Iraq's Dwindling NGO Sector

Most organisations set up after 2003 have ceased to operate, blaming lack of funding and support.

More than 85 per cent of non-government organisations in Iraq have stopped operating in recent years, and civil society leaders warn that the future is uncertain for those that survive.

Lack of funding has been the main cause of the sharp decline, according to industry experts who attribute the shortfall to the global financial crisis, the high cost of operating in Iraq, and weak government and local support. Others point to problems such as corruption, violence, and declining interest among from international donors.

Although experts say international NGOs have made significant contributions to the rebuilding of Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, dwindling contributions from foreign donors and governments have greatly curtailed their recent efforts. Domestic Iraqi NGOs, meanwhile, complain of the difficulty in gaining domestic funding and the absence of government support.

Barwen Muhammad Amin, a senior Iraqi government official dealing with NGO affairs, said that from a peak of some 6,600 registered groups in the years following the United States-led invasion, only around 500 are still active today. NGOs in Iraq are involved in a wide range of issues including housing, environment, media development, health, agriculture and vocational training.

Aside from the Kurdish region, where more than 1,000 civil society organisations have operated since the Nineties, NGOs did not exist in Iraq until 2003.

Majid Abdul Hameed Abu Kalal heads the Thar Development Centre in Muthanna province of southern Iraq, where the Iraqi planning ministry estimates that 49 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line. Kalal’s group teaches job skills to the many unemployed people in the governorate, but says that without continued support from abroad, many NGOs such as his will be forced to fold.

“There has to be enough time, people and logistical support for the kind of workshops and trainings we do. It all costs money and we can’t get it done with just volunteers,” said Abu Kalal, who has worked in the NGO sector since 2005.

“We do our best to raise the economic level of people in Muthanna, but the funding shortage has greatly reduced our services. If this continues it could destroy all that we’ve we tried hard to build in the past,” he said.

The largest donor in Iraq is the United States, which through USAID and the Regional Reconstruction Teams has used a large proportion of the money from its 53 billion-dollar rebuilding plan to fund NGOs and civil society. The US has pledged to maintain substantial support after the withdrawal of combat forces in August.

Other foreign governments and organisations have slashed their development spending in Iraq, citing security problems and pervasive graft as a factor. Last year, Transparency International ranked Iraq as the fifth most corrupt nation in the world.

“Funding has been steadily eroding over the past three years, with the increased violence in Iraq signalling to international donors that Iraq is not stable and that investment there may be lost,” said Azzam Alwash, chief executive officer of Nature Iraq, an Italian-funded NGO that works to revive the environment.

“So they’re sending their money to where they think it will bring long-lasting benefits.”

An NGO director, who declined to be named for fear of angering the government, confirmed that funding from international sources has declined while domestic funding sources are still unavailable.

“Immediately after the war, there was a huge blossoming of NGOs,” he said. “Once people were able to form such associations openly, it seemed that everyone and his mother had his own NGO.”

The source continued, “Some were just people trying to find a way to make money; some were honestly interested in providing a service. But I would say most of the original NGOs fell by the wayside over time.
The main reason was that they couldn't raise funds. The national NGOs really didn't know how to craft proper proposals for international funders and they didn't have connections or people to vouch for them.

Some observer have suggested that government funding is a viable alternative for civil society organisations, arguing that support from Baghdad would allow them to be sustainable and independent from the political parties which currently back many NGOs.

In the north, the Kurdish Regional Government makes monthly payments to a number of NGOs, although critics say preference is given to organisations run by members of Kurdistan's ruling parties. The Kurdish authorities have reduced financial support of NGOs in recent months, however, and are considering awarding grants only to organisations that apply for new funding next year.

Amin, the NGO official in Baghdad, said organisations have to accept some responsibility for their current troubles. He cited the high salaries received by NGO staff, expensive projects and the dearth of unpaid volunteers.

To stay afloat, many NGOs have had to tailor their proposals to areas where funding is most available. In many cases, this has meant pitching humanitarian or democracy-building proposals to ensure approval from Washington.

Alwash argues that things could get worse rather than better for NGOs if Iraq becomes more prosperous.

“Iraq is now on the cusp of increased oil revenues, making into a supposedly rich country,” he said. “NGOs will thus be expected to be able to raise funds domestically.”

Activists such as Kwestan Muhammad Amin, director of the Kirkuk Charitable Orphan NGO, are concerned that if they have to close down for financial reasons, many needy Iraqis could be left out in the cold.

Amin, who works among the some 5,000 widows and orphans left destitute by years of violence in Kirkuk, said her NGO now subsists only on the charity of private citizens in Iraq and abroad.

“I'm scared that this help will be cut off in future, and I might not be able to carry on taking care of these orphans,” Amin told IWPR. “They might go back onto the streets and end up homeless.”

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