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Congregations turned to Actors: The case of Christian Local Reconstruction Committees in Nineveh

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Local religious actors can play important roles in the physical and emotional rehabilitation of conflict-affected communities. In this study, the role of the Church-led local reconstruction committees (LRCs) in sustainable community rehabilitation in the Nineveh Plains of northern Iraq was examined on the basis of qualitative field research. The LRCs were formed after the liberation of the Nineveh Plains from the so-called Islamic State to directly engage conflict survivors, reduce dependency on external actors, enhance intra- and inter-community collaboration, and facilitate the rehabilitation process. The study demonstrates that despite complex security and political dynamics, local Church leaders can be strong local actors and drivers of change, particularly in influencing post-conflict rehabilitation and the rebuilding of communities. However, they need to be sensitive to the complex and highly politicised inter-communal and socio-political dynamics. This study concludes by providing a number of practical policy recommendations to local, national and international stakeholders.

1. Introduction

Violent conflicts, whose visible impacts can be identified through large-scale destruction and displacement, are often accompanied by invisible but far-reaching psychological impacts on the displaced communities. Loss of a home does not solely mean physical deprivation, it can also symbolise a loss of dignity, identity, privacy and social connection [1,2]. Additionally, people's attachment to specific locations, which are significant for cultural, sentimental and historical reasons, can in itself be a factor for people displaced due to conflict to want to return to their places of origin [2]. The reconstruction and facilitation of return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their original homes is therefore considered a crucial step in the process of reclaiming their lives, and correlates with the social and economic rehabilitation of a community [1].

A central issue in sustainable post-conflict reconstruction is the disaster-affected community's own attitude towards rehabilitation. The local community is a valuable contributor towards housing reconstruction as a provider of human resources (such as skilled and unskilled labour), institutions, buildings, financial assets and technology [2]. Close collaboration within the community is an important way to rebuild society and strengthen bonds of trust [3].

In 2014, the so-called 'Islamic State' (IS) occupied large swaths of Iraqi territories, including parts of the Nineveh Province, which was home to diverse ethno-religious communities. IS subjected the inhabitants, particularly ethno-religious minorities such as Êzidîs, Christians and other ethno-religious groups, to mass killings and extreme violence. They destroyed their homes, towns, infrastructure and sacred places. The United Nations Special Rapporteur for Human Rights and the European Parliament described certain parts of IS's military campaign as genocide [4,5]. The IS incursions resulted in large numbers of people being displaced, many of whom fled to the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), and/or migrated onward [6]. The Nineveh Province was eventually liberated from IS through a military campaign that lasted from November 2016 to July 2017 [7].

Deep-seated tensions exist within the Nineveh Plains, fueled by historic inter-communal grievances, the lack of clear state policies for bringing IS members to justice, the presence of different security actors, often with competing agendas, and gaps in the provision of basic services, while large numbers of people remain internally displaced [8]. Iraqi Christians, some of the oldest ethno-religious communities in Mesopotamia [9,10], have been heavily impacted by these different factors.

Christians in Iraq additionally suffer from intra-communal divisions variously along social, theological and political lines. There are 14 different denominations within the Iraqi Christian population, as well as more than 12 political parties and 6 armed factions [11]. Not surprisingly, there is a deep sense of insecurity among Iraqi Christians about their future in the Nineveh Plains, which is reflected in the high numbers immigrating [8], threatening the future of the Christian community in the country. To counter this decline, many local, national and international organisations have been investing in the rehabilitation of the Nineveh Plains in order to encourage the inhabitants to remain and those who have been displaced to return to their homes. The Nineveh Reconstruction Committee (NRC) is one such local organisation that works, *inter alia*, to enable Iraqi Christians who wish to return to their villages in the Nineveh Plains and to do so in dignity, safety, as well as security, as the interviews revealed.

The NRC, established in 2016, is an umbrella organisation for several local reconstruction committees (known as LRCs) of Christian churches in the Nineveh Plains, which were formed between 2016-2017 after the area had been retaken from IS. They later joined forces to facilitate the reconstruction and

rehabilitation of destroyed houses. The LRCs are led by the priests of their respective churches. They vary in terms of their organisational structures and funding streams. Together they established a system for surveying, assessing and cataloguing the damaged or destroyed residential and communal buildings (such as schools, healthcare facilities and churches). These catalogues were then used to apply for reconstruction funds.

Over the years, the LRCs have become strong actors, influencing the post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction of communities. This paper provides a holistic understanding of the LRCs, as a model to demonstrate the role local religious actors can play in the sustainable rehabilitation of communities in a post-conflict context.

2. Methodology

The study is based on a desk review of available literature around reconstruction efforts in the Nineveh Plains following the occupation through IS. This was supplemented by field research, which was conducted in the Erbil governorate during autumn 2019. A sample of 31 nonrecurring, voluntary, confidential and semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted for this study.

The definition of 'key informant' or 'expert' used for this study is based on Meuser and Nagel [12] and describes a person performing a certain function within a social system. It is not tied to a formal qualification or an official position as 'expert'. The specialized expert knowledge comes from hands-on experience within a given context and is only accessible through an interview [12]. The key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted using templates which were adapted to the context of each interviewee [13]. They were coded ahead of a deeper analysis using the qualitative content analysis method, as described by Mayring [14].

Attempts were made to ensure that the KIIs represented different age groups, beneficiaries and ethno-religious minorities and affiliations (see table 1). A number of the KIIs were affiliated with national and international non-governmental organisations (NGO and iNGO, respectively) or LRCs and 45% were also beneficiaries of humanitarian aid. From within the LRCs, KIIs were conducted with Christian leaders from the Syriac-Orthodox, Syriac-Catholic and Chaldean Churches and a staff member of the LRC in Baghdeda/ Qaraqosh. The others included 11 national and 8 international staff members of iNGOs, as well as 3 staff members of national NGOs and 5 volunteers of the Local Peace Committee (LPC) in Bashiqa. Security and feasibility factors presented some limitations to achieving an entirely representative KII sample.

The research reflects the opinions and perspectives of the sample of interviewees and is shaped by their direct socio-political context. It provides insights into individual concerns and reflect trends but does not claim to present a comprehensive picture reflective of the views of the whole community.

Table 1: Key Informants

Interviewees (Total = 31)	Description	Number	%
Gender	Male	21	67.7
	Female	10	32.3
Age range	20-30	3	9.7
	31-40	13	41
	41-50	7	22.6
	51-60	6	19.3
	61 and older	2	6.5
NGO representatives		8	25.8
iNGO representatives		19	61.3
LRC representatives		4	13
Beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance		14	45
Ethno-religious affiliation	Syriac-Orthodox	1	3.2
	Syriac-Catholic	1	3.2
	Chaldean	1	3.2
	Sunni Arab	2	6.5
	Assyrian Christian	1	3.2
	Êzidî	5	16
	Sunni Shabak	1	3.2
	Shiite Turkman	1	3.2
	Christian – No denomination indicated	4	13
	Preferred not to be identified as religious	14	45

3. Community rehabilitation in the Nineveh Plains

Religious actors can significantly impact relief and rehabilitation processes due to the influence they exert on their communities. Iraq is a religious country and as such, religious leaders are important community leaders often wielding political influence. They can be driving forces for resolving conflicts or for exacerbating them [15]. According to Wainscott [16], religious leaders in Iraq are perceived as important figures for conflict resolution through their influence over religious discourse and their strong social media presence. If this influence is utilised responsibly, religious leaders, with their locally rooted identities, can be driving forces for the establishment of sustainable peace [16].

In the interviews, respondents gave insights into their communities and what they perceived as crucial factors for rebuilding them. A content analysis of the interviews identified four different, yet overlapping, areas in which respondents felt their communities needed to be rehabilitated in the context of the Nineveh Plains:

- (A) The *physical reconstruction* of houses and infrastructure which had been severely damaged.
- (B) The *rehabilitation of social relations* within and between communities. The ‘social fabric’ of the Nineveh Plains’ communities had been disrupted, which had negatively impacted the emotional attachment of IDPs to their hometowns.
- (C) The *psychological recovery* of individuals whose feelings, emotions and mental states had been impacted. Respondents made it clear that the violence experienced during

the IS occupation was long-lasting, difficult to cope with and was accompanied by traumatic experiences and memories.

- (D) The *overhaul of the political context* and related factors. Respondents feared that violence, or even a civil war, may recur. They were concerned about the political and economic instability of the country and their districts, which were driving factors behind many people's decision to immigrate.

4. The Role of Local Religious Actors: Gaps & Policy Recommendations

Local religious actors in the Nineveh Plains, including the LRCs, NRC and individual religious leaders, have been deeply involved in efforts at reconstruction and long-term, sustainable community rehabilitation. Respondents and the literature both agreed that the physical reconstruction of the Nineveh Plains was a complex and highly sensitive process which went beyond the mere rebuilding of houses. As one of the KIIs stated: "the LRCs can support the reconstruction of a house, but the rehabilitation of a home goes beyond the physical aspect". The following summarises key findings, good practices and gaps as identified by the research, and provides some accompanying policy recommendations:

4a. Involving beneficiaries

It is important to involve beneficiaries in the process of reconstruction, not just by proxy through their religious actors. The data indicates that people remained in close contact with their respective religious communities during their time in displacement. Different displacement patterns existed, yet people from the same ethno-religious group and the same region were often displaced to the same area. Their respective Church congregations and faith communities acted as pools of information during displacement, and these also played important roles in the reconstruction processes. The LRCs were often able to accommodate their approach to the needs of the beneficiaries. This was feasible because of the direct contact and communication between the LRCs and the beneficiaries, facilitated by the structures and networks of the Churches. The reconstruction initiatives, led by the priests of the affected communities themselves, thus developed long-lasting and durable solutions as they were guided and shaped by the needs of the respective recipients.

Policy Recommendation:

- When rebuilding houses, Church congregations and LRCs in Nineveh should involve house owners in the reconstruction processes. This will reduce 'dependency' during rebuilding and foster a greater sense of autonomy and self-agency. Furthermore, it is more likely to lead to a more sustainable reconstruction process since the rehabilitation is adapted to the needs of the end-users.

4b. inclusive approach

An inclusive approach in the reconstruction processes, which involves broader community rehabilitation, is vital. Post-conflict housing reconstruction can be politically sensitive due to the large impact it has on people's lives and livelihoods, as well as the substantial resources needed to achieve it [2]. Hidden tensions often persist and may reignite if root causes of conflict are not anticipated and efforts taken to alleviate these [1].

The interviews showed that although the LCRs were primarily focused on rebuilding Christian

houses, some LRCs expanded their target group to also include houses of other ethno-religious communities. However, these activities depended on the attitude of the individual priests, one of whom explained: “In our town, I also wanted to repair Êzidî [Yezidi] houses through the LRC and asked donors for additional support. Unfortunately, their budget was earmarked to only support Christian housing reconstruction. I think this is a wrong decision! Luckily, it did not affect the relationship to the Êzidî community.”

While inclusive approaches are motivated by strengthening social cohesion, they have the potential to cause competition over resources and ignite conflict within (and between) communities. Some priests who supported the rehabilitation of non-Christian households, faced criticism from their own community members for sharing the scarce resources with others while there was still need within their own community. A staff member of a national NGO stated: “Reconstruction in general is a sensitive process. Any approach which increases gaps between the different ethno-religious communities might cause problems. Especially organisations which are linked to a specific ethno-religious community need to pay attention to that”.

Policy Recommendations:

- LRCs should use their position to foster cooperation between the different Christian denominations. The physical reconstruction process within communities can be a starting point for reinforcing relationships among community members.
- LRCs could advocate within their own congregations for the involvement of other affected ethno-religious groups in the reconstruction processes. In this way they can bring people together even across community lines, reduce prejudices and rebuild trust.
- LRCs must monitor the local context and act appropriately. They must maintain good relations with the leaders of the communities they work with, so that reconstruction measures are not perceived as interference in affairs of other communities.
- LRCs need to carefully examine the local dynamics to avoid causing further conflicts (and thereby violating the Do No Harm principle so important in humanitarian interventions).
- International donors and implementation partners of LRCs need to plan, closely monitor and evaluate the impacts of their programmes in order to ensure that their support benefits all people in need, regardless of denomination, religion or affiliation to a Church, in line with the humanitarian principles. Funding and implementing mechanisms need to be regularly revised and aligned with the respective context they operate in and the needs of local populations.

4c. Impartial support of all people in need

Following the recapture of areas from IS, international organisations with reconstruction funds needed to quickly identify local partners to work with. Churches were readily accessible due to their established structures which could provide tangible benefits such as networks and access. According to some KIIs, church board members held significant authority in the community and were considered important actors in the socio-cultural dynamics. This sometimes resulted in nepotistic behaviour. “I am an active member of the Christian community here, but I know people who are not. People who are not directly aligned with the church or openly criticise the church, might be deprived of support. People should not be advantaged just because they have relatives working in the committee or are related with the clergy”, a national staff member of an iNGO expressed.

Policy recommendations:

- LRCs must develop systems to guarantee impartial and non-deferential support for all recipients based on need alone and independent of their faith, involvement in church structures or ties to certain communities or their leaders.
- International donors and implementation partners of LRCs need to consider the broader impact their cooperation on reconstruction and rehabilitation projects might have on communities. While the existing faith-based organisations provide valuable support to the Christian communities, this assistance can be perceived as unfair by other ethno-religious communities, especially in the immediate post-conflict relief and rehabilitation phase when the needs of different communities are high.

4d. Trust in local faith organisations

Many local faith-based groups have long-standing histories and relationships in their countries, superior to those of humanitarian organisations. Some KIIs working for iNGOs stated that the close connection between the congregation, the clergy and beneficiaries can also be a positive factor in the reconstruction process, for example during initial surveys and needs assessments. While it is natural that people in need might try get more and faster support through drawing on their church networks, one KII LRCs came from the community, they were the appropriate actors to conduct an accurate needs assessment: “The people of the LRCs know the beneficiaries personally. The fact that the priest is in close connection with his congregation members can prevent false statements about needs.”

Policy Recommendation:

- LRCs and other local faith-based organisations are helpful partners for international donors for planning interventions as they possess knowledge of the community. To be reliable partners for international donors, LRCs need to facilitate professional and streamlined data collection as well as set up monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

E) Post-IS Tensions

The interviews revealed that after the return of IDPs, tensions increased in certain locations between inhabitants who had remained in their towns during IS occupation and those who had been displaced and returned later (i.e. in the Êzidî majority town of Bashiqa versus the Sunni Arab majority town of Al-Fadiliya). These tensions were later mediated by different NGOs but were mainly addressed by religious leaders from both sides. A member of a Local Peace Committee explained: “People still do not consult the police in case a problem occurs. Mostly, if tensions arise between different ethno-religious communities, the respective religious leaders are entrusted to solve the problem.”

Policy Recommendations:

- Religious leaders, as entrusted persons, should acknowledge their important roles as mediators in conflicts on the ground. They could work on cultural identity disputes, which are often promoted by sectarian players.
- Through the use of religious language, theological interpretations and prayers, Church leaders can create a good environment for fostering communal relationships.
- Through social programmes in churches, Church leaders have the chance to open up the space for discussions and promote communal recovery.

Conclusion

Conflict survivors have the potential to play an active role in sustainable rehabilitation in post-conflict settings. Housing interventions are a crucial factor for the physical and emotional rehabilitation of conflict-affected individuals, and can enhance resilience. Community involvement helps to reduce dependency on external actors in conflict- and post-conflict contexts and thus leads to more durable solutions. Moreover, through close collaboration within the community, trust can be rebuilt and strengthened as the reconstruction of houses correlates with the social and economic rehabilitation of a community. Local religious actors are rooted within the communities which are in need of support. Often, these religious actors have access to conflict affected communities and are entrusted by the beneficiaries. Although the challenges seem enormous in the light of uncertain years ahead, these interventions bear the potential to pave the way towards a more peaceful future.

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