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Civil Society Research Priorities in Iraq
A Workshop hosted by IDRC

Amman, December 8 – 9, 2005

Draft Report

Background and Introduction

On December 8-9, 2005, participants representing Iraqi civil society organizations and key regional and international institutions were invited to take part in workshop examining research priorities and good governance in Iraq. The workshop was organized by the Middle East Good Governance Fund (MEGGF) managed by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). IDRC is a Canadian institution which funds researchers from developing countries to examine issues they identify as crucial to their communities in their search for the means to build healthier, equitable, and more prosperous societies. IDRC provides technical support and promotes knowledge sharing and networking between scientific, academic, and development communities in the developing world and in Canada.

The MEGGF is a new initiative established in November 2004 and funded by the Iraq Task Force of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) which aims to increase policy-relevant knowledge that is useful for promoting good governance in the Middle East region, particularly in Iraq. Its focus is on the interactions between civil society and political institutions and how these contribute to a more open and democratic space. Through support to research, it proposes to look at how civil society promotes concepts of governance and how political institutions interact with civil society and policy processes and are held accountable. The Fund also attaches importance to youth, gender and media as cross-cutting themes.

The aim of this workshop was to discuss with the participants current research and program priorities in Iraq today and to understand the challenges the research community in particular faces. In particular, IDRC aims to develop a research agenda in Iraq which focuses on the themes identified for the MEGGF.

The workshop focused on four key areas, namely: the challenges facing Iraqi civil society; political developments and constitutional issues; the role and influence of political parties; and the impact of clannism on existing political systems (see agenda and research questions). The workshop, conducted over one and a half days, was held in Arabic with simultaneous translation into English.

Workshop participants came from Iraqi universities and NGOs in various parts of the country and were chosen by IDRC after extensive consultations with partners working in or on Iraq (see participant list attached).

General Issues Raised

Two key points were raised at the outset of discussions. The first was that, at this workshop, participants were being asked to consider longer term research capacity in the midst of pressing humanitarian needs of the Iraqi population. All participants recognized the constraint of research development in the midst of the pressing needs for delivery of humanitarian assistance. However, they agreed that building home-grown research capacity was important and would contribute to the future well-being of the nation-state.

The second point raised was around the issue of terminology and specifically relating to the definition of "good governance". Participants from the academic field especially noted the importance of defining terminology with accuracy. However, there was recognition by most that debates around terminology and translation of such terms are not new. It was generally agreed that the focus at this workshop should be placed on the mechanisms which will help achieve good governance, and away from becoming caught in lengthy debates concerning the terms used and their translation in Arabic.

Challenges facing civil society in Iraq

Three basic areas concerning civil society were addressed at the meeting, namely: the legal framework addressing civil society organizations (CSOs) in Iraq; the relationship between civil society and communities in general and how they influence policy; and donor support for civil society.

Civil society representation at the workshop was very diverse and participants recognized that each brought to the table viewpoints relating to their respective sectors. This in fact, brought out rich discussions which contributed to shedding light upon the current challenges faced by CSOs on the ground, and also highlighted at the same time the broad spectrum of their priorities.

Since 2003, CSOs have been building from the ground up and striving to address socio-economic challenges including (but not limited) to relief efforts, health and essential services. Now numbering around 1,400, CSOs face several challenges including:

- all aspects of the current occupation, security and peace;
- the reconstruction of the state and separation of powers;
- laws resulting from the new Iraqi constitution;
- the magnitude of immediate socio-economic needs, and
- their own need to build capacity and skills at the institutional level.

Participants observed that CSOs need to continue foremost to provide services addressing immediate needs for the people, while also educating and raising awareness of the public

on issues such as electoral participation and political processes. Participants also stressed the need for CSOs to become more involved in advocacy and lobbying, especially on constitutional issues and social policies. This is considered an area in which CSOs in the region as a whole should strive to improve, and not just Iraq. The media was noted as being an important partner to CSOs in building the lobbying process. On the level of research capacity, the importance of strengthening research centres as academic centres was highlighted as was the need to exert more effort into basic data collection and field research, as well as information sharing with other stakeholders.

The legal framework concerning CSOs is murky at best. Efforts are needed on the part of the new government in place to develop the relationship of CSOs and to be transparent in public policymaking. For their part, CSOs need to improve their public accountability and transparency, ensuring that they express the interests of the Iraqi people and convey them to policymakers.

Most CSOs also lack a clear and comprehensive strategy or vision. There is real need to plan based on information that reflects the realities and priorities of each sector. Coordination and networking in each of the different sectors – eg. trade unions, or professional unions, women's unions, research centres – will strengthen civil society overall and their messaging to both the government and the public.

Finally, participants noted some challenges in dealing with donors working in Iraq. Some emphasized sensitivities around public perceptions of CSOs who have certain donor partnerships. Most were concerned with ensuring that initiatives are built based on partnerships with CSOs rather than on a top-down donor and recipient relationship. Coordination was again noted as extremely important, not just with donors but also with decision-makers in relevant ministries and on the legislative level.

Political Developments and Constitutional Issues

This part of the meeting was used to discuss the development of the constitution and priorities for CSOs. The current constitution document was ratified on October 15, 2005 and drafted within six weeks by members of the Interim Iraqi Government to replace the Law of Administration for the State of Iraq for the Transitional Period. Amendments to the constitution can be considered within the first fourth months of a newly elected parliament.

Workshop participants noted several positive and negative attributes of the constitution in its current state. On the former, one participant noted that this document was prepared in record time and is yet the most detailed in Iraqi history. It is also the first that elaborates on about human rights and civil society organizations. It points to Islam as the official religion of the country but in such a manner that it does not conflict with national identity.

However, on the negative side, the drafting and adoption of the new Constitution was not without controversy, as sectarian tensions in Iraq figured in the process of its

development. Despite its short timeline, the deadline for the conclusion of drafting was extended on four occasions because of the lack of consensus on religious language. Contrary to more positive views expressed, many workshop participants felt that the drafting process was entirely rushed and excaberated divisions between Iraq's ethnic and religious groups. Some felt that rights, especially those of women and children, needed further development in the text. Some also noted that Iraqi presidents should be elected by the people and not the parliament. Participants agreed that details concerning how the constitution was drafted and how parties reached consensus should be made public at the appropriate time and much earlier in the process of the development of the document.

There was acknowledgement that the political interpretation of the constitution is more important than the text itself. The mechanisms by which the constitution is amended should be carefully monitored. In this regard, participants noted the following as priorities for CSOs:

- Undertake extensive review of the articles of the constitution, laws and institutions amended and re-designed, and suggest areas for modification and/or improvement, especially on those concerning CSOs;
- Educate the Iraqi people about the contents of the constitution and their rights and responsibilities; and
- Open up spaces, where possible, for public discussion and engagement on the constitutional document.

The role and influence of political parties

As the country moves from several decades of one-party rule towards a multi-party system, approximately 50 groups or alliances currently exist in Iraq, many of them emerging Islamist parties. Political parties are sometimes identified as being part of civil society, but because of their politicization are distinct. In the case of Iraq, parties tend to be sectarian in nature, and show similarities to the political context in Lebanon.

Political parties are in the process of building, and participants pointed out that in this regard, they were in much the same position as CSOs. Their programs tend to be weak and their level of public acceptance low. Yet, workshop participants expressed caution in considering the Iraqi political party scene as abnormal or exceptional; what is important is that the idea of a multi-party system is being accepted in the country.

Participants noted some key points concerning Iraqi political parties:
- There is a need for a regulatory law for political parties in order to set standards.
- Political party leadership (identity, charisma) is often critical to their success or failure – for example, when a prominent leader passes away or steps down, the party in question has a tendency to split or ceases to exist. Leaders also help to reinforce democratic development within political parties or institutions – if they themselves do not adhere to these values then the party cannot be democratic.

- It is necessary to prevent majority parties repressing the ideas of minorities. A two council system, ensuring minorities have a number of seats, will be helpful in this regard.
- Militias in political parties have a negative effect on good governance and particularly the ability to promote freedom of association and expression.
- Islamist parties are increasingly taking part in democratic processes. Some participants noted the difficulty of separating religion from the state, and emphasized the importance of cooperation between government institutions and and religious groups.
- Spreading the culture of democratic thought should not be kept to political parties or the elite. Instead, it should be widespread so that the Iraqi people learn to think and plan for themselves. The culture of suppression in Iraq which has permeated previous generations should be overcome.

Civil society acts as a bridge between the Iraqi public and political parties/authorities. Without a strong, vibrant civil society there can be negative consequences for the relationship between them. There is a need to ensure that civil society remains autonomous, and away from the governing of political parties.

Participants pointed to several areas where CSOs can play an active role. To start, CSOs can gather information via public opinion polls and surveys on trends of public support for political parties. They can also gather information and reflect on what expectations the Iraqi people have from political parties, including the types of qualifications that the Iraqi people will look for in their leadership. In turn, CSOs must be educators on both sides of the bridge, taking on great advocacy roles as noted previously, and also sound research and dissemination on the rights and responsibilities of citizens. Equally important are the needs to encourage women's participation in parties as is the need to groom young people in the country to be leaders. Finally, participants noted that, like in other parts of the Middle East region, comparative research is needed on the role of Islamist parties and their success in organizing and leading.

The impact of clannism on existing political systems

Clans, or tribes, have played an important governance role in Iraq. Clans were originally formed based on group land ownership patterns. Later, the role of clans changed when land was registered only in the name of the clan leader, leading to the emergence of a feudal system. Over time, through the revolution of the monarchy and the emergence of political parties, clans became weaker. Then, the former Iraqi regime first tried to abolish any role of clans but then later after 1991 encouraged clanism, even promoting an office of Clans Affairs. This was done mainly for security reasons but was also purportedly used for corruption.

Participants discussed a new form of clannism which has started to appear with highly educated leaders who also maintain traditions to enhance their affiliation to their tribes. They have imposed themselves on political life in Iraq to have their own say and their own points of view. In addition to this strength, the Iraqi governing council has also

given more power to Iraqi tribal units. New groupings started to appear and many tribesmen started their own entities and CSOs or realigned themselves politically. Participants felt that consideration should be given to the role of tribal units in political processes in Iraq though it also noted that their impact should not be exaggerated.

Participants grappled with the notion of a tribal Iraq. Though they did not want to deny the historical importance of tribes, they emphasized the need to build an Iraq as a country of institutions that respect the law. The constitution's dealing with tribes is considered contradictory in this respect.

The link between tribes and religious leaders is also important and indeed they work closely together. In the case of the Shi'ite tribes in particular, there is a strong relationship between tribal leadership and the Shiite clergymen.

Future Research Topics

At the conclusion of discussions on the four main workshop themes, IDRC summarized the list of priority research areas that had emerged.

For **civil society**, there were three important needs listed:
- A mapping of civil society organizations and good governance: definition of good governance by Civil Society Organizations, the internal use of good governance and the promotion of this concept;
- Capacity-building and civil society networks in the area of democratic development; and
- Developing a culture of dialogue and democracy within civil society organizations.

Concerning the **constitution**, the workshop discussions pointed to the following areas in need of further research:

- The role of civil society in influencing constitutional development and policymakers;

- The role of civil society in monitoring the implementation of the constitution and their political interpretation; and

- Developing tools for advocacy and influence on constitutional development.

Priority research areas on the issue of **political parties** included:

- Democratization of political parties and their structures.

- The links of political parties with civil society and policymakers.

- The role of young staff in political parties.

Finally, on the roles of **clans and tribes**, in-depth research on the following would be beneficial:

- Analysis of the political role of tribes.
- Analysis of the relation between tribes and religious movements.
- The relationship between tribes and political parties.

Other needs were also discussed such as the creation of an NGO resource centre, for development, collaboration and information sharing - whether a physical centre or a virtual resource database. Participants also reiterated that some studies need to be devoted to the role of civil society in: overcoming the violence currently affecting the daily lives of Iraqis; dealing with conflict resolution; and reconciliation.

Next Steps

As noted in the introduction of this report, the aim of this workshop was to discuss with the participants current priorities in Iraq today and to understand the challenges the research community in particular faces.   It also helped participants around the table open the discussions on their own research needs and to network both amongst the Iraqi researchers/practitioners and with other regional social scientists with comparative research experiences to share.   IDRC is committed to working with the Iraqi research community to advance on these positive first steps.

IDRC colleagues explained the process by which they receive proposals to the Middle East Good Governance Fund for funding consideration and, as follow-up to this workshop, encouraged participants to submit proposals based on the research priorities noted above.   IDRC also noted a possible MEGGF-UNDP partnership in providing research support to the Iraqi research community and will share information concerning this partnership once finalized and approved.

Annex I
List of Participants

Dr. Wisal Najib Azawi	Dean of Political Science, Nahrain University
Dr. Riyadh Aziz Hadi	Dean of Political Science, Baghdad University
Dr. Isam al-Khafaji	University of Amsterdam
Mr. Abdul Zahra Waheed	Director, Iraqi Center for Development and International Dialogue
Dr. Kashaf al-Ghitta'	Director, Al-Thaqalyn Strategic Studies Centre
Dr. Hayder Al Jashammi	Watan Research Center, Baghdad
Mr. Mohamed Sinjari	Iraq Institute for Democracy
Mr. Jamal Al-Jawahiri	Iraqi Al-Amal Association
Mr. Kasra Mofarah	NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI)
Mr. Oussama Safa	Lebanese Centre for Policy Studies
Dr. Joost Hiltermann	Crisis Group, Amman
Dr. Ziad Abdel Samad	Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND)
Ms. Annie Demirjian	UNDP
Ms. Veronique Pepin-Halle	Canadian Embassy
Ms. Roula El-Rifai	IDRC
Mr. Charaf Ahmimed	IDRC
Ms. Eileen Alma	IDRC

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AGENDA

Thursday, December 8

11:30   Logistical details and welcoming drink in Ayla meeting room (second floor)

12:00   Group lunch in Atrium restaurant (main floor lobby)

13:30   Welcome by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Ayla
          meeting room – 15min
   - *Introduction to IDRC and the Middle East Unit team*

13:45   Roundtable introduction by participants – 45min

14:30   Introduction to Middle East Good Governance Fund (MEGGF) – 15min
   - *Presentation on MEGGF program strategy and themes*

14:45   Discussion

15:15   Break – 15min

15:30   Challenges facing civil society in Iraq – 2 hours
   - *What are the laws governing civil society organizations and political
     associations and which groups are excluded from these laws? How do these
     laws impact the structure and work of theses organizations?*
   - *How do CSOs promote with people an active concept of citizenship, how do
     they link to policymakers and how are their efforts policy relevant?*
   - *How do CSOs integrate a focus on youth and gender issues?*
   - *How can donors support civil society in their policy planning research and
     activities?*

19:30   Group Dinner (Indu Restaurant in the hotel, main floor level)

Friday, December 9

9:00   Political developments and constitutional issues – 1 hour
- *How do CSOs and political parties contribute to the development of the constitution and what are the priorities?*

10:00 Break – 30 min

10:30 The role and influence of political parties – 2 hours
- *What is the legal framework under which parties function?*
- *How do political institutions mobilize civil society and how do they link up to policymakers?*
- *How can internal structures of political parties be more democratized?*
- *What is the role of Islamist parties in promoting good governance processes?*

12:30 Lunch - Bourj al-Hamam Restaurant in the hotel, main floor – 1.5 hours

14:00 The impact of clannism on existing political systems – 1.5 hours
- *How do clans act as political units?*
- *How does their participation in the political system promote or impede the development of the process of good governance and the sense of active citizenship?*

15:30 Break – 15 min

15:45 Next steps – 1.5 hours
- *Summary of research priorities*
- *Common areas of interest with MEGGF*

17:15 Workshop adjourned