

Resettling Expelled Villagers to Their Places of Origin—20 Years Later

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This paper reviews why two successive projects failed to resettle internally displaced persons to their former village in Northern Iraq, from which they had been forcibly removed 20 years before. It turned out that both the Regional Government and the implementing NGOs assumed that they were dealing with a routine reconstruction and resettlement project. As a result, they skipped the first two stages of institutional design expected under the AIC methodology, namely (a) the “appreciative” and learning stage which would have helped them better understand the project’s unfavorable enabling environment and hopefully led to a common vision of an acceptable, more complex project; and (b) the “influence” stage of design during which designers/ implementers would have realized the need for various institutional linkages so as to ensure availability of complementary design skills not found in a single NGO and implementation of complementary projects.

I. Historical Background

In the late 1970s, the Government of Iraq decided to force people who lived in the rural areas of the country’s Northern region to move to collective towns². Ultimately, more than 80 % of the Kurdish rural communities were displaced and more than 4,000 villages were destroyed³.

In March 1991, during the first Gulf war, a public uprising led by the Kurdish population and the Kurdish militia, succeeded in expelling the Iraqi Central Government from most of the Kurdish territory. To protect the Kurds from the risk of retaliation by the Iraqi army, the United Nations adopted resolution 688, which focused on the protection of the Kurds’ human rights and established as a Safe Haven a No fly Zone above the 36th parallel⁴.

After their victory, the two major Kurdish parties went on to fight each other, though they soon agreed to establish two separate Regional Governments, each responsible for administering its own geographical area. As the area’s main economic activity had been agriculture, the regional authorities with the collaboration of dozens of international NGOs and UN agencies, decided that it would be in the best interests of the local population now living in the collective towns, to be resettled back to their areas of origin where they could return to the rural life and agricultural activities they had been deprived of. This well-intended objective, however, faced major obstacles as explained in this paper, which examines the experience in Hawar, a village located

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² The problem for the Iraqi Government was that the Kurdish people living in the rural areas of Northern Iraq were supporting the guerillas who were fighting Central Government to protect Kurdish human rights and identity. Since they could not control thousands of villages, the Central Government decided to move all the villagers to collective towns by force. Collective towns were like huge camps to which between 10-50 villages were re-located, depending on the number of villages close to the camp area. The advantage for the officers of the Baath party was that they could then continuously watch people’s movements and restrict their contacts with the Kurdish fighters.

³ Kurdistan Regional Government, UK Representation, A Brief History of Iraqi Kurdistan, <http://www.kurdistan.ws/>

⁴ See footnote 3.

about 16 Km South East of the town of Hallabja, where there were a number of unsuccessful attempts to resettle the original inhabitants.

The first part of this paper describes the objectives and actual results of two of the reconstruction projects implemented in the area. Then, using the AIC methodology⁵, the paper diagnoses the problems that were encountered and led to the projects' failure and proposes an alternative design process for future similar projects.

II. The Hawar Resettlement Projects

The First project:

In 1993, an international NGO sent to Iraq two of their employees to make a list of the people who would be entitled to receive a construction package to rebuild their original house in the village. The agency had the following criteria for selecting the beneficiaries:

1. The family had to own the original house's plot of land on which the new house would be rebuilt;
2. The family had to agree to keep the house as their property for at least 6 months; and
3. They had to agree to actually live in the house.

The project was implemented very rapidly and 70 houses were built under the supervision of the NGO's staff. Six months later, the agency sent evaluators to verify whether people were living there as agreed. They discovered that some people were living there indeed, though others were not – but there was no follow up. Worse, within one year after their construction, most of the houses had been destroyed by their owners who preferred to re-sell them as building materials. Ultimately, just a few houses remained, and only one family decided to live in the village.

The Second project:

Two years later, in 1994-1995, an internationally funded domestic NGO visited the area to ask the displaced population whether they wanted to go back to their place of origin. Once again there was a selection process, and about 200 families originally from Hawar and two neighboring villages were given construction materials to rebuild their houses. The NGO's staff monitored the construction of the houses until their completion. Because of their negative experience under the first project, families raised some of the concerns that had discouraged them from resettling, and the NGO took these into account by building in the village a small health center for emergency cases, and a small 6 classroom school. Nevertheless, once the project was

⁵ The AIC methodology approaches institutional design in terms of both structures and processes. For the structural design the method considers: (i) the institution's appreciative (or enabling) environment which is comprised of factors such as physical, socio-cultural, political, economic, and institutional; (ii) its influenceable environment which refers to those external elements such as its clients, financiers, and suppliers whose support is essential; and (iii) its controlled (or internal) institutional environment. In terms of process, 3 design stages corresponding with each of these 3 environments are expected: (i) the development of agreed upon common goals; (ii) the design of the relationships among stakeholders; and (iii) the preparation of operational plans, creation of internal organizational relationships and incentives, and establishment of feedback mechanisms. See also <http://www.odii.com/> under the section "Papers", Wholeness: The Development of a New Philosophy and Model and Process of Organization, by William E. Smith, Ph.D. 2001; and The Design of Organizations for Rural Development, World Bank Staff Working Paper no. 375 March 1980, by William E. Smith, Francis Lethem, and Ben Thoolen.

completed, people once again moved out of their former village and only one person decided to reside there ⁶.

III. Diagnosis: Why did these two projects fail ?

Since the Kurdish Regional Government was supporting the idea of resettling and rehabilitating the villages destroyed by Iraq's Central Government, the foreign NGOs had assumed that the Regional Government was responding to the population's felt needs and did not verify the demand for, nor feasibility of, what turned out to be a very ambitious project. The following were indeed the projects' objectives:

- To resettle the displaced people to their places of origin;
- To revive the rural Kurdish communities;
- To resume their agricultural and livestock activities;
- To help people find sources of income despite the economic sanctions that had been imposed on Iraq; and
- To revive the traditional habits and ways of life of the Kurdish nation.

Actually, the process of resettlement was successful in a limited number of villages which were attractively located, namely they had access to electricity, water, and reasonable quality roads, and even more importantly, they were close to towns and cities where the resettled population could find employment. But such successes were the result of chance rather than design, as there had been no consultations with the former villagers. Indeed, the project cycle required only that the NGOs submit a proposal to the local authorities, with construction starting as soon as project approval was obtained.

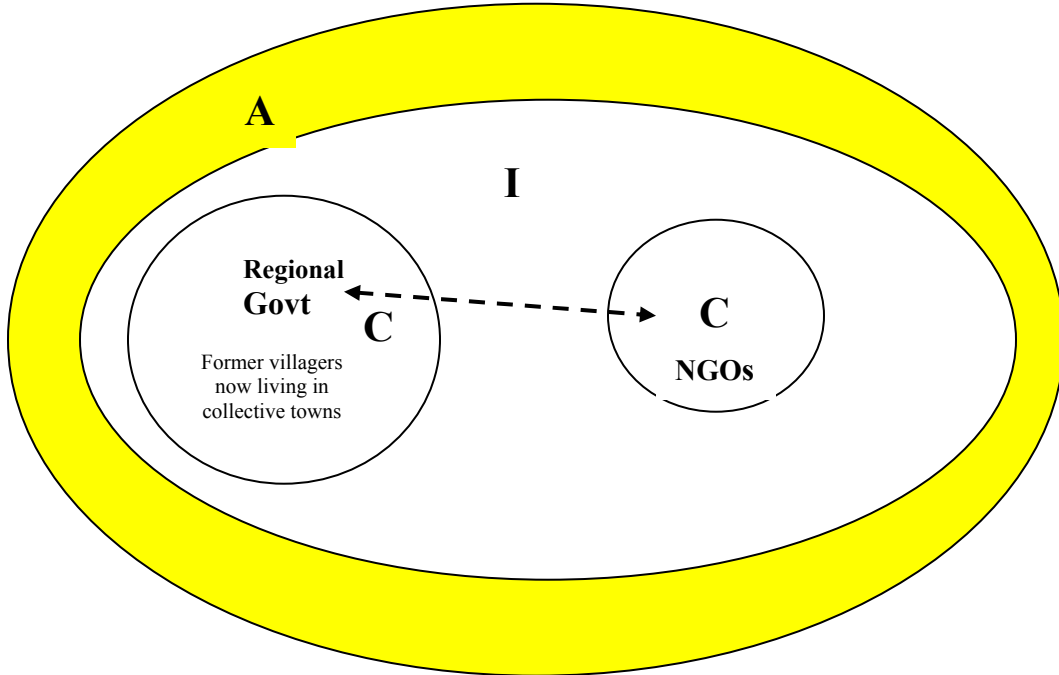
In the case of the domestic NGO, who should have benefited from the first project's experience, their approach seems to have been quite similar to that of the international NGO, except for some design improvements in response to unsolicited local requests. Thus, they too missed the key factors leading to project success or failure that competent feasibility or ex-post evaluation studies would have revealed.

Using the AIC framework, we can see that the project implementers were primarily concerned with ensuring proper coordination with the regional authorities, which were in their "influenceable" environment. In other words they assumed either that, because of their own worldwide (or country) experience, they knew what the villagers wanted and therefore did not have to consult with them, or that the local authorities had already consulted with the villagers and therefore knew exactly what needed to be done. As to the project's enabling/ policy environment that project designers and implementers should have appreciated, it seems that they failed to take account of it altogether.

The above frame of mind/ institutional approach can be represented graphically from the NGOs' viewpoint as follows:

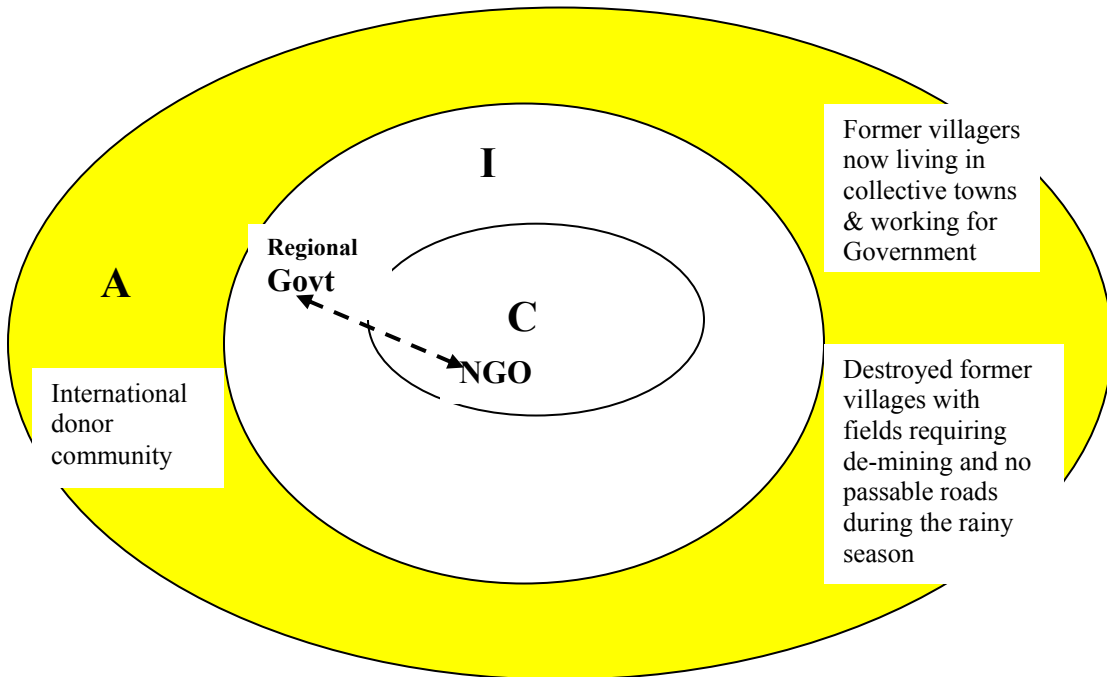
⁶ A third project, which consisted of the provision of one water tap per group of 10 to 20 families, was also implemented in Hawar in 1995. However, no records of the project's results could be located.

The single institutional partner model in isolation from the enabling environment



In contrast, the institutional reality should have been perceived by the NGOs as shown on the next chart and explained below:

The institutional reality in the field in relation with the NGOs



Let's now review in detail the design assumptions behind the projects' failure, starting with the "Appreciated" (or "Enabling") institutional environment.

Appreciated/Enabling Environment:

1. The NGOs assumed that the Regional Government project request and its objectives represented a consensus of the key stakeholders, and in particular that of the intended beneficiaries, when in fact, there was no client for the project as conceived. This problem occurred because neither the NGOs nor Government had identified the key stakeholders and consulted with them.
2. The projects' economic objectives were very ambitious, even though not perceived as such because, contrary to the usual reconstruction/ resettlement projects carried out immediately after a disaster, this project (i) was being implemented almost two decades later and (ii) was attempting to revive an agricultural sector that had been destroyed for a long time, and with people who had forgotten their agricultural traditions. Meanwhile, the design also overlooked the re-settled populations' loss of income from the urban jobs they would have to give up, and their immediate need for alternative sources of income.
3. The idyllic vision of going back to the past, to the vibrant rural life of the Kurdish communities, happy to run their own farms, raise livestock, etc, was an idea that no longer matched the reality as experienced by the former villagers now benefiting from the amenities of the collective towns.
4. More specifically in the case of Hawar, the rural resettlement plans were not built upon an appreciation that the following changes had occurred overtime:
 - In the past, the working age people were employed on their own farms, which were adequate to provide a living for their family, whereas today's working age population were civil servants living in the collective town who had no intention of giving up their jobs to go back to farming. Indeed, there had been no plans to establish government offices in Hawar. Furthermore, the farmlands, including irrigated lands, and most of the grazing lands were still mined and going back to work there would have entailed risking one's own and one's family's life.
 - Two decades before, there was one primary school with 3 classrooms in the village and it was adequate for the needs both because the population was not as large as it had become, and because people were not particularly concerned with their children's further schooling. However, by the time of the re-settlement, most of the children of the families in the collective town were going on to secondary schools, colleges and universities. Families did not want to risk the future of their children by going back to their former villages.
 - The village of Hawar lacked utilities, such as electricity and water supplies. In the past, women used to bring drinking water from streams miles away from their residences, whereas they now had access to water supplies inside their houses in the collective town, and didn't want to go back to the drudgery of the old days.
 - Finally, because the NGOs had only visited the area during the summer, which is the dry season, they had failed to realize that during the rainy season the access road from Hawar to the town of Hallabja became impassable – which once again would have undermined the welfare of the re-settlers.

Influenceable Institutional Environment

1. The NGOs assumed that the Regional Government was adequately representing all stakeholders and therefore there was no need for a mechanism for regular consultation of the beneficiaries and their active participation in project design and implementation.

2. The NGOs did not see a need to establish linkages/ coordination mechanisms with other external entities to get the necessary complementary resources or to implement complementary projects to ensure the viability of the village, such as repairing the road, connecting the village to the electricity system, or financing parallel de-mining and agricultural resettlement activities. This led to a lack of economic incentives to attract and retain the villagers in Hawar.
3. There was no information sharing between the successive project implementers and thus no learning from experience.

Controllable/Internal Institutional Environment⁷

The NGOs' expertise was essentially in carrying out efficiently and at low cost emergency reconstruction works immediately after a natural or man-made disaster had occurred. Thus,

- a. before starting construction, they did not expect their employees to re-assess the project concept or design, or to become familiar with a project's area or its history: their employees' task was to focus exclusively on implementation; and
- b. after completion of construction, they did not have the skills nor did they provide incentives to their employees to follow up; in fact, most of the construction supervisors were on short term contracts, as short as 6 months.

Not surprisingly, under these circumstances and such a narrowly defined mission, little effort was devoted to learning from the projects' ultimate impact.

IV. Recommendations and Suggested Alternative Design Process

This case illustrates the challenges of providing assistance to displaced populations when the assistance comes almost one generation after the events took place, and the danger of focusing primarily on action planning at the expense of the initial stages of institutional and project design.

Instead, under the disciplined AIC methodology, and even for apparently routine projects such as this one, **the first stage of design should always be one of learning and of verifying that there is an actual demand for the project on the part of its key constituencies/stakeholders.**

As we learned from this case, for the people who had been forcibly removed from the village of Hawar, two decades had elapsed, during which they and their children had become used to living in collective towns or close by, and had benefited from higher living standards than in their original village. In addition, the destruction of the village had not been limited to that of its physical infrastructure, but it also included other dimensions such as the mining of irrigated lands and grazing areas, and the loss of the plants that depended on irrigation water for their survival. Meanwhile, the village's population had grown considerably.

Furthermore, a fundamental feasibility criterion for any re-settlement project is that its beneficiaries should be at least as well-off as without the resettlement. In this case, while the project had obviously been well intended and aimed at improving the situation of people by reducing the risk of their becoming unemployed during a period when Iraq was facing economic sanctions, it remains that for the people to be resettled, the advantages of staying in the collective town were considerably higher than the risks and hardships of going back to their places of origin.

⁷ This section is based on conversations with the construction supervisors. The author did not have access to the NGOs' internal documentation.

Thus, if the NGOs and the Regional Government had made this comparison ahead of project implementation, they would have discovered that there was a lack of demand for the project as conceived. They would then have realized the profound difference between emergency assistance and assistance to displaced populations:

- a. in the first case, the emergency supply of humanitarian and reconstruction assistance is likely to respond to a genuine demand; whereas
- b. in the second case when considerable time has elapsed, such assumptions can no longer be made and a deeper understanding of the affected population's circumstances and needs will be necessary to determine the nature of the demand for projects.

That is why, under the AIC methodology, designers would have then chosen **an appreciative process** (such as a search conference or other culturally appropriate consultation methods that allows major stakeholders to freely express their views) **leading to formulation of a common vision of a desirable future**. In our case, such a future would probably not have been an exact replica of the past, since people had undergone major changes in their life and the new generations born in the collective town were unlikely to find it appealing to return to a past they had not known.

Assuming now that a common vision would have emerged from the first stage of design and that, prima facie, it would have been financially feasible, **the second stage of design under the AIC methodology** would require such steps as:

1. Bringing the stakeholders again together to look at the obstacles to achieving their vision and identifying a strategy to overcome them;
2. **Defining the institutional structures and agreeing on linkages and coordination mechanisms with other key external entities** including Regional Government in order to obtain the necessary complementary resources or projects, such as repairing the road, or connecting the village to the electricity system, and de-mining the fields; and
3. Agreeing on a process to select the NGOs or other agencies to assist in implementing the strategy, ensuring that they would have both the technical and the institutional/social competency as necessary to consult with the former villagers and involve them in the process of rebuilding right from the early conceptual stages of the project. In practice, since the resettlement task and revitalization of the village was far beyond the capacity of one NGO, a consortium of NGOs might have been preferred, including some humanitarian agencies and some rural development NGOs preferably familiar with the region.

Finally, it would have been only under the third stage of the AIC process, that the detailed planning of project implementation would have been carried out, including:

1. A proper phasing of the activities and definition with the implementing agencies and the villagers of their respective roles;
2. Creating a timely internal and external information exchange system; and
3. Strengthening the monitoring and evaluation system and ensuring that one of the NGOs would be responsible for overall long-term coordination.

Conclusion

This case is another reminder of the risks of external assistance without a design methodology that systematically takes account of the enabling environment and builds on local knowledge and experience. There are few simple, easy, or routine development projects.