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## Improving the environment in poor neighbourhoods through community participation

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**ACCESS TO SANITATION AND SAFE WATER:  
GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS AND LOCAL ACTIONS**

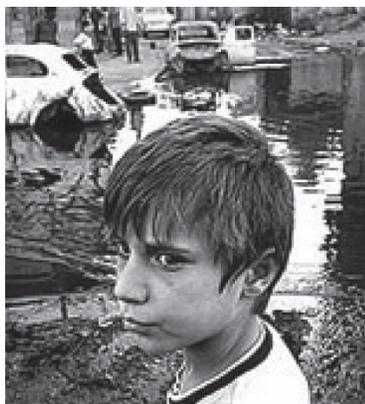
**Improving the environment in poor neighbourhoods  
through community participation**

*B. Shukur, Iraq*

*The provision of public and social services in Iraq had always been the responsibility of the central Government. The whole dimension of these services underwent dramatic change as a result of many years of sanctions; the local governments had no longer been able to meet the basic needs (housing, water supply, sanitation, solid waste collection, etc). To put the concept of community participation into practice, a pilot scheme (Baghdad Neighbourhood Rehabilitation project) of essential remedial measures had been undertaken (1999-2003) in four low-income neighbourhoods characterized by severe dilapidation of the living environment and services. This scheme (funded by UNDP, UN-Habitat, and EC) aimed at improving the living conditions in these areas through the support of communities and local municipalities. Rehabilitation works were conducted to promote the concept of community participation and train the residents on self-management and local leadership to sustain these services and reduce the overburden on the municipalities.*

**Background**

The effect of the breakdown or unavailability of public services in highly concentrated urban areas was dramatic, and manifested itself into sewage flooding, disruption of health services, garbage collection, scarcity of potable water and poor education services. Combined with low family income and huge unemployment rates, this situation soon translated itself into miserable living conditions, recurrence of vandalism.



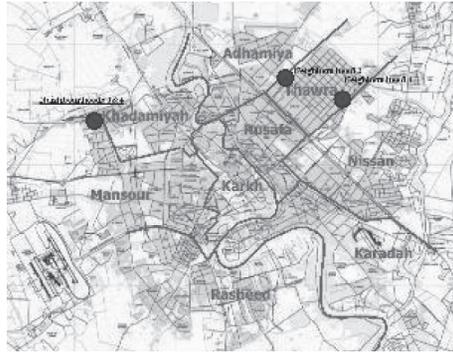
**Photograph 1. Children and sewage**



**Photograph 2. Garbage everywhere**

**Project's overall objective**

The project was initiated to halting the degradation of the living conditions in deprived urban neighborhoods in Baghdad through the active involvement and participation of their communities in the rehabilitation process by introducing community-based approaches in the process of public services management. Initially, UN-Habitat, through its local team, started the pilot project in two neighbourhoods: Al Habibia complex/Thawra city (10,000 people); district 460/Al Shulla city (2,000 people). The project was extended in 2000 to cover; Al-Talibia complex (6,500 people); and another block in district 460 with (2,000 people).



**Figure 1. Neighbourhood locations**

### **Implementation strategies**

At the beginning, the project was confronted by a couple of obstacles, such as; winning the trust of the communities and bring them together with their local municipality as they had resorted to apathy and blamed the municipalities for the dilapidation of their living environment; sensitizing the communities on the benefits of community participation was not simple and could not be done rapidly as they had been enjoying full services in the past which made it more difficult to sensitize the communities on the benefits of community participation; changing attitudes within the municipalities' staff and convincing the local municipalities, that with the participation of communities their work will be less, easier and more rewarding and that resources directed to those communities, would be utilized effectively and efficiently; the municipalities limited resources in terms of manpower and machinery.

Thus, Supported by a local structure of cooperative societies and municipality focal points, the implementation of the project followed a pronged strategy that included:

### **Community mobilization and awareness raising**

Workshops and meetings were organized for the communities, in order to involve them from the beginning in the rehabilitation of their neighborhoods, and participate in the identification and the prioritization of the issues to be tackled, together with the cooperative societies and the municipality focal points. Their awareness was also raised on the necessary measures to take in order to maintain their living environment. These workshops contributed to build the confidence of the communities towards the municipality in its efforts for the rehabilitation of the public services in these areas. Local institutions (women and youth unions) were very instrumental in supporting the project team in persuading the communities to approach and accept the municipalities as partners, and building mutual trust between them. The project committed itself to the goals of gender equality in human settlement development, and ensured the participation of gender representatives from women's stakeholders groups in all the steps of the project cycle and especially in decision making. School teachers also played a big role in these workshops and in conducting door-to-door surveys.



**Photograph 3. Hot discussions**

**Rehabilitation of public infrastructures**

The project first attended to the rehabilitation of potable water and sewage pumping stations, which contributed to building the confidence of the communities. Sites were cleared from garbage and sewage flooding, and certain areas were converted into playgrounds and amusement parks at the request of the communities and with their participation. Public lighting was re-installed, which contributed to providing more security to these neighbourhoods, and several roads were also paved by the project.

**Strengthening and empowerment of cooperative societies**

The cooperative societies have a major role to play in the improvement of the living environment and the rehabilitation of the public services. Established by the project, they are the link with the municipalities, through which the communities can voice their concerns. They are also service societies and are entrusted the coordination and/or the charge of diverse tasks that are within their capabilities, such as garbage collection and cleaning of streets. Their strengthening was therefore essential, the project attended to their needs by providing them with income-generating facilities and tools. The cooperatives are now in charge of the management of amusement parks and of the small shops and market stalls provided under the project to be rented, and, in some areas, run training courses in sewing. The generated income is then used to service the communities.

**Coordination and involvement of other UN agencies**

The project coordinated with UNICEF to carry rehabilitation of educational and health institutions within the target neighbourhoods, thus, six primary schools and a Primary Health Care Centre were rehabilitated in Al Shulla and Al Talibia.

**Solid waste management**

A solid waste consultant was provided by the municipality to identify the problems in solid waste disposal, to draft recommendations for improvement, and to look at recycling as a source of income. Following the recommendations that stemmed from the experiments conducted, for example in Al Habibia (figure 1) reflected high percentages of organic material with a good percentage of plastics. These outcomes encouraged the project to start with a solid waste management programme, aiming at; reduction of tons of waste land filled annually; increase the percentage of residents, and various institutions that would participate in recycling programmes. Undertaken steps were:

- Coordination with the local municipalities to provide the co-operative societies with tractors and wagons to collect solid waste at household level with the provision of 10,000 garbage plastic bags to be equally distributed among the households on monthly bases.
- Encouragement of at source separation, where special machines to trim the plastics that are collected from solid waste. The plastic grains would then be sold for recycling to the huge number of available plastic factories.
- Constructed a special location for a solid waste composting, unfortunately it was not completed due to the 2003 war.

**Addressing people with special needs**

The project addressed people with special needs whom were living in extreme poverty, income generation tools (sewing machines, shoe repair machines, shacks) were provided to them in order to ensure them with sustainable livelihoods. In addition, the project also coordinated with the Community Based Rehabilitation project that is funded by UNDP to provide others with job opportunities within their programme.

**Rehabilitation of other water and sanitation facilities in Baghdad**

To support the Baghdad municipality, additional funds were allocated to the project to extend its activities to cover the rehabilitation of other water and sanitation facilities in Baghdad (outside the neighbourhoods), these facilities included conventional and compact water treatment plants, water pumping stations, sewage pumping stations, sewers, quality control laboratories, etc.

**Project achievements**

Within the targeted neighbourhoods, the project managed to; increase the access to safe drinking water; decrease sewage flooding; have a solid waste collection and disposal system in place; provide healthier schools

and kindergartens and health centres; provide decent playgrounds for children and sport fields for the youth. The visual evidence of the improved environment were very clear to other neighbourhoods and they started asking to be include in future projects, unfortunately war started in 2003 and their dreams disappeared.

But the major achievement, the project has contributed to changing the mentalities of the communities. Vandalism has substantially decreased and the communities have started to undertake the maintenance of rehabilitated areas. The project has also helped to rebuild a relationship between the Municipality and the neighbourhoods. A sign of the success of the project was the recommendation made by the Mayor of Baghdad to replicate this initiative in other areas of Baghdad and to train more staff on community participation approaches.

The success of community participation approaches in these urban areas has led UNDP-Iraq to consider its possible replication in the support and development of remote rural settlements.

In addition, the project (under the title “Baghdad Neighbourhood Rehabilitation”) was chosen as a Best Practice in Dubai International Award for Best Practices to Improve the Environment for the year 2002, and it also chosen as a showcase in the Virtual Exhibition.



**Photograph 4. Now we can walk**



**Photograph 5. Clean environment**

### **Project sustainability**

- The municipality of Baghdad, through its focal unit, would follow-up rehabilitated services with the local municipalities and the service co-operative societies to ensure the provision of an acceptable and healthy environment, and will continue to support this unit in order to replicate this initiative in other areas.
- The communities will participate and be active in keeping their yards and open spaces clean, manage on-site solid waste disposal, keep up their new amenities and organise community involvement in neighbourhood management.
- The co-operative societies will provide the necessary institutional tool to continue these activities, and will contact the local municipality for assistance for activities that the communities cannot perform alone.
- Income generating services and activities will continue, like production of low cost wear by the resident women through the establishment of co-operative funds for the welfare of all the residents.
- The local representatives of the Iraqi Women's Federation will follow up the activities through visits to the families in order to promote the sustainability of the community participation concept and to improve the social standard in the neighbourhoods.
- The Youth Federation will follow up the required upkeep and maintenance of the football fields, playgrounds and green areas.

### **Lessons learned**

Community participation is possible, successful, and can be practiced and used in Iraq to improve the living conditions in urban neighbourhoods, but it would require intensive and continuous training. Despite the confronted constraints, the residents would show very good response to any improvement in the services and the environment around them. Improved living conditions have convinced the people that they have the power to change their own living environment if they have the will, and that partnership and dialogue with

the municipalities are the keys for better access to these services.

However, some residents are not able to participate in the joint activities due to their very difficult economic conditions, and they will tend to expect financial benefits for exchange of their services. So, to grant their co-operation, these people should be given the opportunity to be recruited with the municipality or any other contractor as unskilled workers.

Due to their limited resources, the Baghdad and local municipalities should be financially supported to assist them in conducting the required rehabilitation and repair works for the services they are providing all over Baghdad city. The new approach can ensure planning for optimum use of the municipalities' limited equipment as a complementary contribution to the communities' efforts of self-help.

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### **Acknowledgement**

The author would like to extend his thanks to all the colleagues that worked so hard in the “Baghdad Neighbourhood Rehabilitation project”.

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### **References**

List of the documents (which survived after the 2003 war) that are related to the Baghdad Neighbourhood Rehabilitation project and which were used in preparing this paper:

- Document prepared for the 2000 Best Practice (Draft Report), Dubai Awards.
  - Document prepared for 2002 Best Practice (Draft Report), Dubai Awards.
  - Dubai Awards, Best Practices Database, (2002), Baghdad Neighbourhood Project.
  - Document prepared for the Virtual Exhibition, showing sustainable development initiatives around the world, project showcase (Draft copy).
  - Another document prepared for the Virtual Exhibition (Draft copy).
  - Document prepared for a WES presentation.
  - Document prepared for a TPR presentation.
  - Document prepared for the Annual programme report.
  - Document prepared for the Indicators of a door to door survey.
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