

Building Democracy

Under Saddam, the Iraqi people had no say in their government. Now the U.S. is helping them take charge of their own affairs.

A key element of U.S. assistance is to help Iraqis learn to make decisions at the grass roots level, rather than depend on the central government to make them. The devolution of power from the capital down to the smaller cities, towns, villages and neighborhoods is giving Iraqis a sense of responsibility for their own affairs, something they have not had for many decades.

New local councils, parent teacher associations, NGOs, human rights organizations, and environmental societies are giving people a voice in their own affairs and a say in how they are governed.

Iraqis have shown they support these projects, often matching funds and providing services. Because they are directly involved in process, they are more able to protect them from corruption or co-option by traditional, non-democratic forces.

Karkh District Council

A man in a sport shirt energetically shouted his opinions while a turbaned cleric, three women, and other members of a district council listened as Iraqis met in Baghdad for the first time in their lives to explore democracy last September.

One council member, who worked in a bank before the downfall of the regime in April, said that USAID made it possible for the new councils to form and begin to take a role in running the city's affairs.

"I saw that Americans are here to help us and take us from the pits," she said. "Saddam the criminal did nothing for us. The Americans gave us food and gave us elections in the neighborhood. The people chose me to be on the council."

Among the topics they debated were how to hire an administrator, how much to pay as salary, and how the group could apply for a



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More than 80% of Iraq's adult population has been engaged—either directly or indirectly—in democracy or governance at the local level because of U.S. programs.

Mokhtars (municipal registrars) from a governate prepare for elections to a new district council.

October '03

- 1 ▲ 3 million kids vaccinated
- 2 ▲ Schools open
- 3 ▲ School supplies for 3.3 million delivered
- 4 ▲ Schools open
- 5 ▲ Pre-war level of electricity passed
- 6 ▲ School supplies convoy attacked
- 7 ▲ Agricultural program begins
- 8 ▲ 1,600 schools rehabilitated
- 9 ▲ 235 CAP projects completed
- 10 ▲ Currency exchange begins
- 11 ▲ Rockets hit Al-Rasheed Hotel
- 12 ▲ Iraqi Fulbright program restarted
- 13 ▲ Global Donor Conference pledges \$32.2 billion
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Ben Barber/USAID



A council member stands in front of an animated meeting of a district council as it debated hiring an adminis-

trator and buying a computer. At first scorned as a woman by some members, the council later elected her

to represent the district on the city council.

computer from the city government.

U.S. Army Civil Affairs teams and USAID's contractor Research Triangle Institute, working with the CPA, organized meetings of local citizens in 88 Baghdad neighborhoods and hundreds more around Iraq. The members were selected from neighborhood leaders, businessmen, clerics, teachers and others seen by their neighbors as leaders or people of good character. The local councils in turn elected representatives to district councils and those in turn elected representatives to the city councils in Baghdad and elsewhere.

Under Saddam Hussein, the Ba'ath Party ruled by fear. There was little chance for independent local government or civil society. Now, new council and groups are being formed and new laws and institutions are under way.

For democracy to take root, the local councils must be seen as representative and able to provide for the community's basic needs. USAID worked with the councils to restore basic services and create jobs. It taught citizen leaders and government officials to respond to community needs and promoted

wide participation in public decisions about the use of public funds and provision of services. Nearly 700 local, city and state councils have been established, and more than 2,000 community projects have been completed or are underway throughout the country.

As a result, more than three-quarters of the population, either directly or indirectly, have been engaged in democracy at the local level. Now Iraqis are beginning to devise solutions to problems in their communities, building skills in community decision-making, and learning how to resolve or lessen conflicts peacefully.

To help explain how democratic meetings work, a former official from Colorado was asked to write a guide to running local government. It was translated into Arabic and distributed to all members of local councils, explaining how to run a meeting, encourage people to speak and contribute, resolve disagreements and reach decisions through compromise—all vitally needed skills.

The local councils are producing a new group of leaders able to participate in higher levels of government. For example, after one

Iraqi was selected to join her local or neighborhood council in Baghdad, the group's members voted to send her as their representative to the district council—the next higher level of government. This body—at first hostile to a woman achieving such high rank—later recognized her leadership qualities and voted to send her to the Baghdad City Council. Indeed, many of the new leaders chosen by the local council process can be expected to be elected to higher office when national elections are held in 2005.

At the district council meeting, the Iraqi experiment in democracy seemed to be running off the tracks when a couple of council members began shouting their opinions around the table, appearing to be angry enough to come to blows. However, one council member explained that this was only theatrics and would not disrupt the process.

"Don't worry—that is the Iraqi way," she said with a knowing smile.

In fact, the shouting soon gave way to constructive debate; the council agreed on some issues and deferred others before it adjourned peacefully.

Results

- **Local advisory councils formed** in 16 governates, 78 districts, 192 city and sub-districts and 392 neighborhoods.
- **Provided the local councils with small budgets to spend on projects** such as fixing schools, traffic controls or public health. Councils also advise the CPA about the area's needs.
- **Local councils select a few of their members to represent the neighborhood in district councils** with responsibility for larger portions of cities and towns.
- **The district councils in turn appoint one or two members to represent the districts on the city council.**
- **The advisory councils provide Iraqis with their first chance to experience grassroots democracy** and learn how to debate and compromise in order to achieve results.
- **Councils require all elements of Iraq's diverse society to work together for the common good:** men, women, Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds and other groups.

▲ New currency arrives at banks

▲ Mosul's 100,000 jobs project begins

▲ First bulk cargo ship arrives at Umm Qasr.

▲ Accelerated Learning Program funded

▲ CPA takes over UN Oil for Food program

▲ US/Iraqi Education Cooperative Agreements