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November 18, 2004

The hands of the people

Helping Iraqis help themselves - by training security forces, teachers and other workers - is necessary to reconstruct the war-torn nation from within

COMMENTARY

By Jason Ben-Meir

The brutal violence in Iraq requires not only accelerating the training of indigenous security forces there but also giving the Iraqi people the responsibility for their own communities' reconstruction.

That the United States has spent only \$1 billion of the \$18 billion available for reconstruction is due to:

Heavy reliance on foreign companies that cannot effectively operate because of security conditions.

The lack of an overall strategy that enables the Iraqi people to design and implement reconstruction projects in their own communities throughout the country, which for now means focusing on regions outside the hostile "hot" zones.

If the United States strongly supported the indigenous reconstruction of Iraq, whereby local communities implement projects that respond to their self-described needs, critical socio-economic benefits for tens of thousands of households might become apparent in a remarkably short time - just a few months.

How will this work? In most cases, communities form local associations - core civil-society institutions - to manage approved projects and implement new ones. New tiers of cooperation then form, as neighboring communities join to create projects beneficial to the entire area.

Indigenous reconstruction is a form of bottom-up development that is based on pluralist democratic procedures. Around the world, indigenous reconstruction

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has shown extremely positive socio-economic and political consequences.

For the process to work, independent facilitators are needed to catalyze dialogue within a community on its reconstruction priorities. The Iraqi interim government, with the support of the international community, especially the United States, should thus immediately begin training thousands of Iraqi schoolteachers, government and nongovernmental organization personnel and community members in facilitation methods.

The techniques they learn would help to achieve broad community participation in reconstruction efforts, possibly because of their similarities to conflict-management procedures. Based on dialogue and the use of a third party, the techniques would help to ensure a process that, for once, is responsive to community needs, inclusive and productive. The interactive development experience would create mutually beneficial relationships and trust among the participants, just as conflict-management procedures do.

A basic training course in facilitation can be completed in a two-week period. Newly trained facilitators could then return to their communities, organize meetings and help set in motion an indigenous reconstruction process.

Once communities determine their particular reconstruction priorities - which typically takes about six community meetings, each lasting two hours - outside funding to implement the locally designed projects is needed. After this is obtained, the next step is the creation of local employment for building schools, women's cooperatives, health clinics, irrigation canals and so forth.

The interim Iraqi government should also create community reconstruction planning and training centers. These locally managed centers would assist communities in determining their priority goals and then in designing and implementing projects to achieve them. In sum, they provide one-stop shopping for community development needs and do so in ways that transfer needed skills to the local population.

Two fundamental elements of a pluralist democracy are the dispersion of power toward the interior - localities - and the inclusion of all social groups in decision-making. Community reconstruction centers are pluralist democratic institutions, because they strengthen the capacities of local people to manage their own development.

Community empowerment occurs through a gradual, nonviolent and, as examples around the globe show, widely accepted process because of the many collective and individual benefits the community experiences. As people fulfill their own interests, they feel less alienation,



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and their zone of tolerance expands, because the underlying conditions that fuel extremism are being directly addressed. Those affected are then less likely to channel hatred toward outside actors.

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

For the United States to support this new direction in the reconstruction of Iraq requires that policy-makers think very differently about how lasting development can be achieved and understand the absolutely vital role local communities must play in the process.

The reconstruction of Iraq will be sustained by its own communities, if they are put in control of its design and management.

Ben-Meir is a doctoral student in sociology at the University of New Mexico. He is president of the High Atlas Foundation, a nonprofit organization that assists community development in Morocco.

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