The following recommendation can help tens of thousands of Iraqi households in a few months:

- The Iraqi government should immediately begin a two-week training programme for thousands of schoolteachers and other community members, as well as outside technicians and appropriate government and non-profit liaisons, in facilitation methods. The techniques they learn would help to achieve broad community participation in reconstruction efforts.

The interactive development experiences that people at the centres experience create mutually beneficial relationships and trust among the participants, just as conflict-management procedures do.

Typically, communities can determine their reconstruction priorities in six two-hour community meetings.

- The Iraqi government should create "Community Reconstruction Planning and Training Centres".

These locally managed centres assist communities in determining their priority goals and then in designing and implementing projects to achieve them.

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Centres also provide training in facilitation, conflict management, modern agriculture, health, and other skills desired by the local population. They also provide the educational forum that catalyses positive political change.

In summing up, they provide one-stop shopping for community development needs and do so in ways that transfer needed skills to the local population.

Around the world, indigenous reconstruction has shown extremely positive socio-economic and political consequences.

As more and more Iraqis enjoy the benefits of indigenous reconstruction, they will become increasingly emboldened to oppose extremism within their own country.

If communities are fully engaged in the design, implementation and management of projects that influence their daily lives, then aid as a tool of public diplomacy will be effective.

Its own communities will sustain the reconstruction of Iraq if they are put in control of its design and management.

- Ben-Meir is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. He is a former Peace Corps volunteer who served in Morocco and is President of the High Atlas Foundation, a US non-profit organisation that assists community development in Morocco.

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