IIST Technical Report (30 November 2007)

The State of Social Sciences in Iraq Universities: Survey and Assessment

IDRC Grant No: I-103936-001

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Date of Presentation: 30 November 2007

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Synthesis
This research project, funded by IDRC, examined the state of social sciences in Iraqi universities in four regions, involving four major universities (Baghdad, Erbil Sulaymaniya, and Basra), and a number of new-small provincial ones in Anbar, Salahudin, Najaf, Karbala and other provinces. The native research team examined three clusters of variables, socio-political, institutional and cultural factors that promote or inhibit the development of social sciences and native research capacity.

The team received warm support from vice-Prime minister Dr. Salam Zauoba'i, and Higher Education minister throughout their research effort between May-November 2007.

The centrality of the role of the state, the team discovered, was crucial in terms of funding, structure of higher learning in institutions, the curricula, terms of admission, academic freedom. Central policies, salary hierarchy, and social and cultural bias, all favoured natural rather social sciences.

Examining the universities' institutional structure, the quantitative and qualitative steady growth sustained throughout four decades (1940s-1970s) was eroded by wars, UN imposed sanctions, and state police monitoring. The curricula are outdated, the teaching staffs require new generation of foreign-language speaking native tutors, libraries cry out for digitalization and modernization, and the campuses demand civil liberties.

A new post-conflict condition has ended state monopoly: private universities are expanding; new consumers of academic intellectual products (international donors and agencies) are in abundance.

At present the academia has been re-linked with the world; funding has improved, but political and criminal violence is again inhibiting this positive turn. The potential for growth, however, is there.

Research Problem:

This research project examines the state of social sciences in Iraqi universities and academic institutions to identify the weak and strong points that promote or inhibit the development of research in this field.

Iraq boasts of quantitative academic growth in numbers of institutions, expansion of infrastructure, of the teaching staff, of students' population, and the introduction of new disciplines and curricula, throughout some seven decades. In the first half of this period, this was paralleled by remarkable qualitative growth. In the second half, however, the previous qualitative advance of the academia sustained massive erosion. This decline resulted from multiple causes, political, socio-cultural and academic institutional factors. The country was in almost constant war and crippling sanctions.

Our survey-research was focused on three clusters of factors: political (state educational and cultural policies), institutional (the organization and inner functioning of universities) and socio-cultural factors inhibiting and/or favouring development of social sciences.

Academic higher learning is centrally administered, monitored and financed by the state, (the Ministry of Higher Education, MHE). The educational policies, ideological leanings, developmental priorities, and financial capacity of the Ba'ath nationalist-socialist single-party state resulted, at least since 1980s (marking the first war with Iran), in stagnation and decline of academic education in general, and social science faculties in particular.

The bulk of the research effort, however, is focused on how these clustered factors impacted on the academic institutions: growth of the academies (from 1 to 22), of the students population, and of the teaching staff; but the decline in quality of tutors, budget, curricula, libraries, and academic research centres. The terms of admission to the academia and post-graduate studies, censorship, and control over academic life were examined together with the structure of universities, method of organization of disciplines, selection of the curricula, text and reference books, the size and quality of teaching staff. Native research products of selective years, MA dissertations and Ph.D., were quantitatively and qualitatively examined and assessed.

Research Findings

A basic fact in the realm of higher education is, for better or worse, the central role of the state. Central authorities finance, administer and monitor free academic learning. Changes in the structure of the academia, in the curricula, or in the scope of academic freedom require central sanction.
The 'welfare state' policy of near total absorption of secondary school graduates into academic life as part of its social contract in exchange of political consent, is also a blessing and a curse.
As a result, private academic institutions disappeared for decades; the organization of social sciences was trapped into a rigid, structure dating back

to the early 20th century, preventing the development of interdisciplinary frameworks, or the introduction of new disciplines. Developmental outlook, ideological concerns, and social bias, rendered social sciences held low. The text books have been centrally determined one text book per subject; texts cry out for updating. The quantitative increase of universities (almost one or more per province) stretched human and dwindling material resources to the limits, compromising the quality of learning. The quality of teaching staff (number of Ph.D. holders, knowledge of foreign languages, and longevity of tutorship) deteriorated.

Social science faculties relatively increased (sociology from 1 to 8; philosophy from 1 to 5), but most modern disciplines (anthropology, appeared only in 2002) or subjects (e.g. security studies, sociology of religion, ethnic studies, linguistics, etc.) seem to be wanting.

Teaching techniques seem also to have been confined to the lecture format; teaching of research methodology, terminology, and field research instruction, is poor. Research centres were and still are hollowed out; libraries still wait for digitalization and expansion. This is the legacy of the last quarter of a century, when the country was deprived of its oil revenues, literally cut off from the world, and a sustaining a constant brain-drain.

In the aftermath of 2003,the academia re--linked with the world through scholarship, the internet, the freedom of travel, unrestricted importation of books and freedom of publication. Teaching staff salaries improved (from $8 to a minimum of $450). Faculty deans were now elected.

Private and international universities have now been reintroduced on a wider scale (2 international foreign-language universities and more than a dozen of private universities). With the presence of international bodies, agencies and firms growing demand on local research and knowledge ended state monopoly of the 'market' for intellectual products.

Yet, political and criminal violence exacerbated the effects of the Islamic-conservative influence over academic life. New forms of political control over the teaching process and academic freedom are evident. A life-threatening atmosphere triggered a new wave of academic exodus abroad. These developments have almost neutralized some of the positive developments mentioned earlier.

The continuation of political violence and instability may well hamper prospects of development for the time being. Stability, decentralization and exposure to the world may continue to encourage change.

Fulfilment of Objectives

The Project offers a wealth of information of and a comparative-critical approach to various aspects of the state bof social sciences in the country in general, and in academic institutions in three major regions in particular. The findings point to major areas where reform and development is required. With a robust dissemination effort, the findings may contribute to the fulfilment of the overall objective of the Project: to strengthen social science research capacity in Iraq through an assessment of the conditions and needs of universities.

The Project also involved a number of academic figures and young researchers in the effort, enhancing a two-way exchange of expertise and experience between native-based and Diaspora Iraqi researchers. The Project also yielded in the process fruitful work relations with a number of Iraqi universities. Regular official and semi-official contacts have been established with a host of universities (Mustansiriya, Karbala, Kufa, Tikrit, Salhudin, among others) to help develop their curricula and provide for reference books (some of which already printed by the IIST) and field research training.

Salahudin University (Erbil) conveyed a full-fledged proposal to our institute to train some 75 of their post-graduate students in research methodology and techniques throughout 2008-9. (The proposal was officially conveyed on 12 December 2007).

The IIST also established liaisons with the Ministry of Higher Education (MHE), the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Scientific Research (MSR) that may contribute to the dissemination of the research findings.

The cabinet minister of the MSR, Mr. Raid Fahmi, expressed the desire to organize special courses on 'Research Methodology and Techniques'.

Project Design and Implementation

The research plan was premised on Maurice Godelier's definition of social sciences as inclusive of all faculties other than natural and technological sciences. Three clusters of determinants were examined: institutional (in the academia), political, and socio-cultural factors. The major focus, however, was laid on the institutional factors: organization of faculties, the curricula, the teaching staff, reference or text books, , problems of methodology and terminology, organization of faculties, libraries, among other determinants.

Field research plan was divided by region: Baghdad, Kurdistan, South 1 (Basra and adjacent universities), and South 2 (Kufa and adjacent universities.). In Baghdad, the plan envisaged further division of labour: Mustansiriya and Baghdad universities.

The team managed to extend survey to two other (Sunni) provinces: Salahudin (Tikrit) and Anbar (Ramadi and Falluja). This helped expand coverage of regions, and avoid possible accusation of communal bias.

Thematic division of the plan: one, collection of quantitative data sets, and two: examination of qualitative aspects: interviews, questionnaires and open source literature.

Unified data set tables were discussed, approved and formatted for all team members; the data-set sheet covered all areas specified by research questions: teaching staff (size and qualifications), curricula, text and reference books, organization of faculties and disciplines, libraries, research centres and son.

Questionnaire and interview reference points were also prepared, discussed, amended and approved for the project.

Filed initiatives were left open to expand on data collection if the required by the conditions at hand, which differ from one region to another.

Research design envisaged originally was amended as research progressed to include new details.

The time lines were an impediment. Originally, the staring date was set either on mid December 2006 or mid January 2007. Rescheduling was necessary due to delays in transfer of funds. The new schedule (late April) risked loosing two months of summer academic holidays (July and August). Curfews and violence impeded research in Baghdad.

Project outputs and dissemination

Phase I of the project- survey of social sciences in Iraqi universities, resulted in a *volume in Arabic* (60,000 words with scores of standardized and systematized sets of data organized in tables, statistics and diagrams) that will be published immediately (anticipated publication date: 20 December 2007).

An *English translation of some 20,000 words* is being revised for electronic publication and distribution. In addition, *an English summary of 5000 words* has been prepared and will be circulated soon.

A workshop will be held to discussion and debate in a *Workshop* to be held early next year (Beirut), and *a conference in Baghdad to generate* feedback. *A body of recommendations is expected* to be collected and conveyed to all native (Iraqi) and international agencies and parties of interest.

Capacity Building

 The project helped reinforce and sustain our institute's research capacity, and put to test our administrative and technical potential in order to better see the loopholes and improve on organization and implementation.

The project also increased our *understanding of the research environment in Iraq* fraught with xenophobic culture, bureaucratic impediments, and unnecessary 'fear of exposure', together with a measure of readiness to extend cooperation and support.

The project improved our understanding of better ways of access to information (consult Project Management), and assess the available sets of data.

The Project also deepened *our mutual understanding of native researchers' mentality* in order to improve their collective team work, refine their initiative-oriented spirit, and enhance acceptance of 'outside'-office, independent disciplined work, and acceptance of implementation-linked method of payment.

The project offered a good chance to involve and *train seven young researchers* taking part for the first time in field research.

Lastly, project resulted in forging good working relations with officials (ministers and cabinet undersecretaries) and academic colleagues (deans, faculty heads, and lecturers) in most universities examined in the report.

Project Management
Planning
Project management was divided in three major stages: 1- discussion of topic, development of proposal and selection of team members, and so on; 2- full

meeting of the team members to discuss, refine and approve research theme, plan, research questions (reference points), research design, division of labour responsibilities, honorarium and method of payment; 3- special meeting to explain ethical obligations, sign commitments of non-violence, and explain risk mitigation strategy;

4- editorial meetings were held at the end of research to examine the validity and accuracy of data, and edit the report.

Division of team

The research team was divided into six local groups (by city), and these were led by a core of three: Dr. Shirzad Najjar (Kurdistan), Muhammad Atwan (South), and Haidar Said (Baghdad). IIST director was to oversee the progress of work by monthly reports, and weekly follow up.

Office secretary at the main office Beirut, and at our office in Erbil, was to collect, file, and distribute, all relevant data and nit exchange of telephone calls and emails together.

Types of administering team:

The nature of the field work done involved many types of work organization: *centrally administered, office based* (from our offices in Beirut directly liaising with senior researchers or, where needed, with assistant researchers in the field), *locally administered* (from a region senior researcher directing town based assistant researchers, the case of Kurdistan), or centrally administered by a *foreign-stationed, non-office-based director* (the case of Baghdad, directed by Jordan based supervisor and involving two senior researchers and a number of junior assistants) or *locally but individually administered* (the case of Basra, one senior researcher per city).

Office mentality:

All modes of work-supervision were more or less *successful,* except the *foreign-non-office- based type.* This failure has to do with the prevailing 'office' mentality, where free-individual work discipline (and perhaps ethics) does not seem solid yet. 'Office' mentality usually de-links achievement from pay; regular salaries are the norm and may have, in certain cases, a negative impact on the flow of work.

Approaches to academic institutions:

Perhaps the major shortcoming was the failure to discuss and define how to approach the relevant institutions (universities) for data collection: friendly approach from below (directly to faculties via friends and colleagues), or official (indirect approach from above) via the bureaucratic chain of the Ministry of Higher Education. Both lines were intertwined and used successfully in Kurdistan; line from below was successfully used in the south; line from above was deployed in Baghdad and caused problems and delay, before the second line (from below) was activated.

Xenophobic mentality, 'fear of exposure', and 'communal' rivalries, were not properly estimated.

IDRC:

The IDRC showed a good friendly and supportive follow up of the project throughout the research phase, which allowed for the discussion of various issues, inclusive of some hardships. A note on 'timelines' is not irrelevant. The timelines envisaged in the original plan (January 2007) was not observed, causing some unnecessary disruptions.

Impact

The project has already generated a measure of interest by native and international figures and agencies to have the research findings published.

Given the fact that the findings will be available in both Arabic and English, electronic and printed formats, the outreach of the project will be wide.

The dissemination of the findings will most probably raise awareness of(and perhaps bitterness over) the state of social sciences, and provide some recommendations on to improve and develop different areas: curriculum, text-books, teaching techniques, libraries, terminology lexicons, research methodology, among other things.

The survey offers objective assessments of weak and strong points that may well help government policy and decision makers develop focused policies regarding the principles of the organization of disciplines, terms of academic admission and postgraduate studies, diversification of centrally standardized text-books, or granting a measure of autonomy to universities in this and other regards.

It also provides, perhaps for the first time, a systematized set of comparative academic data by region, sector and faculty, allowing to writ this set larger, nationwide.

Overall assessment

The project's theme of mapping the state of social science, originally constructed by the IDRC, is of vital importance that will contribute to better understand the problem at hand, and enable policy and decision-makers, academic institutions and figures, both native and international, to search for and carry out plans and projects to further develop academic learning, and contribute thereby to enhance civic knowledge and culture.

The effort, time and funding was worth expending. In terms of value-for-money, the project is invaluable.

Recommendations

Political:
Delegate more authority to universities; increase funds higher education budgetary allocations; expand university and college levels participation in policy making; end discrimination against social sciences.

Organization
Re-organize social science faculties to create more integrated inter-disciplinary frameworks (politics-governance and law; or politics and sociology, etc.), introduce new disciplines (gender studies, sociology of religion, anthropology, linguistics, security studies, ethnic studies, informatics, etc.).

Teaching Staff

Improve generation-expertise balance between veterans, long-term tutors, and junior lecturers, to sustain a smooth flow and accumulation of knowledge and expertise.

Increase scholarship abroad to ensure new disciplines and new authorities incorporated in the body of knowledge, the curricula and research and teaching techniques.

Curricula:

-*Text books*: Renew current text books; timelines for old ones must not exceed five years; render annual partial updating mandatory; plan more than one text book per-subject; plan and commission translation and authorship annually.

Urgently define gaps of literature (major theoretical and case-studies produced in the nineties and early 2000, are wanting in almost all social science faculties)

-*Reference books:* increase, diversify and import reference books in Arabic and other languages (reading list).

-*Terminology*: increase English lessons to teach terminology; provide English-Arabic and French-Arabic lexicons and glossaries already available on the market; create digital networks with relevant websites;

-*Research techniques, research design and field research: integrate and increase* teaching hours for these three subjects under one rubric; and provide relevant literature.

Libraries: digitalize libraries, increase appliances for students (computers), increase book-lending hours, increase funds to expand libraries human and material resources in qualitative and quantitative terms; get networked with Arab and foreign academic publications (reviews, periodicals) and academic publishing houses; provide publication catalogues for universities; plan quarterly and annual procurement guidelines.

Research centres:

Re-activate existing research centres; give them autonomous status (independent budget and management), increase their allocations, link them to field research needs, and respond to native and international research and funding markets.

Language
Render knowledge of foreign languages mandatory to academic employment; increase foreign language teaching hours, and up-date foreign-languages teaching techniques (audio and visual libraries); recruit foreign educated Iraqis from the Diaspora, and when practicable, employ foreign experts.

Scholarship abroad and native post-graduate studies:

Increase scholarship to western countries; render government funded scholarships transparent; give priority to Iraq-based students; ensure proper quotas allocated to provinces; refine terms of admission to native MA and Ph.D. studies.

Academic freedom and access to data:

Protect academic freedom of research from encroachments by armed political groups, and open up official archives for academic researchers; provide official statistics on websites (open source literature) and help end xenophobia.