Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wimm20

Humanitarian Alliances: Local and International NGO Partnerships and the Iraqi Refugee Crisis

Kathryn Libal a & Scott Harding a
a School of Social Work, University of Connecticut, West Hartford, Connecticut, USA

Available online: 09 Jun 2011

To cite this article: Kathryn Libal & Scott Harding (2011): Humanitarian Alliances: Local and International NGO Partnerships and the Iraqi Refugee Crisis, Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies, 9:2, 162-178

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2011.567153

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Humanitarian Alliances: Local and International NGO Partnerships and the Iraqi Refugee Crisis

KATHRYN LIBAL and SCOTT HARDING
School of Social Work, University of Connecticut, West Hartford, Connecticut, USA

This article examines collaborations between international and local NGOs serving Iraqi refugees in Jordan. Refugee displacement, while fraught with challenges, also presents opportunities to support Jordanian civil society and the state social safety net. Such developments potentially benefit not only Iraqi refugees, but also low-income Jordanians. Barriers to international NGO involvement in Jordan have led to a collaborative model of humanitarian assistance, utilizing ties with local organizations to build programs and direct resources and services to Iraqis. The article is based on field research and interviews with representatives from the majority of international NGO in Jordan, Syria, and the United States. The authors find that while humanitarian cooperation in addressing Iraqi forced migration is important, the complexity of this crisis has limited their work. Without support from the international community and the United States for deepening such alliances, Iraqi refugees will remain vulnerable for years to come.

KEYWORDS forced migration, humanitarian alliances, Iraqi refugees, Iraq War, Jordan, nongovernmental organizations, urban refugees

INTRODUCTION

Often overlooked in U.S. policy debates about the Iraq War over the past 8 years has been an understanding of the extensive human consequences for Iraqis in terms of social development, public health, and well being (Harding & Libal, 2009; Hills & Wasfi, 2009). One of the most profound effects has been
the displacement of some 4 million Iraqis, including an estimated 2.7 million Iraqis forced to move from their homes and communities within the country and an estimated 2 million more Iraqis who have crossed borders into neighboring countries as refugees (Barnes, 2009). The exodus of refugees has been marked by a noticeable “brain drain” of the educated middle class and key professional sectors (Sassoon, 2009). Both the immediate and future ability of key Iraqi institutions to function effectively is threatened with the loss of these skilled workers, educators, and administrators. Regional governments and humanitarian organizations also note the destabilizing effects on local countries of absorbing a large population of forced migrants.

International and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been central actors addressing Iraqi displacement (Libal & Harding, 2009). These organizations have achieved some success in terms of policy changes and international commitments to assist Iraqis, but have also been challenged in their ability to help protect and provide meaningful services to most of these refugees (Harper, 2008; International Crisis Group, 2008). Despite the critical role of NGOs, Iraqis remain vulnerable to exploitation and involuntary return to Iraq. Many refugees in Jordan and Syria face downward economic mobility, due to limited savings and an inability to work legally. The lack of official refugee status also means that many displaced Iraqis cannot access key social services in their host countries (Chatelard, 2009).

Humanitarian assistance has provided only modest benefits to a small proportion of Iraqis. By 2009 United Nations (UN) agencies and international NGOs experienced a drop in donor support for this emergency, triggering a reduction in programs serving Iraqis. Most of these organizations expect that funds to assist Iraqi refugees will decline in coming years. In addition, Iraqis’ prospects for resettlement in large numbers to asylum countries remain slim, even as their resources dwindle (UNHCR, 2009). These factors, along with the desire of the Iraqi government to show that the country has stabilized, contribute to pressure for so-called “voluntary repatriation” to Iraq. To date only a small percentage of refugees have actually “voted with their feet” and returned home (UNHCR Iraq, 2010). Thus, all of the durable solutions recommended by the international community—voluntary repatriation, local integration, or third-country resettlement—are problematic. As a result, despite increased attention to their situation since 2007 most Iraqi refugees in Jordan and Syria are likely to remain vulnerable for years to come.

In this article we examine efforts among service providers in coordination with UN agencies to build alliances between international and local NGOs serving Iraqis in Jordan. Refugee displacement to Jordan, while fraught with challenges for Jordanian society and Iraqis, also presents an opportunity to support Jordanian civil society and the state social safety net. Such developments potentially benefit not only Iraqi refugees, but marginalized Jordanians as well. Barriers to international NGO involvement in Jordan have led to a collaborative model of humanitarian assistance, utilizing ties with
local organizations to build programs and direct resources and services to Iraqis. Based on field research and interviews with key NGO actors, we find that while these efforts point to the importance of humanitarian cooperation in addressing forced migration, the complexity of this crisis has limited their work. Jordan and Syria are reluctant to integrate large numbers of Iraqis, even as insufficient donor support from the international community jeopardizes the long-term protection needs of Iraqis.

DISASTER AND THE SOCIAL MOBILIZATION OF DISPLACED POPULATIONS

Research on disasters has gained renewed attention in social work and allied fields in the wake of the attacks of September 11 and Hurricane Katrina (Tierney, 2007; Zakour, 2006). Social work literature has focused on the role of micro practice and has emphasized the professional response to natural disasters (Galambos, 2005; Zakour, 2006), for example training clinical practitioners to address the impacts of disaster on individual and family health and well being. However, some have argued that disaster must be understood more broadly than as devastation caused solely by natural events (Moyo & Moldovan, 2008). From this perspective, disaster often has its roots in social, economic, and political processes that lead to social instability and conflict. These may include deliberate policies and state actions that undermine the economy and infrastructure of a country and induce the fracturing of social networks and communities. Examples include war, the failure to address preventable disease and epidemics, the imposition of economic sanctions, and neoliberal economic strategies. This broader conceptualization recognizes the fundamental role of policy decisions in the creation of inequality and other structural factors that indicate “man-made” disasters (Harding, 2007).

Within this framework, disasters provide the opportunity for reshaping policy and mobilizing local communities for reconstruction and social development to meet the needs of displaced populations. Yet Pyles (2007) underscores that little research has been conducted examining social development following disaster, noting, “a core and often neglected element of disaster recovery has been the rebuilding and community development phase” (p. 321). Ager, Strang, and Abebe (2005) emphasize the role of psychosocial services in rebuilding social capital as key to community development in post-conflict societies. Thus, community building may represent a means for reconciliation and for addressing the trauma of displacement and community disintegration (Frederico et al., 2007).

Moyo and Moldovan (2008) suggest that state failure to deal with the effects of disasters provides opportunities to organize those affected into a “viable political force.” They call on social workers in particular to use
community organizing to “channel people’s discontent into political action” (p. 9) following disasters. Yet not all disaster situations yield readily to social mobilization and community building. Crises involving large-scale human dislocation present distinct challenges for humanitarian actors and community activists. For example, recent refugee crises often require a response to populations who reside “out of status” in host countries and have been absorbed into poor, urban enclaves (Campbell, 2006). Lacking durable, recognized legal protection, refugees mobilize at their peril, as was the case with Sudanese refugees in Egypt in 2005 (Moulin & Nyers, 2007). While forced migrants are not entirely powerless, their ability to effectively organize for adequate services is limited, especially when they are dispersed in urban contexts. Such is the case for Iraqi refugees, the majority of whom are undocumented forced migrants residing in Jordan and Syria. To engage in social mobilization would place them at risk for arrests and deportation. Moreover, unique vulnerabilities due to trauma, high rates of disability, age, health, religious or ethnic background, and gender further inhibit community participation and self-advocacy for services.

A general body of scholarship examines direct practice with refugees (Drachman & Paulino, 2004; Drumm, Pittman, & Perry, 2003). However, research gaps exist concerning the efficacy of service provision in conflict zones and during repatriation or permanent resettlement of refugees. Moreover, few studies analyze how international humanitarian and development organizations and local NGOs mobilize for support (Kim, 2010). Within the global context of recurrent man-made disasters and forced migration, NGOs play a crucial role in advocacy and service provision for refugees (Ferris, 2003). Since the 1980s, international NGOs have come to dominate the provision of humanitarian assistance (Walker & Maxwell, 2008). The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and donor countries typically subcontract with international aid groups to provide most refugee assistance. Yet the scale of global crises often means that international organizations, stretched thin by limited resources and competing claims, often cannot establish a long-term presence in countries affected by displacement, war, and other disasters. In addition, the “life-cycle” of a given crisis as perceived by the international community—especially global donors—is usually no more than a few years. Because local NGOs and community-based groups operate in affected areas long after a crisis has faded, “northern NGOs are increasingly working through local NGOs, providing funds and training them to carry on their work” (Ferris, 2003, p. 124).

The case of Iraqi refugees underscores this process and the need for greater cooperation between local and international actors serving displaced groups. Most Iraqis reside out of status in urban locales in host countries and are not easily identified or accessible to aid agencies. Local organizations are often better suited to reach hidden or vulnerable populations, such as undocumented migrants, and deliver services in a culturally relevant
manner. These groups have more legitimacy in communities than outside actors and are thus able to build trust and long-term relationships among local stakeholders. Importantly, they may be better situated to engage in local organizing to promote the interests of refugees and community-building efforts. However, Lewis (1998) warns against an approach whereby international NGOs, under the guise of “capacity-building” of local groups, replicate a model of dependency. In such circumstances local NGOs are often forced to rely on external expertise and resources to create and implement programs, making them vulnerable to cooption and failure due to lack of sustainability. Thus NGO partnerships must be collaborative, rather than reinforcing a subordinate relationship where local organizations have less power to define what services will be offered, to whom, and how they will be implemented. Such collaborative work is potentially constructive in the case of Jordan because international NGOs provide needed resources and technical assistance. As important, these international groups offer leverage to help local community based organizations or emergent NGOs establish capacity without state interference.

**THE SOCIAL ISOLATION OF IRAQI REFUGEES**

While the exact number of Iraqi refugees is unclear, the impact on neighboring countries has been profound (Libal & Harding, 2009; Sassoon, 2009). The size of the refugee flow (on a per capita basis) is such that even the wealthiest states would have difficulty absorbing this population and meeting their basic needs. Jordan and Syria, two countries with limited resources and weak social safety nets, host the largest concentrations of Iraqi forced migrants (Harper, 2008). In 2008 the United Nations estimated that more than one million Iraqi refugees resided in Syria and some 450,000 Iraqis resided in Jordan (Barnes, 2009). These estimates are now regarded as inflated, and the UN relies upon numbers of refugees officially registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees upon which to base programming needs. As of December 2010 this included some 140,000 registered Iraqi refugees in Syria; 30,700 in Jordan; and 8,000 in Lebanon (UNHCR Iraq, 2010). Andrew Harper of UNHCR notes, however, that using officially registered refugees underestimates the overall numbers of displaced Iraqis: “Many refugees choose not to register with us, either because there is a stigma attached in asking for assistance or they see no reason to register unless they need our services” (Integrated Regional Information Networks, 2010).

Both Jordan and Syria have been tolerant of Iraqi forced migrants, allowing most Iraqis to stay despite having no legal status as refugees (Barnes, 2009). However, both countries are reluctant to regularize the status of undocumented Iraqis, which would allow them to work legally, citing high unemployment levels for their own populations. The Jordanian government
has been reluctant to provide significant health and education programs, fearing that this may create a “pull factor,” drawing even more vulnerable Iraqis to cross borders in search of a better life. Under pressure from NGOs, the UN, and the United States, starting in 2007 Jordan has made accommodations to provide access to public schooling for Iraqi children.

Despite these services international and local aid workers depict a growing economic and social distress among many displaced Iraqis: refugees draw upon increasingly limited savings, remittances, informal labor, and humanitarian aid to meet basic needs. Traditional family and kin networks have been fractured by dislocation and the loss of community, while cultural barriers to seeking “charity” further compound their isolation. Unlike camp refugee populations, Iraqis present a particular challenge for assistance because of their relative invisibility as urban refugees. Lacking legal permission to work also suggests that Iraqis who use international assistance may become dependent upon such support.

Limited global funding for humanitarian aid is another barrier confronting most Iraqi refugees. While the global community increased assistance for Iraqis in 2008 and 2009, this aid remains insufficient. Moreover, the Iraqi government, which has its own significant resources, has thus far lacked the political will to devote sufficient bilateral assistance for refugees’ needs (Refugees International, 2008). Limited international donor support for the refugee crisis places a disproportionate burden for assistance on Jordan and Syria, discouraging host governments from enacting more durable protections, such as granting official refugee status and work permits.

In many global contexts, civil society organizations would be expected to provide services and resources for vulnerable groups. Jordan and Syria, however, like most countries in the Middle East, have not relied upon NGOs to promote social development. While religious organizations have played important roles in both countries as conduits for social support, the governments monitor such work and remain reluctant to allow community-based groups to advocate for the needs of vulnerable populations. Charitable work on behalf of Iraqi refugees is significant, but has not been adequately assessed (Sassoon, 2009). Another key actor in the Arab world, the Muslim Brotherhood, has been an important force in social development (Harmsen, 2009). In Jordan, it remains unclear the extent to which such Islamic networks are assisting displaced Iraqis. Other religious community organizations, especially Christian groups, play important roles for Iraqis. In Syria, these faith-based organizations have been crucial (Sassoon, 2009). Overall, the size of the refugee flow into Jordan and Syria has strained the limited capacity of such local groups to provide comprehensive aid to Iraqis.

In Jordan, civil society has also played a small role in social development, due in part to a history of state control of this sector. Several royal NGOs, like the Jordan River Foundation, have facilitated community development and in recent years have emerged as important partners with
international aid groups. Through emerging collaborations with international groups, Jordanian NGOs have strengthened their capacity; through expanded outreach they have begun to promote community building among Iraqis and Jordanians. Given the projected long-term nature of this situation, the United Nations and global NGOs are working to build local organizational and state capacity to better serve all vulnerable groups.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study used a qualitative method approach. Since 2007, we have conducted interviews with 85 respondents from humanitarian and human rights NGOs, UN agencies, (including the UNCHR), the International Office of Migration (IOM), and the U.S. government (Congress, State Department and Department of Homeland Security). We conducted interviews in the Middle East for a total of 3 months during the summers of 2007, 2008, and 2009. We interviewed representatives from most of the leading international NGOs operating in Jordan working to address Iraqi displacement, four local Jordanian NGOs, and representatives from UNHCR and IOM in Jordan and Syria. Since early 2007, we have also interviewed U.S.-based NGO staff involved in programming, fundraising, and advocacy for Iraqi refugees, as well as Congressional staff persons working on legislation in support of Iraqi refugees.

We employed a purposive sample in our study. Participants were identified based upon their roles as leaders in providing humanitarian relief on behalf of displaced Iraqis. Individuals were chosen based on their affiliation with specific organizations that were involved in developing responses to Iraqi refugee needs from 2006 to present. Our initial goal was to reach representatives from all the major international NGOs involved in humanitarian assistance for Iraqi refugees. As research progressed, we focused on organizations that were actively collaborating with local, partner organizations (both nongovernmental and governmental), in Jordan and Syria. The sample includes regional and local directors of international NGO operations, local and international caseworkers, Iraqi outreach volunteers, UN and U.S. interviewers processing refugees for resettlement, and NGO staff involved in advocacy and lobbying in the United States and Europe.

We used a semistructured interview design for initial interviews focusing on the role of humanitarian service providers and civil society, as well as advocacy efforts to address Iraqi refugees. Follow-up interviews with key respondents followed an emic, unstructured format common to the conventions of ethnography. Interviews typically lasted 60–90 minutes and were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed for key themes. An “open coding” procedure was used to identify primary themes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). After identifying themes, we utilized a constant comparison method
NGO Partnerships and Iraqi Refugees

169
to re-examine data for additional support of those themes (Padgett, 2008). These interviews were supplemented by information from organizational and government documents. We also maintained field notes based on our insights from research trips. These follow conventions of ethnographic research (Emerson et al., 1995), including recording and analyzing public talks for key themes, maintaining a journal or field log, and writing “process notes” based on discussions between the researchers. In addition, we engaged in participant observation such as attending informal hearings and advocacy events in Washington, DC linked to legislation. This included observation of one “Advocacy Day” in 2008 that brought together leading humanitarian organizations, refugee rights advocates, academics, lawyers, and others involved in work on behalf of Iraqi refugees in the United States.

Primary themes identified in our larger study include the need for a systematic global response to protracted refugee situations, the lack of capacity within international and local NGOs, and chronic funding concerns about who will pay for refugee programs. For the purpose of this article, we address themes identified across all categories of informants that emphasize the challenges and prospects of collaboration between international and national or local NGOs and state agencies. We distinguished several themes based upon cross-cutting insights that were repeated within a majority of interviews: (a) the importance of international and national NGOs in addressing Iraqi displacement; (b) promoting a development approach to refugee assistance; (c) a lack of capacity to address social welfare needs of local and refugee populations; (d) the opportunity to build local capacity through international and local alliances of civil society actors; (e) the importance of coordination of efforts between NGOs, UN agencies, and local government agencies; (f) the importance of activating Iraqi volunteer outreach workers to reach underserved or “hidden” populations of Iraqis in urban environments.

NGO ALLIANCES IN JORDAN

Numerous interviews with NGO and UN workers underscored the complexity of the refugee situation in Jordan. Iraqis are largely dispersed within urban centers like Amman and Zarqa, rather than living in camps where they can more readily access information and services. Most Iraqis’ lack of legal status has made them fearful of seeking outside assistance and thus hindered outreach and registration efforts. Chatelard (2009) notes that the restricted “physical and social mobility” of many undocumented Iraqis in Jordan impede access to services, makes parents reluctant to send children to school, and renders Iraqis vulnerable to exploitation in the informal labor market (p. 16).

Humanitarian workers in this study agree no short-term resolution to Iraqi displacement is forthcoming. What was initially regarded as a
humanitarian crisis is now viewed as a long term social development issue. While this reality could be seen as a threat to the relative stability of Jordan, it also presents an opportunity to address longer-term needs of refugees and vulnerable Jordanians. Thus, NGOs working on this issue seek to provide a level of services beyond basic relief. Through education programs, skills building, and group dialogue, this “development” approach emphasizes empowerment, community building, and self-sufficiency.

This method is also fostered by the political realities of providing aid to Iraqis who reside in poor sectors of Amman or in outlying cities. These communities are also populated by marginalized, poor Palestinians. Most international NGOs note the desire to build capacity and provide support to community groups that already serve Palestinians and low-income Jordanians. Strengthening the capacity of existing local organizations therefore addresses criticisms of creating “parallel social institutions” seen as unfairly benefiting Iraqis. Such a process seems relevant to the views of local populations. For example, according to one informant with several decades of experience in development work in Jordan, many Jordanian youth have expressed a desire to access projects and programs used by Iraqis. Many NGOs have thus designed services that are accessible to all at-risk groups in Jordan. For U.S.-funded projects, at least half of recipients must be Iraqi refugees, thus conceding to the Jordanian government that social development and humanitarian programs cannot exclude poor Jordanians.

Until 2007, few international NGOs based in Jordan worked with displaced Iraqis (Libal & Harding, 2009). As the number of international NGOs increased, coordination emerged as a critical concern according to respondents in the study. This includes a lack of attention to certain refugee needs as well as potential overlap in programming and the provision of material assistance (Barnes, 2009). To address this, the UN facilitated the formation of working groups around particular humanitarian programs. For example, NGOs working on education for Iraqi children attend regular meetings chaired by UNICEF, and working groups on informal education and livelihoods were formed.

Collaboration between international and local NGOs presents distinct challenges and opportunities. International NGOs have been the conduit through which U.S. and UN funding flows. After several years of developing programs to meet humanitarian needs, however, international NGOs continue to have insufficient capacity or access to refugee communities to adequately assist large numbers of Iraqis. Thus, services typically target the “most vulnerable” refugees, including unaccompanied minors, female-headed households, and those with chronic medical and disability concerns. Yet providing long-term and quality assistance to even these refugees remains a challenge, while it also risks alienating other key groups like adult Iraqi men.
In response, the International Rescue Committee and International Medical Corps have developed local partnerships to strengthen their work. This is particularly important for NGOs who are new to the region or have not worked in Jordan. Other international groups, like Caritas, Near East Foundation, Questscope, Save the Children, and CARE, have a long-standing presence in Jordan conducting development work. These groups have been better positioned to adapt programming and access existing community networks to develop outreach to Iraqis.

Another key challenge for NGOs is identifying and serving Iraqi families and communities. This stems from limited awareness among refugees of services, their reluctance to be “too visible” to authorities, or the lack of geographic proximity of service providers to neighborhoods where many Iraqis reside. Our research shows that NGOs have gradually adapted to this constraint by providing stipends to Iraqi volunteers, many themselves refugees, who do outreach within neighborhoods where Iraqis are concentrated. In interviews, several Iraqi “caseworkers” noted the importance of establishing trust with refugees in order to do effective outreach, thus articulating a key principle of community-building and organizing efforts. They cite the importance of intensive case management that includes follow-up with Iraqi families to be sure they registered with UNHCR and have accessed services based upon their particular needs (Al Qdah & Lacroix, 2010).

Jordan also recognizes the long-term nature of the refugee crisis and its limited capacity to meet the needs of its own citizens. Thus, informants note, the government has negotiated to create more durable forms of infrastructure through bilateral assistance from the United States. This includes building new medical clinics and schools available to the entire population. Linked to the increased openness of the government to develop programs for Iraqis is the potential for Jordanian NGOs to gain greater prominence. While it remains difficult for small community based organizations to operate, due to funding and permitting constraints, such outreach is occurring on a small scale.

UN agencies cite the importance of supporting local organizations and the Jordanian government in its efforts to address Iraqis’ needs (Barnes, 2009). Interviewees emphasized that the chronic nature of this situation means the international community must foster capacity within private and governmental social development sectors. This also reflects the reality that in the near future the UN presence will be significantly reduced, even as Iraqi refugees continue to reside in Jordan. Thus, the UN has begun to shift funding from international NGOs to several royal foundations, the Jordanian Red Crescent Society, and government ministries charged with health and education. While the United Nations also hopes to support community-based organizations, most of these groups have yet to seek such partnerships with UN agencies.
A major theme from our interviews is that NGO alliances in Jordan are crucial to meeting the needs of Iraqi refugees in terms of education, material assistance, and psychosocial services. Such collaboration illustrates the importance of reforming international support to build sustainable partnerships that address long-term humanitarian crises. A key obstacle in community-based work with Iraqis is the lack of organizational capacity and trained caseworkers able to address individual and family needs. For example, while some local and royal NGOs have established programs that address gender-based violence, these organizations have limited outreach capacity (Harmsen, 2009). In addition, government ministries lack a well-trained, experienced workforce able to implement local programming that promotes social development. To address this limitation, one international organization now partners with a Jordanian NGO to train government caseworkers, police, and other community members to develop responsive community programming and awareness of domestic violence. Other training of state caseworkers by this initiative targets child protection needs.

Questions of state capacity have been central in debates about education for Iraqi children. In 2007 UNHCR estimated that up to 750,000 Iraqi refugees were in Jordan. The UN, NGOs, and Jordan thus assumed that several hundred thousand Iraqi children and youth were in the country, but not attending school. One NGO representative cited this as a potential developmental catastrophe: “if you have a generation of Iraqi children growing up uneducated this is going to be literally a disaster for the country.”

In an example of the success of NGO advocacy with donor countries, Jordan was persuaded in late 2007 to allow Iraqi children to attend public schools. NGOs also secured international funds to support formal and non-formal educational activities. Despite this policy change, only a small percentage of Iraqi youth currently attend public schools. The Jordanian Ministry of Education found that 24,000 Iraqi children attended public and private schools in 2007/08 (Chatelard, 2009). Yet some NGO representatives feel that these figures are inflated. Low enrollments are due to several factors, including the need for children to work and contribute to family income, a fear of deportation if families register children for school, concern that Iraqi youth will face stigma, skepticism about the quality of schooling, and limited outreach by the Jordanian government. As important, according to informants, many Iraqi youth and their families believe that pursuing education is futile given that they cannot legally work or continue their studies in Jordan’s public universities.

Limited school participation has prompted NGOs to raise awareness with Iraqi parents about the importance of education to children’s well-being. A number of these groups now support collective efforts to engage in outreach and implement nontraditional education programs for Iraqis not
attending school. Examples of this work include providing tuition for youth in private schools that serve working class communities, training teachers about the unique needs and culture of Iraqis, and developing alternative educational programs. The latter are intended to reach Iraqi youth otherwise unable to attend school. Technical training, English language instruction, and classes to help Iraqis achieve the equivalent of a General Education Diploma are innovations previously used with Jordanian at-risk youth and are relevant to improving the skills-base of displaced Iraqi youth. Several interviewees noted that the Iraqi refugee crisis affords multiple opportunities to engage in “structural systems strengthening”—in this case efforts to create stronger educational infrastructure that benefit Jordanians and Iraqis.

Informants explicitly cited the importance of education for meeting the developmental needs of Iraqi youth. Thus aside from attaining literacy and other traditional curricular goals, refugees’ psychosocial needs are addressed through education initiatives. Given the significant trauma and violence experienced by most refugees, education is regarded by relief workers as a critical method of strengthening Iraqi families and rebuilding social ties. Those working on education initiatives in Jordan suggest that by participating in some form of education and avoiding social isolation, many Iraqi children had already demonstrated resiliency and (indirectly) were helping to stabilize their local community. One NGO worker stated:

They are much more eager to get out of the house … to interact with their peers. They are not as concerned as their parents about the safety issues. They identify their roles that they take within their families [to help them] cope … to protect the families.

Convincing Jordan to open public schools to Iraqis is an important achievement. Yet NGO informants cite ongoing concerns with the gap between public expressions of support for Iraqi children and actual state effort on their behalf. Ultimately, Jordan must balance competing interests: providing Iraqi children education promotes their well-being and social integration, but it also strains existing institutions. To serve all eligible youth, many schools must run on double shifts, classroom sizes are large, and most schools are underfunded. Moreover, as cited in numerous interviews, appearing overly generous in terms of access to public institutions may signal to Iraqis that eventually they can integrate into Jordanian society permanently.

While Iraqi refugees have generated global interest, most NGOs and the UN have only been able to provide minimal material assistance, including cash payments, food, housing support, and basic household goods. Since 2008, due in part to funding constraints, UNHCR has prioritized its cash assistance to serve the needs of those Iraqis identified as “most vulnerable” (Barnes, 2009). This includes unaccompanied minors, female-headed
households, and the elderly. International and local organizations have increasingly recognized that as global funding wanes, refugees must become self-sufficient. However, both the UN and NGOs have been unable to secure refugee status for Iraqis allowing them to work legally. Thus refugees will continue to depend upon patchwork relief efforts and informal employment to meet their needs.

In this climate, UNHCR has begun to emphasize “livelihoods” initiatives, including adult and youth education and other supports to facilitate future employment. Interviewees involved in UN-NGO coordination efforts noted that concerns about idle or unattached Iraqi male youth were driving this process. Vocational training and other nonformal education may provide opportunities to engage Iraqi youth at the community level and prepare them for future work in terms of gaining “portable assets” (whether in Iraq, Jordan, or another country). Thus multiple informants suggest that focusing on livelihoods helps provide a safety net for refugees while they remain in host countries and readies them for repatriation or resettlement.

A cornerstone of this development approach has been to fund community-building and livelihoods initiatives to be implemented by local and international NGOs. For example, one Jordanian organization has piloted teaching Iraqi women how to produce food and other goods within the home to sell on a small scale in the informal economy. According to a Jordanian social worker, “What we were able to think about is teaching Iraqis how to run their own small businesses from their homes—how to set up microenterprises” operating on an informal basis. While such initiatives offer the promise of economic improvement and the promotion of Iraqi women’s empowerment, there are limitations. “Empowering women” in this case provided opportunities for social networking in a community center and some skills-training, but it did not offer a pathway to acquiring a work permit or long-term economic stability.

Another project focused on life skills. A partnership between a Jordanian civil society organization and a large international NGO provided parenting workshops and training on early childhood development for low-income Iraqi and Jordanian mothers in East Amman. In its first year this project trained more than 600 women in early childhood development and parenting skills. Twenty program graduates were also trained to be local community outreach workers and recruit other women to the program. According to interviews with representatives from both organizations, this initiative was positively received by Jordanian and Iraqi women in the program. Participants viewed it as creating opportunities for social engagement outside the house, providing a sense of efficacy to build connections with the community, and as being psychologically supportive. Another project piloted in 2008 by the same partners drew upon previous outreach by the Jordanian NGO to promote awareness of domestic violence. The organization already
addressed family violence as part of its work and had credibility within the local communities. Expansion of the program stemmed from Iraqi women’s expressed desire (via focus groups) for education on how to address spousal abuse and stress within the household.

Despite the logic of focusing on livelihoods, a majority of interviewees noted the contradiction between providing job training and the barrier most Iraqi refugees face in securing legal work. NGO representatives in this study expressed a desire that Jordan would eventually relax prohibitions on work and allow more Iraqis into the formal labor market. At the same time, U.S. funding to NGOs has emphasized livelihoods, ostensibly to prepare refugees to return to Iraq to work in the future. Representatives from several local NGOs noted that initial programs targeted women and male youth, to the (near) exclusion of adult men who were the primary providers for their families in Iraq. Following evaluations of community-based programming, local and international NGOs pressured donors to develop initiatives that also include Iraqi men. Based on these findings, one local NGO developed parenting and family skills classes for a group of Iraqi and Jordanian men.

These examples illustrate how local and international NGOs have responded to Iraqis’ desires for support. While such efforts are not common, it suggests a nascent process to promote empowerment of Iraqis as stakeholders in addressing concerns they have identified. Combined with other emerging NGO alliances, significant potential exists to meet the needs of Iraqi refugees. Yet declining interest in the Iraqi case by global donors and the uncertainty stemming from an annual funding cycle for humanitarian aid threaten the sustainability of such efforts.

CONCLUSION

The international community relies upon NGO development and humanitarian relief efforts to address the human consequences of armed conflict, forced displacement of populations, and other humanitarian disasters (Walker & Maxwell, 2008). Using NGOs to implement relief programs, therefore, should entail capacity-building of local organizations. Scholars of forced displacement note that while local nongovernmental actors are key participants responding to global crises, the international community often ignores such groups in humanitarian planning and programming (DARA, 2009). This suggests a need for greater capacity building efforts between international actors and local governments and civil society organizations. While NGOs from the global South have increased in numbers and capacity, particularly at the national level, they often rely upon relationships with Northern NGOs to implement humanitarian and development assistance (Nelson & Dorsey, 2008). Despite calls to “systematically invest more resources into strengthening the humanitarian system’s capacity at all levels,” the international community...
has resisted channeling resources from donor countries directly to local organizations and civil society actors (DARA, 2009). Ultimately, the failure to support local groups and NGOs undermines their effectiveness in meeting the long-term needs of those affected by humanitarian crises.

Such challenges are illustrated in the case of Iraqi forced migrants fleeing conflict generated by the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Undoubtedly, international and local NGOs have provided important assistance to Iraqi refugees. Interviews with aid workers, however, illustrate the limits of humanitarian assistance. Many Iraqis are not being served by NGOs, highlighting both the insufficient response from the international community and the lack of local capacity to serve vulnerable populations. Our research shows that some international NGOs have begun to adopt a more grassroots collaborative approach, seeking to empower Iraqis to engage in community outreach and assessment, program design and implementation, albeit on a small scale. The very nature of Iraqi forced displacement—as one that is likely to endure and have few simple solutions—calls for a more community-based developmental approach.

The need for an inclusive approach to refugee services involving all stakeholders—a community development model predicated on a participatory approach—is self-evident. Yet the challenges of including refugees in such community-building and service provision remain. Despite support by the UN and other donor countries, building capacity and supporting local civil society efforts have not been adequately prioritized. Lacking a resolution to Iraqi displacement, questions of sustainability of international relief will become more pronounced. NGOs—whether international or local—challenge governments to respond to refugees’ marginalization through policy, legal mechanisms, and public advocacy. This nongovernmental activism reflects shared determination to shape a more just refugee policy on a global scale.

**NOTE**

1. Twelve interviews were not recorded due to the wishes of the informants. The authors took notes during the session and, immediately following the interview, recorded an expanded “narration” of the interview based on notes. Those recordings were then transcribed.

**REFERENCES**


