

Humanitarian action in Iraq: putting the pieces together

Key messages

- International humanitarian action in Iraq since 2003 has been inadequate to the nature and scale of the task. It has been piecemeal and largely conducted undercover, hindered by insecurity, a lack of coordinated funding, limited operational capacity and patchy information. As humanitarian agencies look to scale up interventions in 2008, most of the earlier challenges to providing assistance in Iraq – political, institutional and operational – persist.
- More concerted action is possible in Iraq, but there is a problematic lack of consensus on needs and on the scope for safe access. The absence of systems to provide up-to-date and accurate information has hampered access and undermined accountability. Needs in Iraq vary widely between different areas, necessitating context-specific responses rather than a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach. But the need for security and protection, as much as for relief and reconstruction, is universal.
- The impact of the Baghdad bombings of 2003 is still felt today. Compromised humanitarian space and reduced access have called into question the protection offered by adherence to principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence – but some of the problems seem to derive from a failure to apply those principles consistently. Humanitarian action is neither a tool of nor a substitute for political action, and the humanitarian community needs to draw clearer lines between its role and that of political and military actors.
- There is an urgent need to establish a common humanitarian agenda in Iraq and to reassert a clear humanitarian identity. This demands that agencies establish the means to assess needs and priorities and to speak with one voice. It also demands a reaffirmation of humanitarian principles as a basis of a new compact with civil society and Iraqi communities.

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Five years on from the invasion of Iraq by Coalition forces, the civilian population continues to face one of the most complex and violent situations in the world. The bombing of the Samara Mosque in February 2006 sparked an increase in sectarian conflict which, together with a widespread breakdown of law and order, has resulted in significant loss of life and displacement on a vast scale. The humanitarian consequences have been devastating. A third of the population lack access to adequate food, and one in five has no clean water. The government is unable to

meet basic needs or provide basic services, and the international community – focused as it is on political, military and reconstruction issues – has been slow to respond. Only when displacement prompted a regional crisis in 2007 did the humanitarian costs of insecurity become impossible to ignore.¹ The inter-

¹ As with every action concerning Iraq, even the acknowledgement of a humanitarian crisis is not apolitical. Resolution 1770, passed by the UN Security Council in August 2007, acknowledges the humanitarian crisis and mandates the United Nations Mission in Iraq with supporting the coordination and delivery of relief assistance.

national humanitarian response has been fragmented, inconsistent and, by general consensus, inadequate. Locally-led responses have not received the support they need. Despite recent improvements in security in some parts of Iraq as a result of the military 'surge', the challenges remain immense.

This HPG Policy Brief is based on discussions with a range of individuals and organisations currently engaged with the humanitarian situation in Iraq. It explores the key constraints to principled humanitarian action, and questions whether the international community is ready to address these constraints as it prepares to scale up humanitarian action in 2008.

Recent commentary on Iraq has stressed the need to scale up the humanitarian response.² Advocates for increased humanitarian action argue that significant humanitarian needs persist, that the obstacles confronting humanitarian action are difficult but surmountable, and that the international community and humanitarian actors should do more. Advocacy in favour of enhanced humanitarian action has been successful in increasing awareness of humanitarian needs, while improved security has expanded access to certain areas. At the same time, mounting domestic pressure in the US and UK to reduce or withdraw troops has led many to think seriously about what will be left behind after five years of engagement.

Consequently, 2008 will see a substantial increase in humanitarian assistance in central and southern Iraq. The UN is stepping up its presence and attempting to transform its role in coordinating operations, funding and analysis.³ Several international NGOs are engaging, re-engaging or expanding their activities, and new sources of humanitarian funding are being opened up. Yet aside from the reluctance within the international community to admit the scale of needs in Iraq, the obstacles that have constrained humanitarian assistance have not fundamentally changed. In particular:

- Potential humanitarian funding is tied up in unspent ministry budgets and trust funds designated solely for reconstruction activities.
- Security remains a formidable problem for implementing agencies.
- The rapidly changing situation means that

² See for instance Greg Hansen, *Coming to Terms with the Humanitarian Imperative in Iraq*, Humanitarian Agenda 2015 Briefing Paper, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, January 2007; and NCCI and Oxfam, *Rising to the Humanitarian Challenge in Iraq*, 2007.

³ The 2008 Consolidated Appeal refers to the need for a 'systematic transformation of UN assistance to Iraq' to create a 'more responsive and flexible system'. It remains to be seen how this will impact on operations in Iraq.

Box 1: Humanitarian needs

Statistics on mortality and malnutrition rates and access to basic services show a worsening crisis. Humanitarian needs are not uniform across governorates or districts and there are gaps in the data available and disagreement over figures, but we know that:

- 2.4 million people are estimated to be internally displaced, with another 2m refugees outside Iraq. Of the displaced, 58% rent housing, 18% live with host families or relatives, 24% live in public buildings and fewer than 1% live in tented camps.
- 4m Iraqis are considered food-insecure and in need of food assistance.
- Only one in three Iraqi children under five has access to safe drinking water, and one in four is chronically malnourished.
- 94 aid workers have been killed, 248 injured, 24 arrested or detained and 89 kidnapped or abducted since 2003.
- A survey published in *The Lancet* in 2006 estimated that violence may have led to 655,000 direct and indirect deaths since 2003. Other surveys put the figure at 81,000 (Iraq Body Count) and 150,000 (WHO).

Sources: OCHA, *Iraq Humanitarian Update*, no. 1, 2008; IOM; Consolidated Appeal for Iraq, 2008; UNICEF; NCCI; G. Burnham et al., 'Mortality after the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: A Cross-sectional Cluster Sample Survey', *The Lancet*, vol. 368, no. 9,545, 2006.

information on needs and programming is quickly out of date.

- Managing operations from outside Iraq has reduced accountability and increased fragmentation.
- There is a shortage of independent Iraqi organisations capable of effective humanitarian programming.
- International humanitarian actors, particularly the UN, lack credibility in the eyes of many Iraqis.

Key challenges

Humanitarian personnel, local and international, have paid a high price for their willingness to respond to humanitarian needs in Iraq. Ninety-four aid workers have been killed since 2003.⁴ The 2003 bombings of the UN and ICRC headquarters in Baghdad had a shattering and lasting effect on the ability of international agencies to work and move freely within the country. Faced with

⁴ See the NCCI website: www.ncciraq.org.

Box 2: A 'crisis of protection'

In recent years humanitarian actors have become more willing to frame humanitarian crises arising from conflict in the more political terms of 'protection', reflecting a concern for civilians' human rights and physical security in both their operational responses and their advocacy. In many areas of Iraq, civilians have been exposed to high levels of violence, with children and unaccompanied women and widows reportedly particularly vulnerable.⁵ The main protection concerns for civilians in Iraq include:

- Attacks on civilian targets or the excessive or indiscriminate use of force by armed groups.
- Lack of freedom of movement – restrictions on entry into and movement between governorates, state border restrictions and movement restrictions due to military/security operations.
- Forced displacement.
- Impunity and absence of rule of law.
- Denial of access to basic subsistence requirements.

significant security constraints, most international humanitarian actors have based themselves in neighbouring countries and managed operations from a distance, through local staff or partners. The burden of implementing responses has fallen to Iraqi staff and organisations, part of a civil society that is not yet well-developed.

This model of 'remote management' or 'remote control' allows operations to continue – and doubtless saves lives in the process. But it also creates a number of challenges, including less efficient service delivery, increased difficulties in maintaining a strategic programme focus, corruption risks and accountability concerns.⁶ In Iraq, additional challenges include the limited capacity and reach of partners, a young civil society, rapidly changing situations, a shortage of independent partners and the need for localisation of activities and local analysis.

A fragmented response

The humanitarian response has been highly fragmented. Coordination is a major challenge in any large-scale emergency, but the absence of a

robust humanitarian coordination framework has led humanitarian agencies in Iraq to adopt their own strategies in seeking funding, collecting information and working with implementing partners, including the establishment of the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq. Humanitarian appeals were not coordinated or consolidated prior to 2008.

As in other contexts like Somalia and Chechnya, managing partners from a distance may have contributed to fragmentation. It certainly increases the importance of effective coordination. While humanitarian agencies may understand needs in their own implementation areas, their limited points of engagement and the limited reach of their partners have led to fragmentation and raised major problems of coordination. Although mountains of data have been collected, it has not been shared, analysed, used or updated to enable agencies to identify and respond to priority needs.

A proportionate response?

As the crisis in Iraq and its impact on civilians have worsened, humanitarian assistance has not kept pace. The majority of assistance to the displaced and vulnerable has been provided by communities themselves. Apart from the strain this puts on those communities, there are some needs – including those requiring major infrastructural work – that can only be addressed by concerted action from agencies (local, national and international) with the necessary resources and expertise.

International humanitarian assistance in Iraq can be roughly divided into three operational phases: an initial flood of organisations in 2003, the withdrawal of most international aid organisations by 2004 due to insecurity, and the ongoing implementation of humanitarian projects through Iraqi partners and 'remotely managed' national staff.⁷ The international community prepared for a large-scale post-invasion humanitarian crisis in 2003, but none materialised. When the crisis finally emerged, in the form of sectarian violence and displacement in 2006 and 2007, the humanitarian community did not have systems, contingency plans or funding in place to scale up their activities.

The year 2006 saw both the lowest level of emergency funding and notable increases in

⁵ *Rising to the Humanitarian Challenge in Iraq*; and interviews with practitioners

⁶ Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer and Katherine Haver, *Providing Aid in Insecure Environments: Trends in Policy and Operations*, HPG Report 23 (London: ODI, 2006).

⁷ An article in the *Wall Street Journal* at the time cited three key reasons for the withdrawal of NGOs in 2003, namely unsafe and chaotic conditions and political pressures, other priorities around the world with higher levels of need, and unease at working under the military administration of occupation and fear of the instrumentalisation of aid. See D. Bank, 'Humanitarian Groups Spurn Iraq', *Wall Street Journal*, 29 May 2003, quoted in F. Weissman (ed.), *In the Shadow of 'Just Wars'* (London: Hurst & Co., 2004).

insecurity, as evidenced by the highest number of civilian deaths since the onset of the war. While emergency programming in the region increased substantially in 2007, humanitarian aid is still inadequate to provide for the most basic needs of vulnerable Iraqis. The Iraqi government has funds available, but the vast majority of this money has not been used to meet humanitarian needs. The capacity of line ministries is limited by corruption and mobility constraints, and officials have quit for fear of kidnapping and assassination.

Unlike reconstruction and development, no significant international funding mechanisms were created with the sole purpose of financing humanitarian assistance. Donors have looked to the national government even when it is clear that it is unable to provide the necessary aid. Donors have also cited lack of information as a barrier to targeting funds, yet UN agencies and NGOs which claim to be able to identify and meet needs are struggling for money. There appears to have been a lack of dialogue and trust between donors and agencies, especially around accountability and monitoring. Revised and new funding initiatives, such as the Emergency Response Fund and the 2008 Consolidated Appeal, seek to address the issue of flexible funding, but they are short-term mechanisms and have been implemented late.

The distinction between humanitarian, reconstruction and development agendas is not an absolute one; indeed, they are substantially related. Support for recovery in the medium term is clearly essential. But the current situation requires that more urgent priority be given to meeting basic needs.

Compromised humanitarian space?

If adherence to the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence is the litmus test for a principled response, then it is hard to view Iraq as anything other than a failure. International humanitarian actors are perceived as aligned with the Multinational Force, rather than as neutral and independent organisations. When UN agencies and international NGOs arrived *en masse* immediately after the invasion, many received funding from the same governments whose troops were on the ground. The use of the Multinational Force and private contractors to provide security for humanitarian operations, as well as their direct engagement in humanitarian action, has blurred the distinction between humanitarian agencies, contractors and military actors and their roles, with serious consequences.⁸ In the words of one respondent, we have ‘let the genie out of the bottle’; there is no easy way to regain neutrality in this context.

⁸ Hansen, *Coming to Terms with the Humanitarian Imperative in Iraq*.

The overlap of humanitarian and military spheres has not been accidental and is not unique to Iraq: in an era of increasing violence against aid workers, ‘acceptance’ strategies alone often cannot guarantee security. Armed protection is one of a small range of problematic security options in insecure environments. At the same time, military actors have been using humanitarian strategies to increase their own acceptance through ‘hearts and minds’ campaigns. While many humanitarian organisations strongly advocate for a clear distinction between humanitarian interventions and political and military action, governments and political bodies do not necessarily agree. A 2005 Security Council Resolution notably ‘welcomed’ the participation of the Multinational Force in the provision of humanitarian assistance.⁹

Internationally accepted UN guidelines on the use of military and defence assets to support humanitarian operations state that:

Humanitarian work should be performed by humanitarian organisations. Insofar as military organisations have a role to play in supporting humanitarian work, it should, to the extent possible, not encompass direct assistance in order to retain a clear distinction between the normal functions and roles of humanitarian and military stakeholders.¹⁰

Iraq is not unique in the way that the ‘war on terror’ has affected perceptions of international (predominantly Western) humanitarian actors and their role. Even international and Iraqi organisations that draw on independent funds and explicitly distance themselves from the Multinational Force have been unable to rely solely on their independence and neutrality to ensure security or access. The very process of providing assistance has become a political action, with serious risks to those who undertake it.

Going underground

Humanitarianism in Iraq has in effect gone underground, with implementing organisations adopting covert operational styles: working from multiple locations, avoiding branding and logos and varying travel patterns, all in an effort to downplay their identity as humanitarian actors and thereby decrease security risks. While openly displaying an agency’s humanitarian identity used to be considered a means of ensuring security and access, in Iraq it provides a clear target for

⁹ UN Security Council Resolution S/RES/1637, 2005.

¹⁰ These principles are also reaffirmed in the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative (Principle 19).

militants or criminals. It is not clear whether and how this situation can be reversed; what is clear is the need for a major effort to re-establish trust in those providing humanitarian assistance. This will demand patience, consistency and adherence to principles.

Scaling up humanitarian assistance: key challenges

As humanitarian agencies look to scale up interventions in 2008, most of the earlier challenges to providing assistance – political, institutional and operational – persist.

Principled responses

Security in some areas of Iraq has improved since autumn 2007, but insecurity, violence, displacement and humanitarian need are likely to continue in the short to medium term. The increase in humanitarian action planned for 2008 must therefore be seen as the beginning of a consistent and proportionate response to humanitarian needs, rather than a one-year 'surge'. Donors will need to ensure that adequate and flexible funding is available, and will need to maintain support for well-planned programmes. Continued advocacy by organisations to this end will be required, to ensure that the traction gained in 2007 is not wasted.

The operating environment for humanitarian action in Iraq will remain highly constrained, at least in the short term. Humanitarian space – an operating environment in which organisations can freely assess needs, provide relief and hold dialogue – does not exist in Iraq in the traditional sense. Humanitarians have been specifically targeted because of their actual or perceived association with the Multinational Force and the governments that support it, or because they are seen as allied to particular sects. To that extent, Iraq is a dramatic, but not unique, example of a trend that humanitarians are still coming to terms with. As the recent HPG report *Resetting the Rules of Engagement* puts it:

Humanitarian actors need to acknowledge that the operating environment for humanitarian action has changed. At present, there appears to be a reluctance within the humanitarian sector to move beyond advocacy that insists on the preservation of 'humanitarian space' but which has not always been able to demonstrate its importance for the safety and well-being for local populations. Humanitarian agencies can no longer rely (if they ever fully did) on perceptions of neutrality to safeguard them, particularly in environments where they become targets in and of themselves.¹¹

The fact that humanitarian actors cannot currently achieve 'perceived' neutrality does not mean that neutrality is irrelevant. Perceptions can be changed over time, and neutrality of (political) *effect* remains a crucial guiding principle. Aid agencies must ensure (as far as possible) that their assistance does not serve either to advance the cause of one warring party over another, or to exacerbate the conflict.¹²

Applying the principle of impartiality – providing assistance according to need and without adverse distinction between groups – also poses a serious challenge. Iraqi organisations, limited to zones in which they can operate securely, will be assisting areas divided along sectarian lines. Working within these geographical divisions will require careful planning on the part of international agencies to ensure that the impartiality of their operations overall is not compromised.

Moving beyond traditional coordination systems

A renewed focus by OCHA and others on improving coordination and information on needs in Iraq is welcome. Establishing systems that provide timely and evidence-based analysis and that reflect the localised nature of needs and access will continue to pose a challenge to agencies. In the absence of such systems, a coherent narrative and needs analysis for response and advocacy will be hard if not impossible to achieve. At present, there are 19 different databases, none of them linked or centralised. As always in crisis response, a balance must be found between assessment and programming. The lack of a clear overall picture of humanitarian needs in Iraq, however, should not obscure the fact that humanitarian agencies have information on their own programming, and partners able to deliver relief to the most vulnerable.

Coordination is hampered by legitimate concerns to protect the identities of humanitarian actors on the ground, given that they could be targeted if information on their interventions were made public. The challenge is how to improve analysis and access to information on both needs and interventions in a manner that does not create a threat to the security of implementing partners. In terms of information-sharing, donors and humanitarian agencies need to think past the usual 'Who's Doing What Where' documents that map interventions, and which are circulated among agencies to assist them in planning their programmes. There is a need for a system that can

¹¹ Victoria Wheeler and Adele Harmer (eds), *Resetting the Rules of Engagement: Trends and Issues in Military-Humanitarian Relations*, HPG Report 21 (London: ODI, 2006).

¹² This principle is enunciated in Article 2.4 of the Sphere Humanitarian Charter, to which many agencies subscribe.

pull together the information that is available, and discreetly provide information on interventions to inform decision-making. This could take the form of a coordinated database managed by trusted individuals with the authority to provide information to humanitarian agencies and donors.

Working locally

The single most important issue in delivering assistance in Iraq remains the ability of agencies to establish effective modes of operation within existing security and access constraints. International humanitarian actors maintain risk thresholds that, once exceeded, trigger withdrawal or remote management. The withdrawal of international aid agencies and organisations from southern and central Iraq followed this pattern. There is no indication that this threshold is likely to rise. Security concerns remain formidable, and agencies must carefully think through the advantages and disadvantages of deploying expatriate staff to insecure areas, particularly if they intend to employ the same security strategies of bunkering their operations or using military escorts.

While not underplaying the very real and extreme security concerns, recent analysis has shown a 'tendency among international humanitarian staff (as well as among donors and policy makers) to treat insecurity in Iraq as a nebulous, generalised, persistent and insurmountable challenge, rather than as a series of serious incidents, each of which can be analysed, placed into (often localised) context and used as a spur to adaptation'.¹³ A context-specific approach to analysing security situations based on local knowledge must be emphasised. Some international aid agencies have adjusted their programming in ways that have steadily increased their access, while others have persisted with less adaptive strategies. Efforts to scale up assistance must include careful analysis of the local security situation, and contingency plans that provide for deterioration as well as stabilisation in the security environment.

The call for increased engagement does not necessarily imply that more expatriates should be placed in the country. Networks for relief have been established through close contact with local leaders, understanding political structures and building up trust with the population, whilst at the same time retaining a low profile. Challenges of coordination and monitoring persist, but NGOs are slowly starting to establish localised ways of working.

¹³ Hansen, *Coming to Terms with the Humanitarian Imperative in Iraq*.

Building civil society in Iraq will take years and is beyond the scope of humanitarian action. Working with local partners and assisting with capacity-building, however, is not. Increasing the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance requires reinforcing partnerships and the adoption of more flexible modes of operation. Responsible humanitarian action focuses on local partnership, but in a risk-sharing manner. Building capacity in this context might also encourage donors to fund national NGOs. Efforts to address monitoring and evaluation issues are critical in reducing the distrust between donors and agencies.

Agencies must also balance their institution's desire for presence versus profile. There is much talk about the use (or not) of humanitarian emblems and agency logos in contexts such as Iraq. Expanding operations on the ground and 'flying the flag' of humanitarianism are two separate issues, and must be carefully considered when emblems meant to convey neutrality instead provide a clear target. Whatever 2008 brings, Iraqi civil society remains the major provider of relief on the ground and will continue to require capacity-building, accountability and support from the international community.

What makes the Iraq crisis unique?

Many of the challenges discussed here have faced humanitarian workers in other conflicts as well. Iraq is unique because of their multiplicity and concurrence: high levels of insecurity for civilians and aid workers, an immature civil society, the absence of robust coordination systems, the operational issues inherent in remote management, weak governance, sectarian divisions, compromised neutrality and impartiality and limited access to basic services. Meanwhile, agencies are operating in the context of the war on terror, which challenges International Humanitarian Law at all levels. Humanitarian activities are being undertaken by a multiplicity of actors, some of which do not respect basic humanitarian principles. These challenges have led to a fragmented response, with no common narrative on humanitarian needs and response.

During 2008, individual humanitarian agencies will decide whether to embrace the current mood of cautious optimism regarding the potential for increased access and the scaling up of humanitarian programmes in Iraq. At the same time, agencies must be aware of the danger of the (further) instrumentalisation of relief assistance as a humanitarian counterpoint to the military surge. The context is highly politicised, but not unique in this. There is a need to reassert a clear humanitarian identity in Iraq and a common agenda. This demands consensus

and joint communication on needs and priorities from the humanitarian community, speaking with one voice. It also demands a restatement of principles as a basis of a new compact with civil society and Iraqi communities.

Those advocating for short-term aid until the Iraqi government can take over its legal responsibilities to provide humanitarian assistance will have to recognise that this is not a short-term humanitarian emergency. The international humanitarian community will have a role in alleviating suffering and providing protection to the most vulnerable in Iraq for years to come. Many of the conditions that have impeded humanitarian action in the past continue to exist. In 2008, we have an opportunity to learn from the challenges of humanitarian engagement to date in order to scale up humanitarian activities in a manner that best reflects the magnitude and variety of needs. Doing so requires putting together the pieces of humanitarian action to build a coherent and effective framework of engagement.

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