

Iraq: A Generation Without Education?



Waad Sami, *Iraqi Human Rights Organization*, 2010.

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Introduction

Before 1990, the Iraqi education system was considered one of the most advanced in the Middle East. Iraq was cited as an example of success in the fight against illiteracy and gender inequality.¹ However after three decades of war and economic hardship from United Nations imposed sanctions, social infrastructure has collapsed and several regions are devoid of basic services. Iraqis are struggling with unemployment, poverty and the effects of war, while social services and the health and education systems are failing, unable to adequately meet the needs of the Iraqi population.

The chaotic situation prevailing in Iraq has checked efforts to resolve the various socioeconomic problems of the country, but the Iraqi government has nonetheless committed, under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All², that by 2015 all boys and girls will receive a primary education. It has also committed to promote and provide quality education to Iraqi girls from kindergarten through secondary school. It has announced a goal of increasing the overall rate of adult literacy by 50% and that of youth by 100%, while aiming to achieve school attendance parity between boys and girls by 2015. These objectives are ambitious, but they are also an urgent requirement for the development of a democratic and prosperous Iraq.

This document aims firstly to present a series of factors identified as the causes of the paralysis of the Iraqi education system: poverty, insecurity, lack of financial resources, the destruction and deterioration of school facilities, and the quality of teaching. Each of these factors intersect in a complex interplay of cause and effect, with none being solvable alone or in isolation. The fact that no single barrier to education exists emphasizes the importance of intersectoral approaches for proposed remedies to the Iraqi education system.

Iraqi Civil Society Organizations (NGOs, trade unions, women's organizations, community organizations, volunteer organizations and local coalitions) working for equality, human rights and social justice locally, regionally and internationally currently play a key role in the implementation of programs and policies promoting education for all Iraqis. In this vein, the last part of the document provides recommendations to resolve, if not at least shore up, the shortcomings of the Iraqi education system by taking into account the important role played by these organizations. However, CSOs should not be considered a substitute for the Iraqi government, but rather an important driver for promoting access to education for all Iraqis.

It is important to note that the research for the production of this document was compiled from various sources of varying quality— media, human rights reports, articles, United Nations press releases. Data on enrolment rates is available, but not on attendance rates or quality of education. Given the most recent information (2007 - 2008) has yet to be updated, the current situation is possibly different. This document should therefore be read in light of these constraints that affect, but fail to invalidate, the conclusions reached.

Paralysis of the Iraqi education system

One in five Iraqis between the ages of 10 and 49 cannot read or write. Disparity between literacy rates varies greatly by gender, age, and whether a person lives in the city or the countryside. Twenty-four percent of Iraqi women over the age of 24 are illiterate compared to 11% of men.³ Twenty-five percent of the rural population is illiterate versus 14% of the urban population. The urban-rural divide is even more pronounced when considering gender: in the countryside, less than 50% of women aged between 15 and 24 years are capable of reading aloud, while in cities between 72 and 80% of women can.⁴

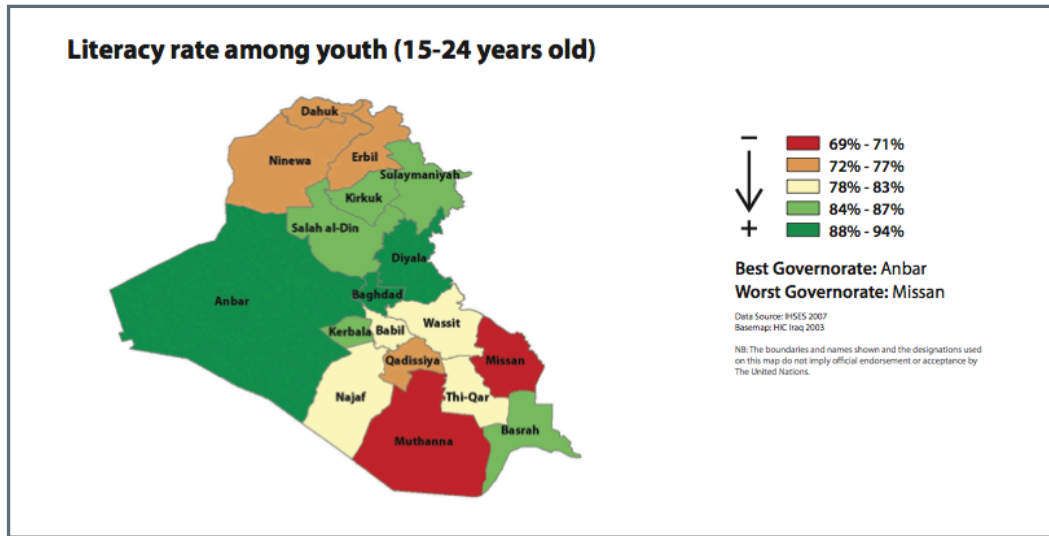
Before submitting recommendations for a gradual improvement in Iraqi enrolment rates and, by extension, the number of people able to read and write, we explore a series of factors responsible for the alarming situation in Iraq- a situation all the more alarming considering a few decades ago the levels of educational attainment were the pride of the nation.

Poverty

After so many years of war in Iraq, children are bearing the brunt of the hardships facing families- especially the families of war-widows. Nearly a quarter of the Iraqi population (23%) lives below the poverty line on less than \$2.20 USD per day.⁵ This is a major factor in the prevalence of malnutrition among children and women: one-in-three children aged five or under suffer from malnutrition. Such dietary deficiencies affect cognitive development and cause moderate or severe stunting that can lead to irreversible long-term learning disabilities.⁶ Eighteen percent of Iraqi two-year-olds suffering from malnutrition are unable to name more than one object, while children with normal language development can name between 150 and 300 words.⁷ Children with limited language development are less likely to succeed in their studies upon reaching school age and therefore have a greater risk of dropping out before finishing primary school.

Dropout rates increase as a family's income decreases. Although education is free in Iraq, school attendance is not without direct and indirect costs, and some families have insufficient money to meet the basic needs of a child's education. In rural areas, 10% of children between the ages of 5 and 14- without noticeable distinction between the sexes- must work, dropping to a figure of 5% in cities.⁸ Incidentally, the majority of children not completing school are from the most impoverished classes found mainly in rural central and southern Iraq.

In 2007, the net enrollment rate (NER⁹) in primary schools (6-11 years) was 87% for boys and 82% for girls. This rate varies widely by region and gender: in urban areas, the NER reached (99%), but in rural areas it is 77% for boys and 70% for girls.¹⁰ Nationally, only 39% of girls complete their primary education (a figure that varies widely by region: Diyala, 60%, Kerbala and Muthanna, 28%).¹¹ In 2007-08, more than one-in-ten (13%) students was older than the normal age for their grade, and of these, 228,829 children were still in primary school when aged between 13 and 15 years old or more.¹² Children aged between 10 and 14 years old have taken, on average, 1.6 years of school per grade.¹³



Source: “The Millennium Development Goals in Iraq”, Ministry of Planning, Government of Iraq, The United Nations Country Team - Iraq, 2007, consulted online 23 September 2010 at: <http://www.iauiraq.org/mdgs.asp>.

Insecurity

In 2007, nearly nine-in-ten children aged 15 or under were not attending school regularly. At the intermediate level, the NER is 37% for boys and 21% for girls (in rural areas, the NER for boys is greater than that of girls by a ratio of 2 to 1).¹⁴ According to the Ministry of Education, in 2007 only 28% of all 17-year-olds who were enrolled in high school graduated.¹⁵ Enrolment rates for universities are equally low.

These figures are partly explained by the socio-economic situation of Iraqi children and partly by the security situation in the country. According to the Iraqi Ministry of Education, between March 2003 and October 2008 31,598 violent attacks against educational institutions were reported. During the same period, more than 259 teachers and researchers were killed, 72 were kidnapped, and 174 were arrested.¹⁶ According to UNAMI, between July 2005 and March 2007 more than a hundred students were killed, mostly by suicide bombings, car bombs and mortar shells targeting universities and schools.¹⁷ The marked reduction in the number of dead and wounded over the past two years reflects the declining rates of violence in Iraq¹⁸, but even if the level of security is generally better, the threats faced by academic professionals and students persist.

The internal displacement of teachers and students is another major problem directly linked to the country's security situation. According to the UN Refugee Agency, more than two million Iraqis were displaced within their own country in 2007.¹⁹ As such, more than 220,000 schoolchildren were displaced, of which many were unable to re-enrol in new schools because they lacked the required residency papers or because there were not enough school places to accommodate newcomers.

Since the fall of the Baathist regime, religion and conservative traditions have occupied an increasingly prominent role in the private and public spheres of society resulting in a regressive

trend that encourages women and girls to stay home to perform traditional tasks. Women and girls are also more restricted in their mobility for security reasons. In 2005, the government of Ibrahim al-Jaafari adopted regulations banning co-education in schools and at all levels— under Saddam Hussein, primary schools and universities were mixed, segregation applied only to secondary school students). In some governorates, male teachers are forbidden from teaching at secondary girls schools. As a consequence of these developments, depending on cultural, economic and geographic factors, the education of boys is being encouraged and prioritized at the expense of the education of girls.

Budget

From the 70s until the war against Iran (1980-1988), the budget allocated for education represented 20% of total expenditures of the state (6% of GDP). However in the context of austerity imposed by war and economic sanctions, the share of total government expenditure allocated to education fell to 8% in the 90's. After the first elections in January 2005, the Iraqi government opted for a modest increase in total public expenditure in the education sector, raising it from 7.2% in 2008 to 9.9% in 2009.²⁰ This increase may suggest that the government is getting a grip on the problems related to education, but much remains to be done to achieve one of the Millennium Development Goals and Education For All by 2015.²¹

The distribution of powers in the Iraqi education system²² does not offer sufficient space to local authorities to produce tailored and targeted services to meet the needs of a given population (according to gender, income, place of residence, or ethnic origin, etc.). There is also an unequal distribution of resources (supplies and schools) between governorates, meted out according to respective power and influence in Parliament.²³ According to the National report on the status of human development in Iraq (2008), this arrangement does not offer much hope for implementing the ambitious reforms necessary to improve the quality of public education. A country can only claim to offer equal opportunities for access to education when sufficient numbers of schools are equitably distributed throughout its territory. In Iraq, due to the unequal distribution of resources, it is common for a single building to be used by several schools.²⁴

State of infrastructure and quality of teaching

Because of the constant deterioration of infrastructure over the last thirty years, thousands of schools suffer from a chronic lack of resources, both human and material, that are essential for the provision of a quality education. According to 2008 data, Iraq needs about 4,731 new schools and 70% of existing buildings must be renovated to meet quality standards. As for higher education, 84% of facilities were either burned, looted or destroyed, and only 40% of destroyed buildings were rebuilt.²⁵

In general, schools are poorly maintained with unclean toilets and no access to drinking water. There are insufficient numbers of classrooms, they have no windows and no heating, and lack chairs and tables. Toilets are often dirty and clogged, libraries and computer equipment are inexistent. The poor state of school infrastructure, particularly in primary education, is an important factor in explaining the high dropout rate.

Furthermore, due to a lack of security and low wages, many teachers have left the country since the 90s. In 2007, the Ministry of Displacement and Migration reported that at least 30% of teachers, doctors, pharmacists and engineers had left since 2003.²⁶ The number of qualified teachers available on the labour market is insufficient to meet the needs of public sector schools, regardless of the level of education concerned. This has forced many schools to hire individuals who lack the qualifications required for their level of teaching.²⁷

Since 2008 private schools have been allowed to operate in Iraq, and Baghdad now has about 30 (3,000 public schools). The lack of qualified personnel to teach in public schools has been exacerbated by this change, as in private schools a teacher earns \$600 to \$850 USD per month, while in the public sector wages vary between \$500 and \$700 USD. In addition to having the best teachers, private schools are clean and spacious with sports facilities and swimming pools which are lacking in the public system. Tuition in a Baghdad private school is about \$1,600 USD per year (the average Iraqi makes \$500 USD per month). However, it is important to note that thus far the educational attainments of private and public school students are roughly the same.

The classroom behavior of teachers is another important aspect that defines the quality of education in Iraq. In a United Nations report on girls' education in Iraq (2010), it was noted that some teachers do not hesitate to hit and insult their students as a teaching method, which does not encourage children to stay in school, especially not girls.²⁸



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Recommendations

The factors explaining the low enrollment and literacy rates in Iraq are complex and have deep roots in the country's political history. The challenges facing the government are considerable. At time of writing, the Iraqi Parliament just came to a power-sharing agreement to form a government and end an eight-month institutional crisis. In this context of chaotic governance, it is imperative to not only listen to, but also incorporate the views of CSOs in the implementation of policies and programs adopted for the improvement of the education system.

The Iraqi Democratic Future Network (IDFN), comprised of sixteen independent organizations from Iraqi civil society working toward equality, justice, solidarity, social development and coexistence amongst the diverse constituents of Iraqi society, launched an education campaign in April 2009. Its aim is the general improvement of education and the eradication of illiteracy in Iraq. Several strategies of awareness (marches, festivals, workshops, school visits, distribution of pamphlets and posters) were used to alert the population and Iraqi education officials, including members of Parliament and officials of the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. The majority of recommendations presented in this section bear a close relation to those proposed by the network IDFN.

Iraqi government

- Adopt strategies that promote access to the education system for children, especially girls:
 - Conduct awareness campaigns nationally and regionally: the Iraqi government has to publicly and unreservedly commit to an aim of universal and compulsory education, where all children can learn and achieve their full potential. Being close to local communities, Iraqi CSOs should be involved in these campaigns. For example, a national program overseen by a trilateral committee (Parliament, Cabinet and Ministry of Education) is aiming to eradicate illiteracy through engagement with schools in cities, suburbs, and the countryside. As suggested by the IDFN, NGOs can contribute to these efforts by providing courses, conferences and workshops aimed at eliminating illiteracy;
 - Pay particular attention to the disparities between cities, suburbs and rural areas— the poor should be entitled to a minimum income;
 - Build and renovate schools, ensuring they have decent toilets, potable water, and sanitation facilities;
 - Produce and distribute training manuals for teachers and textbooks for students.

- Strengthen the institutional and human capacities of the education sector to provide quality education at all levels:
 - Develop quality training programs for teachers currently employed and hire more qualified teachers.²⁹
 - Ban by law the use of corporal and psychological punishment as measures of discipline used by some teachers and principals.

- Improve policy formulation and program development and revision at all levels:
 - Provide support for the local development of new programs;
 - Support the adoption of new strategies and policies to improve the education sector, particularly for disadvantaged children;
 - Encourage preschool and kindergarten enrolment in order to reduce dropout rates in the early years of primary education. Early childhood development is essential to achieve basic levels of literacy for children beginning their studies.

- Intensify preparations and responses to specific humanitarian needs in the education sector:
 - Support the development of parent - teacher and parent - school relationships
 - Promote gender equality and provide psychosocial services, particularly for children and youth living in vulnerable communities and among displaced populations;
 - Conform curricula to international standards;
 - Increase the number of teachers in schools;
 - Expand accelerated learning programs and other non-formal educational opportunities for children and young people who never attended school;
 - Open a greater number of middle schools for girls, and adopt concrete policies to ensure their safety and teaching methods to suit their learning style;
 - Develop a transitional “school – work” program for dropouts to encourage a gradual return to school and, in so doing, address their educational gaps, particularly learning to read and write;
 - Strengthen the capacity of sanitation and health services in schools to cope with outbreaks and prevent the transmission of contagious diseases;
 - Provide foodstuffs to schools in disadvantaged areas;
 - Encourage communities and religious leaders who defend human rights to promote education for all children, boys and girls alike. Conservative religious beliefs are leading to the violation of the rights of girls and women to life, physical integrity, education, health and freedom of movement. In such circumstances, religious leaders should be involved at all levels of nationwide awareness campaigns for education for all Iraqis.

Iraqi and International Civil Society Organisations

- Support- and complement - the policies adopted by the Iraqi government, and apply political pressure if necessary to promote education for all;
- Support government efforts to adopt small-scale initiatives that aim to increase enrollment and graduation rates, particularly in primary schools;
- Encourage and support the initiatives of local and regional Iraqi CSOs;
- Produce a survey of the activities and actions of the various local and international CSOs working to increase literacy and school enrollment around Iraq in order to improve coordination, share information, develop targeted programs, and lobby for the adoption of appropriate policies;
- Promote the identification of schools and other educational institutions as sanctuaries and

places of peace in order to protect the right to education, which is vital not only for the well-being of the population but also for the establishment of peace, stability and development.³⁰



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Footnotes

¹ “Analyse de la situation de l’éducation en Irak” (Situation analysis of education in Iraq), *UNESCO*, April 2003, consulted online 26 August 2010, in French at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001308/130838f.pdf>. Available in English at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001308/130838e.pdf>

² Convention on the rights of the Child (<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>), Millennium development goals (<http://www.iauiraq.org/mdgs.asp>) and the objectives of the Education for All framework (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001202/120240e.pdf>).

³ World Food Programme, CFSVA, 2007.

⁴ United Nations Children’s Fund, MICS, 2006

⁵ Bernhard Schell, “Some Good News from Iraq”, IDN-In Depth News Analysis, Global Perspectives, 12 August 2010, consulted online 11 November 2010 at: <http://www.indepthnews.net/news/news.php?key1=2010-08-12%2013:42:55&key2=1>.

⁶ “Rapport mondial de suivi sur l’Éducation pour tous. Atteindre les marginalisés” (Education For All global monitoring report: Reaching the Marginalized), UNESCO, 2010, consulted online 4 October 2010 in French at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001875/187513F.pdf>. Available in English at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001866/186606E.pdf>

⁷ “Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2006”, UNICEF/COSIT/KRSO/MoH, 2006, consulted online 29 September 2010 at: http://www.childinfo.org/files/MICS3_Iraq_FinalReport_2006_eng.pdf.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Net enrolment rate in primary education is the number of children of official primary school age who are enrolled in primary education as a percentage of the total number of children in that age group.

¹⁰ “Directorate of Social and Educational Statistics 1990”, taken from: “Education in Iraq”, *Inter-Agency Information and Analysis Unit*, 2010, consulted online 28 September 2010 at: <http://www.iauiraq.org/reports/mdgs/Education-Factsheet-English-v2.pdf> and “Iraq Household Socio-Economic Survey 2007”, World Bank/COSIT/KRSO, 2007, consulted online 29 September at: http://iier.org/i/files/docs/Volume_1,_30_December_08.pdf.

¹¹ “Girls education in Iraq”, *UNICEF*, 2010, consulted online 1 October 2010 at: <http://www.ncci-library.org/jspui/bitstream/123456789/699/1/Girls%20Education-Banl.pdf>.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ World Bank/COSIT/KRSO IHSES 2007, taken from: “Iraq - 2010 Humanitarian Action Plan”, Consolidates Appeal Process, *United Nations*, 2010, consulted online 28 September at: <http://business.un.org/en/assets/d5798605-056e-4a28-a625-fb6ec089d887.pdf>.

¹⁴ “Iraq Household Socio-Economic Survey 2007”, World Bank/COSIT/KRSO, 2007, consulted online 29 September at: http://iier.org/i/files/docs/Volume_1,_30_December_08.pdf.

¹⁵ Data taken from: Mehdi Al-Alak, Amal Shlash et al., “National Report on the Status of Human Development in Iraq 2008”, *Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation et Baytal Hikma*, 2008, consulted online 4 October 2010 at: http://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/upload/Iraq/Iraq_HDR_English.pdf.

¹⁶ The Ministry of Human Rights reports the deaths of 340 professors and 446 university students between 2005 and 2007. Brendan O’Malley, “Iraq: Killing Academics Is a War Crime”, *University World News*, 9 November 2008, consulted online 4 October 2010 at: <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20081106155702414>.

¹⁷ United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), “Human Rights Reports”, May 2005 to December 2007, consulted online 4 October 2010 at: <http://www.uniraq.org/docsmaps/undocuments.asp#HRReports> and Working Group on the Protection of Iraqi Intellectuals, academics, teachers, students and educational institutions, consulted online 4 October 2010 at: www.unesco.org/fileadmin/unesco/...of...protection%academics.pdf.

¹⁸ “2008 Human Rights Report: Iraq”, *US Department of State*, 25 February 2009, consulted online 4 October 2010 at: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/nea/119116.htm>.

¹⁹ “Préparatifs pour la conférence internationale humanitaire sur les réfugiés et les déplacés en Iraq” (“Preparations for the international humanitarian conference on refugees and displaced in Iraq), *UNHCR*, 20 March 2007, consulted in French online 4 October 2010 at: <http://www.unhcr.fr/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=4acf418b20&query=irak>. Also available in English at: <http://www.unhcr.org/45ffb87b1f.html>

²⁰ “Education in Iraq”, *Inter-Agency Information and Analysis Unit*, 2010, consulted online 28 September 2010 at: <http://www.iauiraq.org/reports/mdgs/Education-Factsheet-English-v2.pdf>.

²¹ “Increased funding needed to ensure quality education in Iraq – UN”, *UN News*, 20 April 2010, consulted online 23 September 2010 at: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=34429&Cr=education&Cr1>.

²² The responsibility of decision making and the exercise of control of education lay at three levels of authorities: local authorities (kindergartens and primary schools), the Ministry of Education (secondary schools, general and vocational education, teacher training and curriculum development) and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (university management and the foundation of technical institutes).

²³ “Projet de descriptif de programme de pays. Irak” (Draft country programme document. Iraq), Economic and Social Council, United Nations, E/ICEF/2010/8, 2010, consulted online 18 November 2010 in French at: <http://www.unicef.org/about/execboard/files/E-ICEF-2010-PL13-F-IraqCPD.pdf>. Available in English at <http://www.unicef.org/about/execboard/files/E-ICEF-2010-PL13-E-IraqCPD.pdf>

²⁴ Mehdi Al-Alak, Amal Shlash et al., *Op. cit.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ “2008 Human Rights Report: Iraq”, *Op. cit.*

²⁷ United Nations Country Team- Mission Statement, “United Nations Iraq Assistance Strategy – 2008 – 2010”, consulted online 4 October 2010 at: <http://www.iq.undp.org/UploadedFiles/Sections/3758715c-3373-4726-acc5-4d74abd6dfe8.pdf>.

²⁸ “Girls education in Iraq”, *Op. cit.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ “Education Under Attack”, *UNESCO*, 2010, consulted online 16 September 2010 at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001868/186809e.pdf>.