

The streets of Baghdad: Rebuilding neighborhoods

by [Arthur B. Keys](#) in the [January 27, 2004](#) issue

I knew Baghdad was in bad shape, but I didn't expect the vast expanse of urban slums that sprawl across the flatlands between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. I was also surprised to see that the effects of the coalition bombing and open combat were limited. In this city of 5.6 million, which was crumbling for a decade under Saddam Hussein, the most severe blow to normal daily life has been the mayhem caused by looters and thieves.

My work with International Relief and Development (IRD) brought me to Baghdad to help implement a Community Action Program. The need became visible as I visited neighborhoods. In one, where there was no sewage plant, residents were suffering from an inescapable stench and experiencing serious sanitation-related health problems.

In another neighborhood, a lack of electricity and an aging municipal infrastructure had rendered pumping stations useless. I saw street after street flooded with sewage, with water over a foot deep in some areas. Homes were flooded, including inner courtyards where children play, and streets were accessible only by negotiating precariously balanced boards laid across the street.

Five U.S. nongovernmental organizations—including Mercy Corps, Save the Children and IRD—began tackling these and other problems in Iraq. With funding from the United States Agency for International Development, the IRD Community Action Program is a one-year, \$14 million program that will probably be extended for two more years. Its goal is to engage Iraqi citizens in a democratic process of identifying and prioritizing development projects for their communities, and to involve Iraqis in implementing and supervising the programs.

IRD was assigned to metro Baghdad and began setting up offices, establishing communications and organizing a team of Americans, Australians, Jordanian expatriates and Iraqi nationals. IRD's team established contact with other USAID-

funded organizations, forging links that have been critical in helping coordinate community projects.

Our staff of 70—65 of them Iraqis—includes community mobilizers, engineers, income generation specialists, contract specialists, finance managers and support staff. To ensure their safety, IRD hired a leading security consulting firm to assess the physical security of its staff and volunteers, to communicate any known dangers, and to develop early-warning mechanisms for staff activities.

Through local community members, IRD helps establish democratically selected and organized community action groups throughout Baghdad. The Iraqi citizens who make up the groups identify the most immediate challenges facing their communities, and IRD assists the communities in developing projects that respond to those challenges. The community action groups advertise for project bids and award contracts to Iraqi firms following USAID procedures; then IRD engineers supervise the projects and ensure their completion.

In the neighborhood with health problems, IRD built concrete ditches to stop sewage from flooding the area. The residents' health improved—as did the neighborhood's smell. The municipality noticed the improvements, and sent in trucks to remove tons of trash.

The resolution of one problem gave the residents resolve for tackling others. A medical center in the same area provided services ranging from regular checkups to intensive surgery. Contractors were hired to pump sewage from the areas around the center and to repair damage to the roads directly in front of the facility. For a long-term solution, IRD worked with the local municipality to rebuild or replace the pumps in the pumping station and ensure adequate electrical supplies to allow the station to operate effectively.

Another community in Baghdad had been without municipal services for over a decade. What looked like a seven-foot-high dusty gray wall to a casual passerby was actually a solid mass of compacted trash infested with scorpions and mice. IRD helped remove the trash.

Communities are always glad to see trash removed, sewers installed and schools rebuilt. But the greatest rewards come from community involvement, which encourages reconciliation among individuals of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Communities learn to work, live and play together, weaving a

sustainable framework for civil society. By October IRD had helped put in place over 70 community action groups representing 162 neighborhoods and over 1,000 participants, both men and women. Over half a million Iraqis have already benefited from these nascent development programs, including 4,000 who found jobs through the projects. The effect on the daily lives of ordinary Iraqi citizens is staggering.

Yet this relief and development work is risky. The summer attacks on the UN headquarters in Baghdad were a stark reminder of the dangerous nature of humanitarian work in postconflict environments. During Ramadan, the Iraqi capital was rocked by massive bombings targeting the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) began to reassess their commitment to the reconstruction effort in Iraq and asked: What next? Is it prudent to stay in Iraq when the ICRC, one of the largest players, has decided to withdraw?

According to the intuitive logic of humanitarian and development operations in insecure places like Iraq, agencies withdraw staff and downsize programs until conditions improve. Yet anyone who has been in Iraq, in Kosovo before the latest Balkan war, or in Afghanistan, Liberia or Sierra Leone understands that the assistance NGOs offer is most needed during times of heightened instability. No action the NGO community could take would be more devastating to people than leaving. IRD believes, therefore, that it has an obligation to assist Iraqis who are enthusiastically and directly involved in relief and development project.

Yet current trends are worrisome. A decline in the number of international organizations in Iraq has meant more work for the NGOs that remain, and for the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and major contractors. Another worrisome trend is the “bricks and mortar” approach to Iraq’s transition (rather than community development) favored by many international donors. Most of the \$20 billion budgeted for reconstruction is directed to large-scale reconstruction programs aimed at rebuilding Iraq’s deteriorated infrastructure.

Only 2 percent of that budget goes to sustained community-based work, but that work is essential because it builds trust and confidence, and encourages cooperation and self-help. We need community development, a strengthened civil society and new leaders. The NGO community builds new Iraqi institutions from within, developing social capital that will withstand instability and rough-edged transition. NGOs know the efficacy of community-based, participatory approaches to development, and know how to advocate when necessary on behalf of a population

that may not know how to articulate its vision and its perception of the community's needs.

That's why NGOs must stay the course. When work in the field becomes difficult, NGOs must reassess, revise and improve their approaches. IRD, for instance, has reduced its expatriate staff and nationalized key staff positions. It is also training more Iraqis to take over development projects. When we organize a local PTA in conjunction with a physical renovation of a neighborhood school, for example, we improve the chance that the school will continue operation during times of social conflict.

At the same time, we must keep human and financial resources flowing to the programs. Such an approach will serve NGOs well—not just in Iraq, but in Afghanistan and other regions where people need help in making the difficult transition to a sustainable peace.