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## The Right Way to Reconstruct Iraq

By **Jason Ben-Meir** | Thursday, May 26, 2005

*Even as Iraq's new government has taken power, the insurgency rages on and reconstruction projects languish. Jason Ben-Meir — who worked on community development projects as a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco — argues that U.S. reconstruction efforts in Iraq are failing because authorities have been too slow to turn responsibility over to local communities.*

In order to promote political and economic stability in Iraq during this critical time, the United States should ensure that local communities are involved in the design and implementation of development projects.

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Lessons from around the world have shown that development agencies that do not listen to the experiences and concerns of local populations have invested millions of dollars in projects that are ineffective, ignored — and even resented by target beneficiaries.

But when communities are engaged and projects respond to their self-described needs, important socio-economic benefits become apparent in a remarkably short time.

Indigenous reconstruction has been enormously successful in communities around the world because local people have a strong incentive to maintain projects that address their needs, such as in education, health, business, agriculture and environmental conservation.

### Community management

In most cases, communities form local associations to manage projects and implement new ones. New tiers of cooperation form as neighboring communities join together to create projects beneficial to their entire area.

Two fundamental elements of a pluralist democracy are the dispersion of power toward the interior (localities) and the inclusion of all social groups in decision-making. Broad participation in the reconstruction of communities is pluralist democracy in action because it strengthens the capacities of local people to manage their own development.

### The situation in Iraq

reconstruction contracts with foreign companies disempower local communities and often foster resentment toward the international coalition, particularly the United States.

Rarely do projects requested by local leaders result from a genuine process of community participation, yet reports suggest that it is these projects that U.S. troops involved in reconstruction generally respond to.

Lessons from development interventions around the world over decades indicate that long-term sustainability of projects is undermined by this "top-down" approach to development assistance.

Indigenous capacities to manage development cannot reach their potential when local people are not in full control of rebuilding major sectors of their own economic life.

### Large-scale projects or targets?

In principle, major infrastructure projects — such as power grids, oil pipelines and water treatment facilities — can also be designed and implemented using the same participatory methods that include all stakeholders in the development process.

However, in high violence environments, as in Iraq, large-scale projects are more often targeted than small-scale ones. In addition, the required security measures can be prohibitively expensive.

### Undermining the insurgency

Community-based reconstruction undermines religious and secular-political extremists. As people are invited to participate in a development process that aims to achieve their interests, they feel less alienation.

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**Community Reconstruction Planning and Training Centers provide the educational forum that catalyzes positive political change.**

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Their zone of tolerance also expands because the underlying conditions that fuel extremism are diminished.

And as the majority of people in communities, regions and the nation come to enjoy the benefits of local reconstruction, the more ownership they will feel — and the more emboldened they will be to fight extremism within their own country.

The following recommendation can help tens of thousands of Iraqi households in a few months.

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**Only if communities are fully engaged in the design, implementation and management of projects that influence their daily lives, then aid will be effective as a tool of public diplomacy.**

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### Initial international push

First, the Iraqi government should immediately begin a two-week training of thousands of schoolteachers and other community members, as well as

outside technicians and appropriate government and nonprofit liaisons, in facilitation methods.

In the beginning, international experts — from both the public and private sectors — would be needed to transfer, adapt and develop new facilitation methods with Iraqis. But the process would quickly become self-sustaining.

## Technically precise

Community Reconstruction Planning and Training Centers provide the educational forum that catalyzes positive political change.

The techniques they learn help to achieve broad community participation in reconstruction efforts. The interactive development experience creates mutually beneficial relationships and trust among the participants — with positive follow-on effects for the future.

Typically, communities can determine their reconstruction priorities in six two-hour community meetings.

There are many examples of successful trainings in facilitation methods, including in Middle East countries such as Morocco and Jordan.

However, facilitation training on the scale necessary to achieve community-based reconstruction of a nation has never been attempted. This challenge, however, is much less daunting and dangerous than the training of thousands of Iraqi security personnel currently underway.

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**Community-based reconstruction undermines extremists. As people are invited to participate in a development process, they feel less alienation.**

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## Many centers

Transferring facilitation skills is done experientially — that is, within Iraq' communities — and not in centralized locations that can easily be targeted by insurgents.

Second, the Iraqi government should create "Community Reconstruction Planning and Training Centers." These centers, situated in communities and managed by community members, assist local people in determining their priority goals and then in designing and implementing projects to achieve them.

## Convenient reconstruction

Centers also provide training in facilitation, conflict management, modern agriculture, health and other skills desired by the local population. Centers provide the educational forum that catalyzes positive political change.

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**Local capacities for reconstruction**

In sum, they provide one-stop shopping for community development needs and do so in ways that transfer needed skills to the local population.

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Around the world — including in Rwanda, Timor-Leste and the Democratic Republic of the Congo — indigenous reconstruction has shown positive socio-economic and political consequences.

Further, if communities are fully engaged in the design, implementation and management of projects that influence their daily lives, then aid as a tool of public diplomacy will be effective.

Its own communities will sustain the reconstruction of Iraq if they are put in control of its design and management.

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## Jason Ben-Meir

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Jason Ben-Meir is pursuing a Doctorate in Sociology at the University of New Mexico. He is President of the High Atlas Foundation, a nonprofit organization that helps to establish community projects in Morocco that local people design and manage. Mr. Ben-Meir is also a fellow at the American Institute of Maghrib Studies.

A former Peace Corps volunteer and Associate Peace Corps Director who served in Morocco, he and other former volunteers created the High Atlas Foundation in 2000 to utilize their professional relationships, friendships and knowledge gained during their years of service for the continued benefit of the Moroccan people.

Mr. Ben-Meir is also a founding member of the Diversity Institute, a nonprofit that promotes ethnic reconciliation and community development in the United States.

Jason Ben-Meir's publications mostly focus on strategies for implementing community development in the Islamic world and how that can enhance relations with the West.

He holds a Masters degree (1997) in International Development and Social Change from Clark University, Massachusetts, and a Bachelors degree (1991) in Economics from New York University. He lives in New

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