

**Promoting Peace Building in Rapareen:**  
**Account of a peace building project conducted in Northern Iraq**

**Benoite Martin**

**MA Conflict Resolution**

**University of Bradford, UK**

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## **I. Introduction**

The fall of the Former Regime in 2003, caused by the U.S intervention, saw the emergence of social and political tensions among the diverse communities that are populating Iraq.

The bombing of the holy shrines of Samarra on February 22nd 2006 by insurgents, marked the escalation of the level of tensions inside the country. Drifts along communal, religious, confessional, tribal or ethnic lines seem to slowly but firmly deepen while tension is manifested through violent actions resulting in instability of the country (ICG 2006).

As international media foresaw the outbreak of a civil war, international actors engaged themselves on the path of preventing the conflict from further escalating. As political Iraqi actors worked on a process of National Reconciliation under the leadership of the U.S Government, International donors and organizations became concerned about peacebuilding and conflict management initiatives implemented at grassroots level.

Conflict in the North of Iraq is characterized by the case of the city of Kirkuk. The control of oil-rich territories is a central issue dominating relationships between mixed communities and ethnicities living in Kirkuk. The political conflict has fuelled historical social divides and a crisis could soon emerge as important political decisions defining the statute of the contested territories should be taken in the course of 2010.

INSAN Iraqi Society, an Iraqi organization based in Kirkuk, North of Iraq, has been working in this area since 2006, with an aim to bridge divides between communities. It has secured several grants from international donors and used diverse strategies to build peace between

conflicting parties. Since 2008, INSAN has been working at implementing an innovative peacebuilding program in one particular area of Kirkuk based on participatory processes.

Conflict Resolution practitioners have often warned about the dangers of initiatives tackling conflict to worsen the situation (Ramsbotham et al. 2005, ). Some peacebuilding initiatives launched by organizations lacking the adequate skills and capacities or which implementation elements are over-looked can result in exacerbating tensions and divisions. This is why it is of utmost importance to systematically and regularly undertake reviews and evaluations of programs tackling conflict to gauge and qualify the impact of the initiatives. Conflict Resolution is also a quite recent academic field which theory is constantly being enriched by accounts of experiences launched around the world.

This paper provides an account of the peacebuilding project implemented by INSAN Iraqi Society in Kirkuk, Iraq. After providing background information on the project and its context in the first section, goals, methods and achievements of the project are assessed in the second section to qualify the level of impact of the program. The final section highlights the extent of the contributions that the lessons learnt on the project can make to the conflict resolution field as well as the gains that could be made by the project to apply elements of conflict resolution theory.

## **II. Project background Information**

Before introducing the details of the project, a brief introduction is provided on the context of the conflict occurring in Kirkuk and in the targeted area, Rapareen, where the project was implemented.

### **A. Conflict context in Kirkuk and Rapareen**

Kirkuk Governorate is located 295 km North of Baghdad. It lies at the very border of the official Kurdistan Region. Many areas including the capital of the governorate are part of the disputed territories which are the object of a severe political fight between the Iraqi Central Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government due to extremely rich reserves of oil found in these regions. A referendum to be held at an unknown date should statute on the belonging of these territories.

Kirkuk City, the capital city of Kirkuk Governorate, is a historically and ethnically mixed city of 1.250.000 inhabitants populated by Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Assyrians and Armenians traditionally living in peace together.

Kirkuk has been the scene of rising ethnic tensions for the last 6 years fuelled by the political conflict as each community seems to have its own political and social agenda and interests. Massive displacement has also contributed to the conflict as many Kurdish families were seen returning to Kirkuk after they had been forced out of the city by the Former Regime and replaced by Arab families during an 'Arabization' campaign conducted in the 1980's. The

return of these 23,000 families led to the displacement of other families settling in poor areas and empty lands around the city.

Rapareen is one of the poorest areas of Kirkuk, located North East of the city and gathering an average of 60.000 individuals. It is hosting the diverse communities represented in Kirkuk and also witnessed diverse movements of population with Returnees and Internally displaced persons (IDPs) from all over Iraq and escaping violence, settling in the area.

While political interests may be exacerbating tensions among the diverse ethnics represented, social conflict is witnessed between the diverse communities due to a lack of resources available. While the economic situation was extremely weak in Iraq until 2003 due to harsh economic sanctions imposed by the International community and a long history of conflict in the 80's and 90's, the slow reconstruction did little to improve the situation. The poor economic context, limited resources, poor infrastructure and high unemployment are all factors negatively impacting on existing tensions. Local political institutions are dominated by Kurdish and Turkmen communities and the Arab community feels poorly represented. They are also seen as ineffective, poorly concerned by social issues, unable to meet basic needs of the population and favoring the interests of the members of their own communities.

## B. Project Introduction

'Promoting Peacebuilding in Rapareen' was launched by INSAN Iraqi Society in September 2008 and the project has been running for more than one year and a half. It will be concluded in February 2010. The project is being funded by UNOPS and the European Union.

As a non-governmental organization, INSAN chose to address some of the root issues of the social conflict occurring in Rapareen, as little can be done at its level towards the political conflict.

During the conflict assessment that preceded the design of the activities, three root causes to the social conflict were identified that could be worked on through the program: the basic economic needs of the community which are not met; the lack of participation of the Arab community to the decision making process; and the lack of democratic processes in governance by local authorities which are poorly in contact with citizens.

The approach to the peacebuilding program was therefore designed as follows:

- Use a participatory process in further assessing needs of the community and prioritizing development needs in order to give a voice to all parties and further unifying voices in advocating needs to local authorities in order to build social cohesion
- Implement quick impact projects to meet basic economic needs of the community, targeting in priority most vulnerable populations to conflict: youth and women; along spreading peace education through art activities
- Empower key stakeholders of the community to better handle conflict situations and conduct awareness-raising towards peacebuilding.

The project was implemented in two phases.

The first phase of the project, lasting 8 months, launched the participatory appraisal process to define development needs of the community. Visits to households conducted by previously trained volunteers and large community meetings, led to the compilation of a

community development plan. In parallel, several vocational trainings along income generation opportunities were offered to vulnerable community members, always ensuring a fair representation of all ethnicities. Social activities targeting children, youth and women raised awareness on issues related to peace and conflict. A project committee formed of key community members was formed and trained in conflict resolution and worked beside INSAN to overview the implementation of the project.

The second phase of the project, lasting 11 months, allowed to answer to economic needs identified by the community during the first phase by organizing additional vocational trainings. The community development plan was carried forward by the project committee through advocacy sessions organized with local authorities. Awareness-raising towards peace and conflict was further conducted using art such as theatre and dance.

### **III. Critical assessment of the project**

In order to be able to understand and qualify the achievements that the project obtained in the community of Rapareen, it is necessary to assess the pertinence of the main goals, strategy and methods used. Achievements will then be further discussed according to their impact on peace and conflict dynamics.

## A. Goals of the project

The project implemented by INSAN is formulated around three goals:

1. To create an environment propitious to long term peacebuilding by supporting quick impact initiatives directed to youth and women
2. To increase cohesion between groups around a common vision for the development of their neighborhood through participatory needs assessment and planning methods
3. To develop a cadre of conflict management / peacebuilding resource persons able to initiate change in the larger relational pattern within their community

The development of the goals of the project was based on three principles of peacebuilding: Aid and development can address root causes of conflict; Participatory approaches and good governance can rebuild and strengthen cohesion of the social fabric; empowerment and capacity building is essential to achieve sustainability of achievements.

### *Linking aid and peacebuilding*

Aid has the potential to address the root causes or the structural conditions that produce conflict (Reychler 2001). Economic decline and unemployment, socio-economic disparities, inequitable distribution and access to goods and resources, are all factors that have been identified in Rapareen as a source of conflict. Addressing these factors can positively affect conflict and lead to peacebuilding (Norwegian MFA 2004).

INSAN prioritized quick impact economic initiatives building skills and providing access to income generation to address economic decline.

*Participatory approaches in decision-making and good governance, building social cohesion*

When investigating for methods to adequately tackle a situation, it is relevant to involve the people in decisions that will affect them. As community members can be gathered to identify their shared needs and the actions necessary to meet them, it can contribute to building a sense of community ownership and develop trust (Haider 2009). The participatory process builds the community as a group, around common issues and problems (USAID 2007). It develops a sense of belonging as they are working for a shared better future (Fisher et al. 2000). Participatory approaches also give the opportunity for all sections of the community to have a voice and to feel included.

The lack of political participation is another structural condition leading to conflict. Good governance is guided by principles of democracy and equal participation for all. Promoting the existence of links between the local government and citizens ensures that communities have a voice in the decisions that affect them (USAID 2007). The establishment of systems leading to good governance can have positive impacts towards building peace.

In order to bridge divides existing within the community of Rapareen and to rebuild the social fabric and enhance social cohesion, INSAN used a participatory approach to define needs of the community, seeking participation of all groups of the community, and facilitated dialogue between the community and local authority to reconnect the state and citizens.

### *Empowerment and capacity-building essential to sustainability*

Knowledge and expertise needs to be an essential part of every intervention (Fisher et al. 2000). Communities need to learn skills to appropriately manage their conflicts internally. By learning mechanisms of conflict resolution and active participation, they can continuously handle difficult situations after the external actor has disengaged.

By developing local capacities and resources in conflict resolution and political participation and spreading knowledge linked to peacebuilding, INSAN has sought to ensure the sustainability of its intervention in Rapareen.

Through seeking the application of three approaches to peacebuilding within the defined goals of the project, INSAN has demonstrated a holistic nature to its intervention, which is an essential element to the success of peacebuilding initiatives (Stiefel 2001).

#### B. Strategy and methods of the project

The organization Collaborating Learning Projects (CDA) has developed a matrix tool which seeks to assess the strategy of peacebuilding projects. The Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP) matrix is considering two main approaches to peace work to assess the strategy utilized: who is being engaged and what type of change is being sought (CDA 2009).

The factor 'Whom to engage' proposes 2 criteria: More people engaged in action towards peace; Key people engaged.

The factor 'Type of change' proposes 2 criteria: Individual/Personal change seeking to change behaviors and values; Socio-political change seeking to change structures and processes.

CDA considers that project methods that cover as many quadrants of the four-cell matrix have better possibilities to contribute to significant change. But it also points out the importance of introducing mechanisms to transfer project effects into other quadrants.

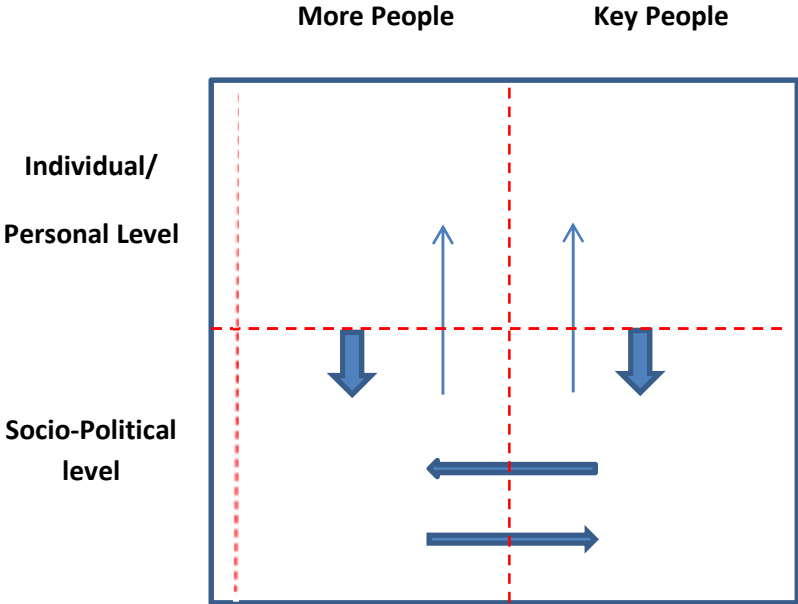
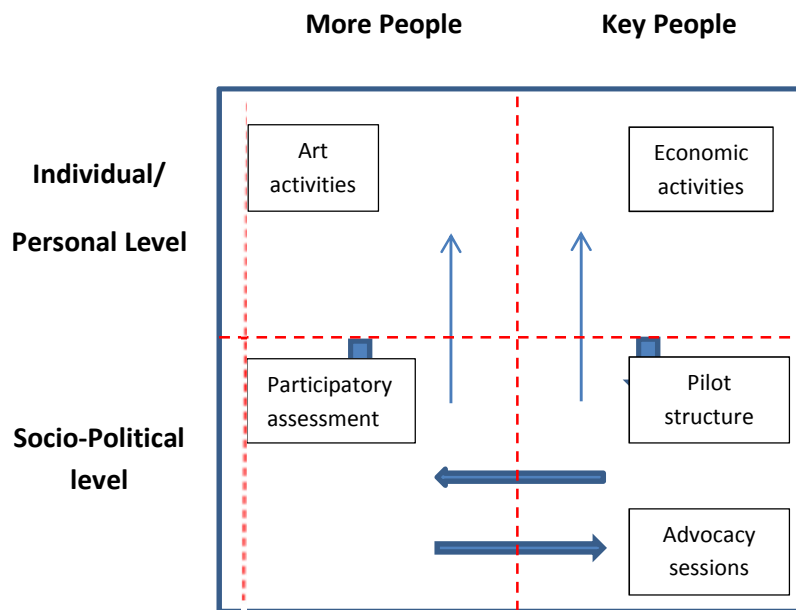


Figure 1 Creating linkages between quadrants

Before placing the methods used in the project of INSAN onto the matrix in order to assess its strategy, the methods themselves should be assessed:

- A pilot structure of the project composed of community leaders was put in place to build accountability. The selected key people were too busy because of their other responsibilities to adequately support the initiative.
- A participatory approach was used to define problems and material needs of the community. The process encouraged participation of all sections of the community which generated high interest among people who had never taken part to such initiative. Agreement was found within the community to develop a common development plan. While social cohesion was strengthened, the process failed to address issues related to social conflict.
- Quick impact economic and art activities served two goals simultaneously. Providing skills to participants, it also served as a dialogue forum where tolerance and acceptance was being built. A majority of beneficiaries secured employment while new relationships were created.
- The community development plan was carried forward to local authorities through advocacy conducted by community leaders. Understanding the impact of speaking together with one voice, leaders need to develop their personal initiative to guarantee the sustainability of this process.



**Figure 2 Project methods on RPP matrix**

Although methods of the project seem to cover all quadrants of the matrix, one can reasonably criticize the large scope of initiatives that cannot be effectively undertaken all at once.

The assessment of methods above has shown that those located within the column of Socio-Political change present several flows. The project pilot structure and advocacy sessions have found poor ownership within the community leaders rendering impacts quite weak and putting in danger the sustainability of those initiatives.

While activities seeking individual/personal change have shown great efficiency, linkages should be established between these initiatives towards the socio-political level.

The project methods should be looking at targeting structures and institutions of the community in a more sustained manner. Higher governmental authorities should be reached where structural changes can effectively be made and can be achieved through vertical linkages with other organizations.

### C. Achievements of the project

A popular method of qualifying achievements of development projects is the peace and conflict impact assessment (PCIA). This evaluation tool recognizes that development work inevitably has an impact on the peace and conflict environment, whether positive or negative, direct or indirect, intentional or unintentional (Bush 2003).

The PCIA framework developed by Kenneth Bush is considered more user-friendly and is adopted in this paper. Bush has defined five key 'impact areas' according to which the achievements of the project conducted by INSAN will be discussed.

#### *Institutional capacity to manage/resolve violent conflicts and to promote tolerance and build peace*

The capacity of a group of community leaders was built to manage conflict situations within their community. As well, at diverse occasions, the organization itself was called upon as an institution to manage conflict. Although the community leaders were witnessed using their skills efficiently, the development of institutional capacity impacted only few key people and was insufficient to address the need of the community in this regard. Opportunities to build institutional capacity should be extended.

### *Military and human security*

Police forces have claimed that crime has decreased in the community since the start of the project. Vocational trainings and economic activities have focused on targeting unemployed youth who are populations at risk to produce violence. A sense of human security has certainly increased as crimes have decreased and economic situation increased. But violence is also generated by insurgent groups which can only be tackled by higher spheres of the military and police.

### *Political structures and processes*

Participatory and advocacy approaches have established links between citizens and local government that were inexistent previously. While the local political scene was dominated by Kurdish groups, the participation of Arab community leaders was facilitated and accepted, showing that inter-ethnic acceptance is growing. However, a lack of sense of initiative from the community as a whole puts in danger the sustainability of these processes and long term work to institutionalize these processes should be engaged.

### *Economic structures and processes*

Skills building and income generation enhanced employment among most vulnerable groups of the community while new shops were opened in the area developing the economic life and provision of services. Needs to reconstruct the economic structures were identified and carried forward to the local government. The government approached INSAN to organize distributions of food and non- food items to vulnerable groups at several occasions. Enhanced economic processes benefited to most vulnerable groups.

### *Social reconstruction and empowerment*

Bridge building was sought as indirect impact in all activities conducted which systematically brought people from diverse ethnics to collaborate (during art and economic activities, and participatory appraisal process). Friendships across ethnics were formed. However, the history of the conflict and current relationships were not directly addressed as the organization does not represent a third party. This leaves some underlying causes of the conflict to be remained unaddressed.

Although great positive impacts were witnessed at the individual level, poor results were obtained when it comes to altering the structures of institutions. This confirms the lack of focus to bringing change to the socio-political level and endangers the longevity and sustainability of the changes made at the individual level. There is poor knowledge and practice of democratic processes within institutions and the roots of effective long-lasting peacebuilding work could be found through civic education.

#### **IV. Lessons learnt**

The field of conflict resolution remains recent. It is important that practitioners systematically reflect on their work, examine processes and methods, identify best practices and deduce the lessons that can help other initiatives to gain efficiency.

Each initiative looking at tackling conflict can contribute to enriching the field of conflict resolution by sharing lessons learnt while it can as well benefit and gain inspiration from other peace works.

Conflict resolution literature is mostly written by and addressed to international organizations. Little space is provided to indigenous organizations that work to tackle conflict. Although, of course, indigenous organizations can refer to most of the literature and apply its principals, some particular challenges face the peace work conducted by these local actors.

*Difficulty to tackle sensitive conflict issues due to questionable neutrality*

The neutrality and good intentions of the local actor can be questioned by the targeted community. This can put at risk the address of sensitive issues of conflict. INSAN refused to work at addressing issues related to social relationships between Kurdish and Arab groups for fear of being pointed at taking sides. Sensitive issues are better tackled by third neutral parties.

To make up for this inconvenience, INSAN put dialogue at the center of every project activity conducted so as to indirectly address the sensitive issue. Whether during economic or art activities, time was dedicated to exchange opinions and points of views related to peace, conflict and current events happening within the community. Participants were led to discuss sensitive issues but their mind was set on participating to manual activities.

### *Acknowledging the work of local actors*

International organizations tend to have difficulty acknowledging the contributions made by local actors, especially in delicate fields such as conflict resolution where initiatives can slip to worsen the situation. The lack of capacity within local actors is common, especially in countries where the civil society has been oppressed for many years<sup>1</sup>.

Peacebuilding approaches need to be linked with each other to maximize impacts on a horizontal and on a vertical level (European centre for conflict prevention 1999). Grassroots initiatives can reach high levels of diplomacy if peacebuilders work hand in hand. Although attempts were made to reach out to international organizations working at high political levels, propositions were never seriously taken into account and vertical linkage opportunities were not seized.

By reviewing the existing literature of conflict resolution, the initiative led by INSAN could as well greatly benefit from some practices to maximize its impact within the community of Rapareen.

### *Evaluation, an everyday companion of peacebuilding work*

Evaluation is an integral part of the project management cycle. But more than that, evaluation cannot be missed out during peacebuilding initiatives as it puts at risk the possibility of taking part to exacerbating the conflict situation. Peacebuilding is a process and long-term monitoring and evaluation are essential to qualify the impacts (Galama and van Tongeren 2002).

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<sup>1</sup> NGOs in Iraq emerged in 2003 as associations were forbidden under the Rule of Saddam Hussein.

INSAN should develop efforts in integrating long-term monitoring and evaluations within its activities instead of conducting one-off evaluations to better assess and adapt its working process.

#### *Developing accountability toward beneficiaries within evaluation frameworks*

An adequate understanding of expected outcomes and impacts of peacebuilding initiatives by the beneficiaries enables them to provide feedback on processes developed and conducted by the organization as the perspective of end recipients can differ from the one of the implementer. If accountability is developed towards beneficiaries, it can increase possibilities of success (Galama and van Tongeren 2002).

INSAN should be more transparent in its endeavors towards beneficiaries and seek active feedback in order to enhance its work processes.

#### *Use of media in peacebuilding efforts*

Media can be supportive of peacebuilding efforts in several ways, from spreading education to providing linkages within the society. Media is a powerful tool that should be used carefully to maximize peacebuilding efforts (Galama and van Tongeren 2002).

INSAN has been using very little the media and should investigate the existing possibilities to use this medium to reach a larger number of the population and to reach other levels of the society.

## **V. Conclusion**

A great factor of the success of the Rapareen initiative was the opportunity of INSAN to sustain its presence in the area on the long term to support peacebuilding. Financial support has been secured and will enable INSAN to be present until summer 2011. INSAN will have been working in Rapareen for at least 3 years continuously.

Following to the success of the Rapareen project, INSAN has been provided with the opportunity to work in another area in Kirkuk. A similar process of work was designed and activities were tailored according to assessed material needs. From the start of the project, social cohesion between Arab and Kurdish communities has been slowly built. This is due to wider historical dividing gaps existing between the two communities.

The impacts of a peacebuilding initiative are dependent and linked to the specifications of the particular context of the targeted area. An Initiative that has gained many positive results in a specific context will obtain different results in another context. Although it is possible to define a set of good practices in peace building, it does not mean that successful interventions can be replicated in other areas and obtain similar results.

Adequate monitoring and evaluation methods would enable to trace and record step after step the practices which enhance the methods and lead to the design of more efficient processes.

**Annexes**



Map of Kirkuk governorate



Rapareen area in Kirkuk city is circled red

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