

UNICEF Iraq

Update on the Situation
of Children in Iraq for Partners

April 2007



For every child
Health, Education, Equality, Protection
ADVANCE HUMANITY

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Representative's Overview

As the first quarter of 2007 draws to a close, Iraq's humanitarian emergency has reached devastating proportions, with children bearing the brunt of the crisis.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has estimated that from Jan-March 2007, an estimated 80,000 people were displaced because of violence and insecurity inside Iraq, bringing the total number of people displaced since the February 2006 Samara shrine bombing to over 720,000 people. The UN estimates that approximately 70 per cent of these are children and women.

Over half of all Iraq's displaced people are renting their own accommodation in new areas, and many more are staying with family and friends. This complex and unique dimension means that any plan to support the displaced must also consider the needs of communities providing shelter to displaced families.

UNICEF is responding to the situation on the ground. As of 5 February, Iraq was re-added to UNICEF's official list of emergency countries, a decision which instantly prioritizes Iraq for supply requisitions and other forms of support. A detailed plan of action for humanitarian assistance has been developed for internally displaced children and women, poor families in host communities and children stranded in conflict zones.

Whether displaced or trapped by violence, the toll on children is increasingly severe. Social services are being unbalanced by population movement, leaving some classrooms and hospitals over-crowded while others are missing students, patients and services providers. Normal elements of childhood are "on hold" in the worst affected areas, with children unable to go to school or even play with their friends without fear. The psychological fallout for children forced to live in such stressful conditions for long periods can only be imagined, leaving a lasting and damaging legacy as they move towards adulthood.

Education, water and sanitation and preventative health care services are all being gravely affected. Schoolchildren and teachers continue to show determination to make it to school across Iraq, albeit sometimes sporadically. But the quality of learning is a concern, with many schools having to hold double or even triple shifts to accommodate extra pupils arriving from other areas. Reports suggest that drop out rates are rising. UNICEF will assist the Ministry of Education to conducting a rapid assessment of school attendance rates in the coming months. In the meantime, we are helping to improve children's learning environment by providing learning materials and rebuilding school facilities. We are also focusing on providing alternative learning opportunities for those who have dropped out of the regular system.

Immunization rates are also on the decline, as insecurity curtails access to primary health care. We are particularly concerned that the number of children with no immunity to measles reached 1 million in April – more than enough to spark a major outbreak of this deadly childhood illness. UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO) will be helping the Government of Iraq to hold a Measles, Mumps & Rubella (MMR) mass immunization campaign for 3.9 million children starting 22 April, in an effort build up immunity and protect children – thanks to generous funding from the European Commission (EC).

Children are also increasingly in need of alternative sources of safe drinking water. National water and sanitation systems are suffering as a result of under-investment, electricity shortages and long-term damage to pipes and treatment facilities. UNICEF joined other UN Agencies this month in raising concerns that diarrhoea rates were rising in children, with an outbreak possible during the summer. UNICEF is pre-positioning millions of sachets of Oral Rehydration Salts (ORS) to help save lives should an outbreak occur. We will also shortly be resuming our water-tanking operation, which had to stop in March for the first time since 2003 because of funding shortages. More funds are urgently needed for this critical service, which reaches approximately 70,000 needy Iraqis per day.

UNICEF will be working hand in hand with other partners (particularly the Iraq Red Crescent Society, IRCS) to provide critical humanitarian relief to these children and their families, such as basic health kits (each for 1,000 children), water & sanitation kits, recreation kits and education kits.

We will also work to strengthen community social services in areas strained by the influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs). This includes advocacy with local governments and community leaders to ensure access to basic social services for all children. To make sure our programmes reach children as effectively as possible, we intend to expand our local operating and monitoring network and strengthen the capacity of our local offices.

Ironically, just as Iraq's crisis reaches a three-year peak, UNICEF is facing major funding shortfalls. While we are extremely grateful for news of an additional US\$24 million in this quarter - specifically US\$7 million contributed by Japan for health and nutrition programmes and US\$17 million, mainly from the EC, for a range of important projects - we are still far short of our anticipated needs for the year. An additional US\$29 million is required for emergency response through the end of August, in addition to US\$66 million for the overall country programme.

We are mobilizing resources where we can, including US\$2 million from internal sources for emergency response. But more funds are needed - at least \$20 million immediately - to enable vital humanitarian activities to continue.

UNICEF is working closely with other UN Agencies to maximize the amount of assistance reaching children. The UN is in the process of developing a Strategic Framework for Humanitarian Action in Iraq, which defines the main priorities for the organization's humanitarian assistance. This should be finalized shortly, although work for children is continuing full-steam ahead in the interim.

UNICEF is also calling on the international community to ensure that support for Iraq's basic social services is adequately reflected in all major global frameworks concerning Iraq - including the International Compact with Iraq which is now scheduled for launch on 3 May. Humanitarian support for Iraq, particularly that which focuses on children, has already saved lives and is helping to rebuild stricken communities. Now more than ever, our actions and deliberations on Iraq must have the interests of the Iraqi child - and therefore Iraq's future - at their heart.

Roger Wright
UNICEF Representative for Iraq

Key Emerging Issues

(i) Humanitarian Response

The number of newly displaced inside Iraq has reportedly reached 720,000 (UNHCR), which is 80,000 more than the total number estimated at the end of 2006. 70 per cent of the displaced are estimated to be children and women. For all displaced children, access to education and to safe water are presenting as primary and urgent needs, as well as protection for civilians.

UNICEF Iraq has conducted a comprehensive multi-sectoral needs assessment for assistance in response to the humanitarian crisis. US\$ 30.9 million will be urgently needed to meet the basic health, education, water, sanitation and protection needs of Iraq's displaced families and other vulnerable children for a period of six months.



UNICEF has mobilized US\$2 million in funding for its emergency response programme from its own internal resources; however, another \$10 million is urgently needed by the beginning of June.

UNICEF fully supports the new Strategic Framework for Humanitarian Action, which underlines the UN Country Team's joint responsibility to support the Government of Iraq and its neighbors.

(i) Health & nutrition:

Prevailing insecurity and the poor existing water supply and sanitation systems suggest a possibility of greater-than-normal outbreaks of diarrhoeal disease this year. Diarrhoea rates are already rising ahead of the May/June start of the diarrhoea season.

The number of children with no immunity to measles reached 1 million in April, due to a fall in national immunization rates precipitated by insecurity. About half of Iraq's districts (60 out of 116) are reporting immunization coverage of less than 80 per cent. A MMR vaccination campaign covering children between one and five years old is starting on 22 April.

Given the negative impact of insecurity on coverage for Polio National Immunization Days (NIDs) in the last quarter of 2006, measures have been taken to increase the outreach and coverage rate for the upcoming MMR campaign.



Reports from parts of Iraq seeing an influx of displaced families indicate that Primary Health Care Centres (PHCCs) are under pressure to serve larger numbers of people than ever before. This could impact the quality of care and deter vulnerable women from seeking care.

Several sources are reporting that hospital care for pregnant women and newborns is being compromised by an exodus of staff, insecurity and unavailability of supplies.

(ii) Education

In March children returned to school for the second half of the year in March, with no amelioration reported in circumstances hampering their schooling. Access to education for displaced children in northern, central and southern Iraq is a primary concern for emergency response.

Some 4.7 million Iraqi children are currently receiving essential learning materials. This initiative will contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning practices in the classroom. It will also alleviate some of the cost burdens of education especially for poor parents who will be encouraged to send their children, particularly girls, to school.

However, the number of children not attending school continues to concern. A recent survey supported by UNICEF estimates that at least 800,000 children were out of school in 2005/6, even before the current displacement and insecurity (63 per cent of them girls).



Drop-out rates are also increasingly outstripping enrolment rates as an issue affecting the quality of education, with many children able to attend school only sporadically.

Violent attacks on or involving schools continue to be reported periodically, deeply affecting family confidence in the safety of schoolchildren.

(iii) Water & Sanitation

The water and sanitation sector continues to be seriously under-funded, while there is a growing need for alternative sources of safe water apart from public networks which may be damaged and contaminated.

UNICEF's water tankering operation in Baghdad, which currently serves almost 70,000 people per day, had to be halted as of 1 March due to lack of funding – the first time this service has stopped in Iraq since 2003. Services are due to resume shortly for another six months. The Mayor of Baghdad has asked for the operation to continue for another 15-18 months, for which currently no further resources are available.

The Government of Iraq needs more support to mobilize additional resources for the water and sanitation sector, as well as to other basic social services.



Safe water is emerging as a primary concern for displaced families – in particular the estimated 45 per cent living without their own private accommodation (according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). Tankering extra water to areas with large displaced populations would support extra water needs but can not be a long term solution for overall safe water shortages.

(iv) A Protective Environment

A survey by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Government of Iraq notes that 30 per cent of Iraq's children are suffering psychological problems. Psycho-social care for children in the education system, within the community and at the family level is a priority for children, particularly the displaced and children who have lost family members due to violence. Displacement continues to affect children's protective environment – for children in host communities as well as children of displaced families. Families are under increasing stress (particularly those who have lost their primary breadwinner due to violence). There is also a higher risk of family separation due to displacement. As a result, children are more prone to abuse, exploitation and institutionalization.



The emergency has increased the challenges for monitoring the effectiveness of local projects. In general, there is a very real need for more reliable data reflecting children's protective environment, but strategies to collect such data remain extremely difficult to implement.

(vi) Monitoring and Evaluation

UNICEF's Situation Analysis of Children in Iraqi will be completed in April. Two external reviews are currently ongoing: an evaluation of the Integrated Community-Based Services Project (ICBSP) and a review of the past three-year emergency experience. Both are due to be completed in May.

A study on birth weight of all newborn babies delivered at Azadi and Zakho hospitals in Dohuk governorate was undertaken from October-December 2006. The final report of the study is underway and will be finalized in April.

(vii) Advocacy

Efforts are building to draw world attention towards Iraq's humanitarian crisis. UNICEF and other organizations are continuing to call for an urgent response to the emergency and – in particular – promote greater investment in basic social services within Iraq's own National Development Strategy.

The UN issued a joint statement between several UN Agencies on concerns regarding Iraq's ongoing safe water shortage. Efforts are ongoing to collect more detailed information on conditions for Iraqis in Syria and Jordan to advocate for their protection.



There are still very real dangers in promoting work being done by international organizations in Iraq, so the "low-visibility" policy for UNICEF operations remains in effect.

UNICEF Iraq in Action

Stopping measles outbreak: Preparations for the 22 April MMR campaign began in March, including micro planning, printing registers, provision of safety boxes, contracting transportation for 2036 mobile teams, supporting distribution of supplies (including vaccines) from Baghdad, sharing of social mobilization strategies and plans to respond to adverse events and addressing the needs of populations in hot spots.

UNICEF supported the training of 75 programme managers and health workers from hard-to-reach districts in the Kurdistan Region. UNICEF is also providing transportation for 30 immunization teams (over a period of four months) working in those districts, to ensure that all under-five children are properly immunized

Support to the displaced: UNICEF is continuously evaluating the needs of some of the most vulnerable displaced families identified through either UNICEF facilitators or the IRCS, as well as assisting the IRCS to strengthen their programmatic and operational capacity. 40 basic health kits containing basic drugs, medical supplies and equipment sufficient for 1,000 people for three months were distributed to PHCCs in the Lower South governorates of Missan, Samawa, Thiqr, and Basra. In addition, midwifery and obstetrical kits were distributed to IDP affected areas in the Kurdistan Region – to strengthen capacity of local health services.

Preventing Diarrhoea: in collaboration with WHO, UNICEF is preparing a plan of action to respond to potential diarrhoea outbreaks expected from May – September 2007. 150,000 sachets of ORS have been pre-positioned in various locations in Iraq and an inventory of ORS availability throughout the country has been prepared. ORS and Zinc for diarrhoea treatment are being procured for delivery in May/June. Additionally, more than 150 doctors and paramedical staff were trained, while another 200 will be trained in April/May on diarrhoea case management.

Integrated Community-Based Services Project (ICBSP): Rehabilitation is ongoing in the 20 remaining schools, out of 110 schools covered under the ICBSP. All ICBSP schools are being provided with sanitation kits and essential sports and recreation kits. Supplies reaching schools within this project include student desks and chairs, sanitation kits, blackboards and recreational kits. The process and outcome are being watched carefully for lessons learned for the expansion of the ICBSP across the country.

Early Childhood Development (ECD): 100 ECD Emergency kits were distributed to kindergartens in different Governorates for piloting. Initial feedback on the evaluation of the kits from the Ministry of Education (MoE) is very positive; MoE are reporting that the kits are having a therapeutic effect on children who are experiencing distress and anxiety due to prevailing insecurity. Furthermore, 750 emergency ECD kits will be distributed to kindergartens and children of first grade in primary schools.

Rebuilding schools: Rehabilitation work is ongoing in 25 schools while 24 schools are still under bidding. The school rehabilitation project, managed jointly by UNICEF and UNHABITAT, aims to restore 160 schools in 18 governorates benefiting 80,000 school-aged children.

Delivery of learning materials: Essential learning materials for 4.7 million primary school children – exercise books (1,510,096 sets of eight), pencils and other materials are currently being delivered to various governorates and distributed to schools nationwide. By end of March, 90 per cent of the total ordered Learning Materials were delivered at the governorate level.

Delivering safe water: UNICEF will resume its operation tankering 40 million litres of safe water on average per month to Baghdad, reaching in the range of 70,000 people per day in ten districts, including schools and six hospitals.

Juvenile Justice: Training took place in March for 30 key decision makers from the Juvenile Care Department. The team looked at good practices in alternative justice and community based rehabilitation.

UNICEF SUPPLIES BY SECTOR

15 Jan-15 April 2007 (items in yellow indicate locally-contracted support)

Item	Rationale	Reach	Cost
HEALTH			
AI social mobilization materials: 2 million educational leaflets and 240,000 AI educational posters plus Kurdish and Arabic adverts on TV	For PHCCs and schools nationwide.	Nationwide, for one year.	\$1.4 million
MMR registry books: 12,000	To support MMR campaign starting 22 April.	MMR campaign to cover 3.9 million children age 12-59 months	\$1 million total for MMR
Vehicles for MMR teams: contracting 2036 vehicles for all mobile teams	To support MMR campaign starting 22 April	MMR campaign to cover 3.9 million children age 12-59 months	\$1 million total for MMR (as above)
OPV: 5 million doses	To Baghdad Central Vaccine Storage Facility to replenish MoH stocks after polio NIDS in Dec 2006	4.8 million children >5 (last NIDS reached approx 4.4 out of 4.8 million <5)	\$700,000
Wheat Flour Fortification Premix: 150 metric tonnes	For national WFF campaign, for flour mills	Nationwide	\$300,000
Provision of therapeutic feeding: 80 metric tonnes therapeutic milk.	To manage severe malnutrition in 72 Nutrition Rehabilitation Centers - NRCs thought out the country, with special emphasis on southern governorates.	1.5 million children	\$200,000
Potassium iodate: 5000 kg drums	For national iodization of salt	nationwide	\$86,250
Pediatric and medical emergency supplies: including gauze, cannulas, bandages, needles, medical tape, gloves.	For emergency maternal and pediatric care to four main general hospitals in Baghdad (Karkh & Risafa)	Unknown	\$85,000
Ferro-Folic Acid tablets: 25 million	To prevent and treat anaemia were delivered to the Ministry of Health (MoH) warehouse for distribution to all PHCCs and maternity hospitals across the country.	Nationwide	\$61,000
Anthropometric tools: 250 sets of weight/height measures and scales	For Nutrition centres & PHCCs in 36 most food insecure districts.	1.5 million people	\$40,000
Basic Health Kits: 40 (containing basic drugs, medical supplies and equipment)	For Primary Health Care Centres (PHCCs) in the Lower South Governorates of Missan, Samawa, Thiqr, and Basra, where there are large numbers of IDPs	Each sufficient for 1000 people for three months, reaching 40,000 in total.	\$20,000

ORS: 100,000 packets in Baghdad for the Lower South and 50,000 for KRG	To prepare for a possible diarrhoea outbreak in the summer. More supplies are arriving, in May (unknown number) with Zinc.	150,000 children, mostly <5	\$7,500
Vehicles for emergency polio mop up (Baghdad)	To respond to vaccine-derived polio case:	16,000 children >5	\$3,500
Midwifery Kits: 20	For support to IDPs in KRG	20,000 (each kit 1,000)	\$3,500
EDUCATION			
Education Kit (School Bags, Rulers, Pencils, Sharpeners, Erasers, Exercise Books, Coloring Pencil, Drawing books (printed and delivered from Baghdad)	As part of distribution of basic education materials for 4.7 million primary schoolchildren	4.7 million primary schoolchildren	\$15 million total
School rehabilitation: 11 schools in Wassit completed	Part of school rehabilitation project managed jointly by UNICEF and UNHABITAT for 160 schools. Work is now ongoing in 25 schools while 24 schools are still under bidding.	Project aims to reach 160 schools in 18 governorates benefiting 80,000 school-age children	\$980,000
Emergency ECD Kits - 100	Pilot project in various governorates to help children deal with the effects of insecurity. 750 emergency ECD kits will be distributed to kindergartens and children of first grade in primary schools next month.	One per kindergarten (100 pupils) - 10,000 children	\$36,000
WES			
Rehabilitation of water distribution network: completed in Al Zubair, Basrah.	To improve access to safe water in Al Zubair district of Basrah governorate	40,000 residents of Hai Al-Askari area.	\$1 million
Water tankering: 53 million litres Baghdad	Project reached poor communities in 10 districts, including 6 hospitals and schools	Approximately 70,000 per day	\$123,000
PROTECTION			
Mine Risk Education (MRE) training for teachers and community leaders.	Part of Iraq's Mine Risk Awareness project	Approx 400 children and 150 adolescents, mainly shepherds, in 10 villages.	\$250,000
Total			
Supplies delivered	>\$17.5 million		
Locally contracted support/capacity building	>\$3.6 million		

Looking ahead:

- The Iraq **MMR vaccination campaign** will start on 22 April. Training for 200 health workers on **diarrhoea case management** will continue in April/May.
- A feasibility study will begin to look at the **methodologies for monitoring violations of child rights**, and an initiative to develop Iraq specific **psycho-social care packages** will begin in April. A consolidated package of revised MRE materials is being prepared for the **launch of a new MRE campaign**.
- The Iraq **Progress Report towards achieving 'A World Fit for Children' (WFFC)** is currently under preparation. The report will cover progress made in Iraq with regards to the implementation of the World Fit for Children (WFFC) goals, whose targets are also milestones to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).
- On 23 April UNICEF will launch its **Consolidated Donor Report** in Amman, as an opportunity to recognize donor contribution to achievements for children in 2006, and focus on the needs for 2007. Iraqi children will participate in the launch.

Funding status:

To date UNICEF has received only 11 per cent of \$20 million needed for the most urgent needs in Iraq. The response capacity so far is critically under-funded and more funds are urgently needed.

Real Lives: Stories of Hope from Iraq

Counting Every Drop – Delivering Safe Water in Baghdad



UNICEF/Iraq-07: Faleeha and her family struggle to access safe water in their Baghdad slum

For thousands of Iraqis living in crudely built cabins littering the Baghdad slums of Sab' Qsoor, a safe drink of water used to be almost impossible to find. The area has only a few pipes to supply municipal water, and many of them are broken or contaminated. As a result, most families have no alternative to stagnant streams, puddles or uncovered wells to quench their thirst.

"We tried to buy water from private tankers but it was too expensive to keep up," says Faleeha, 44 years old mother of six children, "It cost us 1000 Iraqi dinars (equivalent to 78 cents) for just 200 litres. This is enough to drink but not to wash. My children often went to school without even washing their faces."

Sabiha, who lives next door to Faleeha, faced a similar struggle. Her children would regularly walk across town to fetch water from a ditch. The reward for their long trek was, more often than not, illness brought on by diseases which thrive in untreated water sources.

"One of my sons suffered from acute diarrhoea and had to stay a whole month in the hospital, she says. "It affected the rest of my family because I had to stay with him all the time."

A land between two rivers

Safe water should be available to everyone in Iraq. The country is blessed with two abundant natural water sources: the ancient Tigris and the Euphrates rivers. But national water networks have suffered grievously as a result of Iraq's long economic deprivation, and allowed to fall into disrepair.

Even before the 2003 Iraq war, millions of people were struggling with broken pipes and faulty systems. But four years later, Iraq's water problems have multiplied.

In the chaotic aftermath of conflict Iraq's main pumping stations and water-treatment plants were stripped of vital equipment by looters. Acts of sabotage damaged infrastructure even further. Municipal water became dirty and contaminated – exposing children to dangerous and health-sapping waterborne diseases. Diarrhoea, a common consequence of drinking unsafe water, is already the second biggest killer of Iraq's young children, and contributes significantly to malnutrition rates.

To help the most deprived families, UNICEF launched a water tankering service in April 2003. Trucks full of safe drinking water were sent daily to the most deprived areas of Baghdad and Basra. Last year, UNICEF tankers were reaching approximately 120,000 people per day in Baghdad, delivering 400 million liters of safe water to ten residential areas, five schools and six main hospitals – as well as to a growing number of displaced families.

Sab'Qsoor was one of the areas visited by the UNICEF tankers, bringing 1000 litres for each family every other day. For the residents, the sight of the tankers on the street meant another day free from the fear of diarrhoea.

"I used to drink from a well, which my family dug before the war," says 13 year-old Ahmed. "The water was salty and I used to suffer from stomach pain. Now I am drinking the water distributed by tankers which tastes good and I am not suffering from stomach ache anymore."

Dr. Abid, who has worked for years at the local health centre, noticed a steep drop in the number of people seeking treatment for diarrhoea after the water tankering service started. "We have not seen outbreaks of dysentery or typhoid in my neighbourhood," he says. "It is a blessing for these poverty-stricken people."

A service under threat

But water tankering services may not be able to continue in the capital city. Funds for the operation have run out. As of March, UNICEF water tankers are no longer visiting Sab'Qsoor.

'Water-tankering is usually only a short-term solution for the aftermath of emergencies," says Vinod Alkari, Chief of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for UNICEF Iraq. "But Iraq is still facing a growing humanitarian crisis. If people are cut off from this critical service it will push them to the edge of desperation and risk the health of their children."



UNICEF/Iraq-03/Noorani: UNICEF water-tankering services reach families in the aftermath of the Iraq war

UNICEF is asking for support to continue Iraq's water tankering operations for another 12-18 months. In the meantime, UNICEF is working with Iraq's government

and other United Nations partners to boost Iraq's investment in the water sector and improve its capacity to meet the needs of its own population.

For Faleeha, Sabiha and the other mothers of Sab'Qsoor, water tankering means more than safe water to drink. It gives them hope that they have not been forgotten, and that someone is still caring about their needs.

"God has sent UNICEF to save us with a free water supply," Sabiha says. "I do not want to send my children out of the home for water again."

The Journey Back to the Classroom – Eman's story



*UNICEF/Iraq-07/Sabah Arar
Eman works for her primary
school certificate in Wassit,
southern Iraq*

In a small classroom in the hot and dusty southern Iraqi governorate of Wassit, 22 year-old Eman is bent over her books. The stifling air is making it hard to concentrate, the room is crowded and the warm afternoon is drawing to a close, but she is determined to finish the lesson. She knows the few hours she spends here could determine the course of the rest of

her life. This is Eman's second chance to finish primary school, 12 years after she thought she had had to leave learning behind forever.

The journey back to the classroom has been the most challenging of Eman's life. Born into a poor family, Eman left school at just 10 years old to help her mother manage the house and look after her younger siblings. She married while still a teenager – often the only option available to Iraq's poor and vulnerable girls in need of financial support and protection.

But in 2004, life took a tragic turn. Two weeks after Eman gave birth to her first baby, her husband kissed her goodbye and left to buy medicine from the local pharmacy. Their daughter had been born with a physical disability and needed treatment. He never returned. Three weeks later, his body was found in a local morgue – another casualty of the indiscriminate violence fracturing Iraq's families.

"I did not know what to do," says Eman. "I married at 17 and had no means of support other than my husband. My daughter Shereen was just 13 days old and I feared for our future."

Eman returned to her family, but found little relief there. Household resources were already stretched to the limit, with nine people squeezing into one small apartment. Eman's father and brothers were all jobless. The family's only income was generated by her mother, who worked day and night as both a seamstress and a midwife to make ends meet.

One day, Eman and her parents received a visit from Ms. Hana, the principal of the local girls' school, who had a surprising proposition.

“She told us about a new learning opportunity supported by UNICEF, called the Accelerated Learning Programme,” Eman says. “It was for boys and girls who are working or have family problems preventing them from joining regular school. Other girls in the neighbourhood had been talking about this programme, and I hoped so much that I could join.”

A second chance to learn

The Accelerated Learning Programme (ALP) is an innovative learning catch-up initiative offering a second chance to young people who left the education system prematurely to attend lessons outside normal school hours and even sit for their final exams. Launched by UNICEF and the Ministry of Education in 2005, the ALP has become one of Iraq’s most successful and inspiring education initiatives. Over 14,000 young people in 2006 passed their primary and intermediate exams thanks to the ALP. In 2007, 22,000 are enrolled in the programme.



*UNICEF/Iraq-07/Sabah Arar
Many ALP students are married with children.*

Non-formal learning opportunities such as ALP are a crucial alternative for many of Iraq’s young people. Iraq’s education standards have been declining since the mid-1990s as a result of years of economic deprivation and chronic under-investment. Most of the children who leave school early are girls. And with the current violence and displacement putting even more pressure on families, attendance rates are falling all the time.

At first, Eman’s mother was not comfortable with the idea of sending her widowed daughter back to school. But Ms. Hana did not give up, patiently explaining the importance of not missing this chance to get basic school qualifications.

“She was so dedicated to her profession that she visited all houses where girls lived who were not in school, convincing reluctant parents to enrol their daughters,” Eman says with a smile.

Eman is one of the lucky ones, empowered thanks to Ms. Hana’s persistence to go back to school for the first time in 12 years. Her “class” contained students of all ages, some of them also mothers of young children. ALP classes start at 1pm and finish at 5pm, making them more suitable for young women who have children to look after or morning chores to do. Students are provided with basic educational materials such as stationery, textbooks and backpacks. Eman’s school even has a security guard to help the girls feel safe inside and outside the classroom.

Reaching for a better future

Eman and her fellow students cherish this second chance. They never miss an ALP class. All of them have now graduated onto the intermediate curriculum. The ALP is helping them get critical qualifications, giving them support to cope with difficult and sometimes traumatic life events and boosting their self esteem.

Now that Shereen is two years old, Eman knows she must strive to secure her future. For the first time in years, she believes this might be possible.

“The ALP is my golden chance,” she says. “Today I hope that I can obtain a normal school degree that helps me find a decent job. I can relieve the burden on my mother and give my daughter a good future, something I could not have achieved without a school certificate.”

And what might that future hold? Eman is as focused on her ambitions as she is on her lessons.

“I want to be a teacher when I finish my studies,” she says. “Teachers have a special standing in the community. My father, who is illiterate, says teachers hold the lantern that illuminates the way for the generations. The ALP is just such a lantern for me and my daughter.”

About UNICEF in Iraq

UNICEF has been on the ground in Iraq since 1983, working to bring all Iraqi women and children the essentials of a better life. Today UNICEF's programmes are reaching millions of children across the breadth of Iraq with a package of critical care – helping to improve basic health services, ensure a quality education, rebuild water and sanitation systems and protect children from abuse, violence and exploitation. Every day, UNICEF's national network of staff and partners is providing vital humanitarian assistance to families in crisis and supporting reconstruction and recovery efforts. Even in the most challenging conditions, Iraq's children can still count on UNICEF to deliver for them.

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