BRIEFING

INTRODUCING CONFLICT-SENSITIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT TO IRAQ

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Introduction

The project seemed simple enough. The town of Hatemiya in the north of Iraq needed better access to water. In response to a request by local residents, an international NGO working in the region agreed to support an initiative to install a system to bring water from the nearby Tigris River. Everything seemed to be going well until midway through implementation of the new system, when someone sabotaged the freshly laid water pipes. 'I thought it was insurgents,' one international employee of the NGO said. 'Then we had a meeting [with our staff] and everybody said, "No, no, no, it wasn't that." There were small villages around Hatemiya that had not had water for ages, and they were annoyed that Hatemiya was getting water and they weren't.' The NGO sent an engineer to investigate. He returned with a simple solution: to install a larger pipe and thereby increase the amount of water available for everyone in the area – the residents of Hatemiya as well as the surrounding villages. It seemed to be an easy resolution to the conflict at hand. 'Then somebody told us, "Hatemiya doesn't want to share,"' the NGO worker said. The NGO again sent the engineer to Hatemiya to deliver a stern message: either the water would be shared or support for the project would end. The various actors

eventually complied, allowing the project to be completed, and finally the water began to flow.

Process Design and Implementation

Although this incident reached a non-violent conclusion, it prompted the NGO to ask itself questions that other organisations in similar situations were also asking: can community development projects cause tensions to escalate in fragile areas experiencing high levels of conflict? And if so, what can be done to ensure that development projects do not spark violence, but rather contribute to building sustainable peace?

The NGO came to our team of practitioner-trainers from Columbia University's Centre for International Conflict Resolution (CICR) for help. Apparently the incident was not isolated and the staff was seeking new approaches to such difficulties. CICR had been working with the NGO for several months, delivering workshops in basic conflict resolution skills to local community leaders engaged in development initiatives, and was familiar with the partner and its programme. Our team also had experience with issues related to conflict and development, having recently established a programme focused on conflict assessment that included comparative research on theoretical and methodological questions as well as practical application of assessment tools to diverse country cases.[1]

We presented the NGO with a bold proposal: to create a simplified and practical conflict assessment instrument for the Iraqi development staff to analyse conflict dynamics in the areas where they were working, train them in its application and facilitate the integration of this tool as well as other general conflict resolution concepts into their everyday work. In many ways, this was a radical idea. While conflict

assessment has become more widely practised by donors and international NGOs during policy making and strategic planning processes, the application of these analytical tools at the implementation stage and by national practitioners remains rare.[2]

Northern Iraq seemed like the perfect place for such an experimental intervention. Many Iraqi communities have experienced serious tensions in the aftermath of the United States-led overthrow of Saddam Hussein's government in 2003, and development has been taking place in a way never before seen. Ordinarily conducted as part of post-war reconstruction, development in Iraq has been pursued on an accelerated schedule against a backdrop of ongoing military action and a violent insurgency, primarily as a result of U.S. policy. Provision of development assistance can increase tensions and lead to violence under any circumstances; in contemporary Iraq, the risk and the stakes seemed even higher.

Our previous experience in Iraq provided the inspiration and encour-agement we needed to undertake the project. After enduring 35 years of stifling dictatorship, war, international sanctions, military occupation and widespread insurgency, many of the self-styled community leaders we had met had expressed a deep need to help create positive change in their communities. We suspected that they would embrace any opportunity to make constructive contributions to building a peaceful future.

Overall, the initiative raises a difficult and controversial question: is there a realistic possibility for effective and sustainable development to take place in a war zone? High current levels of destruction and violence in Iraq raise doubts about whether it is possible there.[3] Glimpses of progress by our team at the community level in the north of Iraq during the past two years suggest that development is possible and is occurring.[4] Yet this topic calls for more robust research to inform future development strategies in Iraq

and other societies experiencing widespread violent conflict.

The NGO accepted our proposal and a two-tiered approach was adopted. First, we sought to develop a practitioner-friendly conflict assessment instrument and to implement a series of training workshops to build staff capacity to use it. Second, realising that this approach would be effective only if it became embedded in organisational culture, we began educating the organisation's management – formally and informally – about the benefits and challenges of conducting conflict assessments as a standard and preliminary step in every Iraqi community where it worked.[5]

Our approach was in part grounded in the school of thought that gained popularity in the 1990s as a consequence of the Local Capacities for Peace project (a collaborative NGO initiative directed by Mary Anderson, author of *Do No Harm,* 1996) that sought to increase understanding about the relationships between development assistance and violent conflict. Key findings from this research, also referred to as the 'Do No Harm Project', explain that using an analytical framework to examine links between conflict and development 'prompts us to identify conflict exacerbating impacts of assistance much sooner than is typical without the analysis' and 'heightens our awareness of inter-group relations in project sites and enables us to play a conscious role in helping people come together' (CDA Inc. 2004:2).

CICR's project built on a key assumption: that raising staff awareness of the linkages between development and conflict and strengthening its capacity to conduct community level conflict assessments would increase its ability to contribute explicitly to peacebuilding by addressing the sources of tensions and considering lines of conflict in local development projects. The project also aimed implicitly to contribute to macro-level peacebuilding by strengthening relationships between and among different groups.[6]

To this end and given limited time and resources, efforts focused on Iraqi staff, and attempted to engage the NGO's international management staff through formal and informal consultations, and by encouraging their participation in workshops for local staff. That approach created challenges and opportunities. Concentrating on the local staff ensured that the new analytical tools were immediately applied by the people who have the most direct daily interaction with communities and their leaders. The challenge came from the international management team that at first failed to appreciate the usefulness of conflict assessments, which seemed time-consuming and peripheral to its primary objectives and provided no incentives for the staff to apply its new skills. It took several months before the internationals recognised the local staff's increased capacity and began requiring conflict assessments of all communities, highlighting the creation of this process to the NGO's funder as an important contribution to conflict mitigation.

The initiative also sought to encourage teaching and learning that combined conceptual exploration with practical application. Each workshop exposed participants to lessons that they then had several months to test in the field before a subsequent workshop. The cycle of alternating workshop learning with field application was followed a total of five times. The prolonged exposure to the concept of conflict sensitivity, combined with repeated opportunities to apply lessons in its daily work, seemed to result in significant learning by the NGO's local staff.

Methodology

The one-year programme consisted of: a one-day introductory and needs assessment session in September 2004; a three-day workshop in December 2004 on basic conflict resolution concepts and an introduction to the conflict assessment framework; a two-day workshop in March 2005 that explored conflict assessment in the Iraqi context and demonstrated how conflict sensitivity translates into projects; a two-day session in June 2005 that allowed participants to integrate past knowledge and learning from experiences with new conflict resolution concepts in their work; and a final three-day workshop in September 2005 that offered opportunities for staff members to work collaboratively on project proposals that responded to conflict factors and built upon existing peace capacities identified in their own completed conflict assessments.[7]

The local staff members demonstrated a conceptual understanding of the conflict assessment methodology and familiarity with the tool through successful completion of 42 conflict assessments of Iraqi communities through October 2005. During the September 2005 workshop, staff members also made presentations based on the ideas for conflict-sensitive projects that emerged from their work in teams earlier in the workshop. 'Watching them present their assessments in the workshop, I was astounded because they were so far ahead of where they were a year ago,' the NGO international employee said. '…now when they work with the mayor to get a water project, they'll look at the conflict factors.'

The workshops were designed to support the overall objective of the NGO's project, which aimed to catalyse community decision-making processes and action around local development. An important and challenging element of the project was a requirement that communities contribute to all projects, which prompted a rethinking of available resources and capacities at the community level. The assessment framework similarly introduced the concept of evaluating peace capacities, leading to a shift in thinking about community-level conflict. The local development professionals who previously had seen their communities primarily as sources of tension and potential violence began thinking and speaking about the resilience of communities to use conflict constructively and to strengthen relationships.

Conclusion

A lack of time and resources prevented the team from evaluating thoroughly the impact of this initiative. Feedback from the Iraqi community development professionals, both written and verbal, indicated strongly that the project provided them with an important new tool, and with a new approach to development in communities. On many occasions individuals who worked with us began speaking about their roles in terms of peacebuilding rather than simple delivery of development assistance. This change in thinking indicated a profound shift in self-perception from agents of an international NGO to Iraqi citizens with innate capacity to identify possibilities to build or enhance peace through their work at the community level. This led to a sense of greater professional satis-faction and seemed to heighten their sense of agency.

The Iraqi community development professionals also experienced a change in attitude about conflict assessment – first regarding it as a burdensome process, and eventually, as an approach with great potential for enhancing community development efforts and increasing their efficiency. Deeper analysis of how this initiative contributed to peacebuilding more broadly in Iraq calls for examination of linkages between work at individual level and change at socio-political level.[8]

This project, conducted in the context of ongoing military operations and an active, violent insurgency, indicated that it is possible, even under difficult conditions, for indigenous community development workers to analyse conflict in their own communities and apply lessons learned. Besides placing responsibility for addressing sources of conflict in communities with local staff, the initiative also demonstrated that this type of approach could help development practitioners to develop a deeper understanding of how experiences and influences have shaped their own perspectives and learn to listen to and respect other points of view. Assessing the longer-term impacts of undertaking conflict-sensitive development in Iraq will take time. Results of this project deserve to be examined closely so that organisations engaged in development work – in Iraq and elsewhere – can determine whether this approach, or variations upon it, can improve field practices and outcomes.

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Endnotes

[1] CICR defines conflict assessment in this context as the application of analytical tools to identify factors that cause conflict, to understand the interaction between different factors and actors in conflict, and to gauge the potential for conflict to become destructive or lead to violence.

[2] For background information on the evolution of conflict-sensitive approaches to development practice see Gaigals & Leonhardt (2001). A comprehensive overview of different tools and approaches used by development actors can also be found in FEWER *et al*.

[3] Schneider (2004) outlines some of the serious challenges that rehabilitation initiatives in Iraq have faced because of security concerns, including a lack of cooperation, 'remote control' management after evacuation of international staff and the struggle of balancing the need for protection with the importance of maintaining distance from coalition forces.

[4] This assertion is based on a definition of development that goes beyond the typical measures of increased income, wealth, jobs etc. to include greater social capital, increased equity and strengthened relationships.

[5] 'Conflict sensitivity' can be defined here as: understanding fully the context and conflict dynamics in the target area; understanding the interaction between conflict issues and initiatives in the target area; and seeking to address the causes of conflict through programming,

maximising the positive impacts of the effort and minimising negative impacts.

[6] The Reflecting on Peace Practice Programme at CDA Inc. has been actively engaged in research on theories of change in the field of peacebuilding. For an overview of how these theories can be classified, see Church & Shouldice (2003).

[7] CICR designed all of the workshops to respond to express needs of the NGO's local staff. All but one of the workshops took place in northern Iraq; the December 2004 session occurred in Amman, Jordan, due to security concerns and related logistical challenges.

[8] A comprehensive and insightful review of what has been learned about the impact of individual peacebuilding initiatives on peace at the macro level can be found in Anderson & Olson (2003).

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