

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

IRAQ

EIGHTEEN GOVERNORATES, ONE PLAN

Over the past five years, Iraq has become synonymous with violence, extremism and sectarian conflict. And while the conflict has undeniably had a devastating impact on Iraq's 30 million people – half of them children – it is also true that amidst the anger and despair there are millions of families simply wanting to restart their lives. For too many of these families, being able to rely on clean drinking water, sending children to school in safety, and shopping for the evening meal without fear of becoming another statistic in a senseless suicide attack remain out of reach.

In August 2008, UNICEF and its partners tried something new. Instead of accepting the *status quo* of what is too often seen as intractable conflict, teams in each of Iraq's 18 governorates reached out. For three weeks, meetings were held across the country with a broad spectrum of Iraqi opinion shapers and decision makers. Politicians, civil servants, religious leaders and members of Iraq's civil society came together to discuss issues affecting their own towns and villages, and those of their relatives and neighbours.

Their discussions were not easy. Issues debated included perceived freedom of movement and the impact of conflict; how effectively authorities and the humanitarian community had served Iraq's most vulnerable communities; and how safe people feel when they leave their homes. These questions were asked of each subdistrict of the country – over 300 in total. And, at the end of each of the meetings in the 18 governorates, a consensus was reached – an agreement prioritizing where UNICEF and its NGO partners would refocus humanitarian action over the coming months. In some of the most polarized, distrusting and volatile parts of Iraq, representatives of every major ethnic, religious and political persuasion *agreed*.

As a result, 57 subdistricts are now priority zones in which UNICEF and its NGO partners have started a proactive humanitarian assessment and response. Until recently, internally displaced persons and refugees would define Iraq's humanitarian profile, without questioning populations often in very vulnerable circumstances. Meanwhile, of the 25 million Iraqis who are neither displaced nor refugees, many are also experiencing severe shortages of essential social services. This stakeholder agreement provides the 18 governorate-based teams with a clear road map for action. Most encouragingly, of the 300-plus subdistricts identified, only seven were considered completely inaccessible to partners (three of which are in Baghdad). This means that, as the situation stands today, UNICEF and its partners have at least limited access to 98 per cent of Iraq's subdistricts – a huge step forward compared with one year earlier.

Over 43 communities are presently being assessed in Iraq's most impoverished and neglected areas. As soon as the evaluation is completed, the teams will engage everyone necessary to improve children's conditions and reduce their vulnerability to the crisis. Enabling families to access safe water, immunizing children against vaccine-preventable diseases, creating better learning conditions for Iraq's youth, and finding ways to protect children from abuse and exploitation are some of the issues being identified and of the solutions being sought, community by community, to preserve children's future. Once the teams have responded to immediate needs in those 43 areas, they will move on to the next priority communities... and the next...

Thanks to these efforts, hundreds of students learn again in schools that were rebuilt after being destroyed by the war; water tankering operations and hygiene education campaigns protect communities from cholera; and those who fled their homes after their villages were bombed have access to basic health care. Over the next 12 months, 360,000 more children and their families will benefit from the efforts of UNICEF and its humanitarian partners as they strive to reach the unreached.