لجنة تنسيق المنظمات غير الحكومية في العراق
NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq

FOCUS
on
OPERATIONALITY

Key Lessons Learned

- *Access without safety & operational capacity is unsustainable. There is no substitute for presence. Staff security alone does not create safer access. Safe access without operational capacity does not help beneficiaries.*

- *Adapting to insecurity entails reconciling staff safety with the humanitarian imperative.*

- *Localized humanitarian space & safer access have increased in Iraq with variations in military activity, increased adaptability of operational agencies, & crystallization of local power structures.*

- *Active aid agencies have maintained & expanded safer access by acceptance & protective efforts: they are not passive consumers of humanitarian space.*

- *It is possible & useful to have contact & dialogue with non-state armed groups and local leaders in Iraq to make access safer and more sustainable.*

- *Active presence does not necessarily mean a large footprint or presenting an attractive target. Agencies with big footprints tend to fail in Iraq.*

- *A small footprint does not necessarily mean working invisibly or in low-profile, but in many areas these options remain important.*

- *Presence without armed protection is possible in most difficult areas of Iraq for organizations that have a small footprint.*

Briefing Paper   1

January 2008

Adapting to Insecurity in Iraq

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Background

This Focus on Operationality Briefing Paper highlights lessons learned from the experiences of operational humanitarian organizations in Iraq about responding to acute needs in the safest possible way. The lessons have been drawn from an ongoing dialogue with field staff from selected organizations. These have included Iraqi and international NGOs and members of the Red Cross / Red Crescent Movement, varying from very small Iraqi NGOs to large international organizations with country-wide programming.

A number of cross-cutting themes emerge from the accounts provided by aid workers in Iraq. These include the importance of localized approaches, intimate knowledge of context, willingness to take personal and organizational risks, flexible management structures, decentralization of security management and high quality personnel management.

A companion Briefing Paper, "Operational Modalities in Iraq", discusses how agencies have translated safer access into operational capacity. Our Operationality Briefing Paper on "Personnel Management in Iraq" examines more closely the experiences of effective operational actors in managing staff in Iraq's unique and challenging humanitarian landscape.

Photo: private collection

The Contextual Challenge: Reconciling Staff Safety with the Humanitarian Imperative

Life-saving humanitarian operations in any war environment involve exposing staff and partners to risks and threats. Since March 2003, at least 94 humanitarian and human rights workers have been killed in Iraq, most of them Iraqi nationals. Targeted attacks on aid personnel have led most agencies to cease operations completely or to withdraw their international staff to a safe distance. Where work has continued, risks have been transferred to Iraqi staff who now almost exclusively shoulder the security burden in environments where the motives and means of humanitarian work are often misunderstood, misperceived or mistrusted.

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The death toll has led to an increasing tendency among some agencies to regard staff security in Iraq as an end in itself, rather than as way of facilitating humanitarian operations in the safest reasonable conditions. Preoccupation with security — and mainly the security of international staff — has often eclipsed the fundamental principle of *humanity*, the humanitarian imperative to protect and assist people in urgent need.

Re-thinking Humanitarian Security

Between 2004 and 2007 there was a strong tendency among humanitarian organisations to treat insecurity in Iraq as a nebulous, generalized, and insurmountable challenge, rather than as a series of serious incidents which could be analyzed, put into (often localized) context, and used as a spur to adaptations of policy and operations. Inadequately nuanced understanding of insecurity became a rationalization in some organisations for less assertiveness, creativity and engagement. The tendency was reinforced by the decline since 2004 in the number of international humanitarian staff with any depth of experience in Iraq, and an evident trend toward risk-aversion in the organizational cultures of major players in the humanitarian apparatus.

Hidden humanitarianism, stage-managed from a safe distance, has been a double-edged sword. Invisibility has enabled some humanitarian work in the short term, but renders it less safe and sustainable in the long term. Although acceptance strategies have not been a panacea in Iraq, it has been difficult or impossible for independent aid organisations working in a hidden or covert way to visibly differentiate themselves from political and military actors in Iraq and to demonstrate their good intent by being seen to do good work on the ground.

Remote programming modalities, meanwhile, have been at odds with the operational approach of proximity to victims which is essential, as it turns out, for animating creativity, a sense of urgency, and a willingness to take risks. Although operational agencies maintain a presence on the ground through their national staff, the withdrawal of international staff and mobility constraints on national staff have meant incremental increases in the geographic and psychological gaps between the beneficiaries and providers of humanitarian assistance.

Lessons Learned: Nurturing Safe Access

Since 2004 a number of international and Iraqi aid organizations — some very large and some very small — have found creative ways to strike a balance between the need to keep staff reasonably safe in an unstable war environment while preserving — and even expanding — their access to Iraqis in need.

Staff security without access achieves little or no humanitarian impact. Several large, well-guarded humanitarian agencies have quit Iraq or maintain a presence in security "bubbles" due to continuing security risks and targeted attacks.

Bunkerized agencies or those that move under armed protection lose meaningful access to communities in need because of the way their affiliations with such security actors are perceived by the population in much of Iraq. By their own accounts, the security "bubble" that envelopes such agencies can indeed make them a less-attractive target, but it also insulates them from their caseload and from vital information about the communities and contexts where they work. While this may not be so important for one-off distributions of relief goods, sustained access enabling sound assessments of needs, needs-based distributions and adequate follow-up require a measure of acceptance that is not possible with such operational modalities. Moreover, the evidence is far from clear as to whether such deterrence strategies repel attacks, or if instead they act as a magnet for additional security problems.

In some situations, theatre has been a useful and lighthearted way of providing information to communities, building acceptance, gaining their participation in decisions, and encouraging their ownership of projects. Creative programming options such as this can help to sustain and increase access over time.

Photo courtesy of Mercy Hands for Humanitarian Aid.

The agencies that have succeeded in sustaining safe access and operations over time, often in the face of dramatic programming shocks, share a set of specific characteristics:

- they have created and nurtured networks of knowledgeable and reliable local facilitators and fixers
- they have nurtured a dedicated and capable staff, and delegate authority to the field

- they monitor their local context with a high degree of political acuity which allows them to make sound programming judgments in a volatile environment
- they have been able to mobilize donor resources, through contact with the Amman-based donor community or, in some cases, have generated funds locally inside Iraq.

Access without safety is unsustainable. Some organizations have succeeded in gaining one-off or temporary access to volatile crisis areas then have lost it suddenly — sometimes tragically — to the point where they have been forced to cease operations, release their staff, and close programmes. Sustained safer access has been maintained when:

- access and safety are treated holistically as a full-time preoccupation throughout the agency. The responsibility for building acceptance and nurturing staff safety is mainstreamed, rather than 'ghettoized' as a separate management function. Virtually all successful operational organizations in Iraq have de-centralized decision-making on security matters to staff on the ground who are most capable of making sound decisions about their own safety
- adequate resources and staff time are invested into analyzing programming environments, nurturing networks, and sensitizing staff to unanticipated risks and threats
- care is taken not to jeopardize operations by engaging in injudicious advocacy
- staffing decisions take into account that staff from a particular sect or background may have greater safe access to certain areas.

Successful operational agencies have reconciled staff security with the humanitarian imperative. None of the organizations that have succeeded in maintaining safe access have the expectation that Iraq should be a zero-risk environment before or after operations commence. Although nearly all organizations do some form of risk / benefit analysis, those that have maintained or expanded their access over time in Iraq tend not to think about their options in black-or-white terms, and do a better job of making nuanced judgments about their presence, profile and activity.

Such judgments balance concerns about staff security with projected humanitarian outcomes and effects on humanitarian space. For exam-

ple, a number of organizations have found it useful to send their staff and programmes into periods of "hibernation" when risks are heightened. This has proved a useful alternative to programme closure and a resulting collapse of vital networks, loss of acceptance and further shrinkage of humanitarian space. These organizations tend to be intimately familiar with the contexts where they work, allowing them to recognize viable options for varying their activity and footprint to suit changing conditions.

Localized humanitarian space and safe access have increased in some parts of Iraq with changes in military activity and the crystallization of power structures. As in many other conflict situations, humanitarian access has been most severely constrained in Iraq when local power structures have been unclear or contested. When power structures crystallize in the form of official authorities or non-state actors such as militias, the operating environment has tended to improve: checkpoints become more predictable, mobility increases, the behaviour of combatants becomes more predictable, there is less impunity for criminality, and humanitarian organizations are more able to effectively identify and negotiate or assert access with those in control.

While the environment is by no means easy, it is nonetheless a more traditional operating environment for humanitarian actors where they have substantial worldwide experience to call upon, such as in dealing with non-state armed groups, building acceptance with communities, protecting themselves from manipulation, and minimizing other harmful interactions of aid with conflict. Among the most successful international operational agencies, it has helped to have international staff who have experience in coping with these challenges in other difficult conflict settings.

"We are already past the time when international staff could come back on work visits in Najaf. If a foreigner walks down the street in Najaf he'll attract a lot of attention and he will have a crowd around him. But it's not because they want to harm him. They'll be curious! People in Iraq have gotten unused to seeing westerners in the streets unless they're armed. As time passes this unfamiliarity with foreigners will just keep getting harder and harder for them to get over."

An international aid worker in Najaf

Photo: personal collection

An organisation with a "small footprint" is one whose operationality is effected through acceptance, relationships, partnerships and unobtrusive protective strategies. The need for a large physical infrastructure is minimized by making use of partnerships, community support and local commercial service providers. Safe access is achieved through acceptance and unobtrusive protective strategies. It hires and contracts locally, where possible, and it has a local face.

An organisation with a "large footprint" is one whose operationality is dependent on a large physical infrastructure that will attract unwanted attention and limits its flexibility. Its security procedures compel visible protective and deterrence measures that are likely to imply or confirm affiliation with the MNF-I. Heavily dependent on international staff and international commercial service providers for effectiveness, it has a "foreign" face. The mobility and acceptance of these actors are limited. Organisations with large footprints in Iraq tend to fail.

There is no substitute for presence. Safe access cannot be opened and maintained from a distance. Operational agencies have found that having good staff present in the areas where they are operational has been a necessary condition for building and maintaining solid networks and trusting relationships. In an environment where mistrust and suspicion is common, e-mail and telephone contact has not been an effective substitute for face-to-face contact with partners, local authorities or others. Although initial contacts have very often been made in Amman, Kuwait or northern Iraq, it has been necessary to bridge the geographic and psychological distances involved either by being present or by making periodic visits.

The Iraqi field coordinator of one active NGO that covers a broad geographic area keeps staff, partners and local authorities cooperative and informed by spending most of his work week on the road between sub-offices and project sites. He considers that his time in the field is essential to staying informed, and he recognizes that he needs to be extremely well-informed in order to make sound decisions.

Photo: personal collection

Successful operational agencies have capitalized on localized increases in humanitarian space and safe access. Close monitoring of local contexts has been essential but under-emphasized by operational organizations and donors alike. Without exception, successful agencies have invested heavily in context analysis. Some employ dedicated context officers who stay in regular contact with field staff and the organisation's network of contacts. Information about needs, local perceptions, changes in local demographics, shifting power relationships, and the "aid" activities of other entities equips these agencies to more carefully discern opportunities to become more active, and alerts them to the need to adapt their approach to changes in their programming environment.

Some operational agencies have succeeded in maintaining or expanding humanitarian space and safe access by their own efforts. Experience in various parts of Iraq shows that humanitarian organizations do not need to passively accept deficits in humanitarian space. Being equipped with extensive local knowledge and sound networks has allowed organizations to get their foot in the door to begin building an understanding of their work and acceptance in local communities for their presence and activity.

Expanding outwards from well-chosen access points. It is at least as important, however, to demonstrate effectiveness by doing a good job from the start when delivering something tangible. One organisation expanded its operations to a new area that had previously been considered "off-limits". It found that its initial distribution during a first assessment visit left such a positive impression on the local community that its staff were soon approached by local interlocutors encouraging them to do more. Concrete offers of local support were provided, which soon allowed the agency to expand its presence and assistance activities further. Word eventually spread to neighbouring communities, resulting in further requests for assistance and offers of support. Notably, few donors have been willing to underwrite initial distributions during assessment visits, but these can be an indispensable tool for gaining permission to enter a community and to establish the needed trust and credibility for expanding access.

Beware of Catastrophic Success. When acceptance is initially good and expansion of operations is proceeding, there is a danger that a newly-arrived aid provider will lack sufficient operational capacity to deliver on community expectations. The dangers are obvious: unless an agency delivers, acceptance will decline. Similarly, the arrival of other assistance providers can also distort community expectations if there are sizeable differences between providers in the quantity, quality or accountability of their assistance.

Limited presence without armed protection has proved to be possible in Iraq for organizations that have a small footprint. Agencies that have a big footprint tend to fail. Active presence does not necessarily mean having a large footprint or presenting an attractive target. Organisations have found a variety of ways to increase their presence without increasing their vulnerability by presenting an attractive target. The usual operational approach of deploying fleets of marked

vehicles, maintaining obvious compounds and warehouses, displaying signs at project sites and putting staff in the field who readily identify themselves as humanitarian workers, is not only an invitation to trouble in much of Iraq, but is also unnecessary to operational effectiveness. Alternatives used by operational agencies have included, but are not limited to:

- relying on discreet acceptance and protective strategies, rather than deterrence strategies which can draw unwanted attention and isolate an organisation from its beneficiaries.

- minimizing the need for stockpiles and warehouses by entering into agreements with local suppliers who will ensure that certain minimum stocks are on hand in their own premises. This relieves the organisation of the need to maintain a high-profile facility. Responsibility for protecting the stocks falls to the business, rather than the aid organisation. The business will use its own community connections to ensure that its assets are secure. Often these local suppliers have far greater capacity than humanitarian organisations to dispatch goods over a broader area.

- keeping the office discreet and unidentified, or discreetly co-locating with another, more accepted entity such as an active business or social organisation. The latter option keeps the possibility open for an increase in profile if the hosting organisation is willing to take the risk of vouching for the hosted one. Some organisations have gone to the extreme of disguising their organisation as something it is not. This is risky. When the type or level of activity of a disguised organisation doesn't mesh well with its public face, it can attract the scrutiny and unwanted attention of the neighbourhood, authorities and armed groups.

- relying on commercial trucking fleets and other service providers for transport and other logistics which would normally involve the movement of staff.

A small footprint does not necessarily mean working invisibly or in low-profile, although in many areas these options remain important. Some organisations have found creative ways of incrementally increasing their profile without presenting a more attractive target. Options identified so far include, but are not limited to:

- in contrast to the hidden, invisible or covert profile of some organizations, others — including some in the northern, central and southern governorates — make a practice of disclosing their activities to trusted local authorities and leaders. In the view of these agencies, being proactive in this way ensures that authorities don't feel bypassed, are given opportunities to be helpful, and don't get suspicious. Such a "partial disclosure" tactic should be decided by the local staff and the organisation itself, and not be external actors who are unfamiliar with the local context, such as funding agencies.

- discreet but active cultivation of networks of contacts, including local authorities, political and religious elites, professionals, and the social offices of parties and militias. Some organisations pursue a "partial-disclosure" approach, making sure that influential actors are aware of what they are doing and consulting them about how the organisation should pursue its work. This approach invites people to be helpful, and if done with care it does not mean presenting a more attractive target.

- putting magnetic signs on vehicles or banners showing the organisation's name at distribution sites so that recipient communities know who is providing assistance. Signs can be taken off the vehicles and the banners re-furled when the organisation leaves the distribution site.

- promoting familiarity with the organisation through the media, but otherwise maintaining a low profile and not disclosing details that could expose operations to increased threats. Some organisations see this as a first essential step toward preparing to raising their profile.

The organizations that have had the most success working in reasonable safety & with good access employ key, highly-skilled field coordinators to manage local networks & negotiate access. Excellent staff management, including strategic hiring and delegation of authority, has been essential to success. Without exception, the organizations that have had sustained safe access to volatile areas have been methodical and thoughtful about nurturing dedicated, reliable and skilled teams. All have adopted flexible management styles where "remote managers" play a supporting role to field staff. Authority is delegated to field staff to make their own judgments about operations and safety. Hiring and other personnel management decisions among successful agencies are also more inclusive than in other contexts, with major decisions often delegated to field managers rather than remote managers who are not intimately familiar with the requirements of the context.

"The ICRC's operational philosophy of working in the closest possible proximity to those it seeks to protect and assist requires developing and maintaining a broad network of staff in the different contexts in which it operates and is based on the concept of highly decentralized security management. It also demands a common understanding of the risks involved in the current environments, which are diverse and often unpredictable.

The way the ICRC is perceived and the extent to which it is accepted by all the stakeholders in a given context must be constantly monitored. Nowadays, the perceptions of the ICRC in one context may very rapidly have an impact on perceptions — and thus security — elsewhere in the world. The ability to manage these different layers of perception must be further developed.

As already noted, ensuring an accurate perception of the ICRC involves building predictable relations with a range of State actors and approaching a host of other actors, from political to criminal, often with clear chains of command initially, which later break up into multiple sub-groups or clans with shifting agendas and alliances. In sum, it is necessary to deal with the whole spectrum of actors, from powerful conventional armies, to radical armed groups and urban gangs, and the ability to do so, adapting the methods to each one, is an essential feature of the ICRC's operational approach."

ICRC Overview of [Worldwide] Operations, 2008.

It is possible — and useful — to have contact and working dialogue with non-state armed groups in Iraq. In most of the central and southern governorates, organisations report that it is usually possible to deal with militias and other armed groups directly or indirectly through political offices, city councils, tribal sheikhs and religious authorities. In areas where there is considerable cross-fertilization between official police or Iraqi Forces and militias, contacts with these actors have also borne fruit. Where direct contact with non-state armed groups has been necessary, first-contact can often be made through a trusted third-party as an intermediary until a degree of trust has been established.

In contentious & safer areas, local clergy have often been effective guarantors of access, even during hostilities. Less coherence in local power structures means greater challenges for aid organizations when they negotiate access. In Anbar and Diyala, humanitarian organizations have relied heavily on clergy to open up access to communities in urgent need. However, over the past year or so, a reduction in the influence of clergy in some local areas has meant that humanitarian organizations now need to interact and arrange access with new power brokers, including some tribal sheikhs and other local figures.

While some of these actors genuinely want to help the people in their areas, others have learned to associate outsiders with the possibility of generating income for themselves. In the experience of active NGOs, it is possible to resist and manage the pressures of such actors but the access they can provide is less reliable than was formerly delivered by the clergy. NGO staff have adapted to this trend by carefully expanding their networks to include new power brokers, and investing more time in negotiating access to unstable areas than was necessary in the recent past.

Focus on Operationality Briefing Papers document lessons learned and best practices drawn from the recent experiences of operational humanitarian organizations inside Iraq, and provide information relating to current policy and operational challenges. Their content does not necessarily reflect NCCI member views. The Briefing Papers are intended as living documents. Readers, particularly from operational agencies inside Iraq, are encouraged to provide feedback and suggestions to the author, Greg Hansen, at ghansen@islandnet.com and to NCCI at webmanager@ncciraq.org. This and other Operationality Briefing Papers are available for download as PDF files from http://www.ncciraq.org/spip.php?rubrique316. Readers are welcome to quote or reproduce them entirely or in part but are requested to give due acknowledgement.

Further information and resources

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