

Children and women in Iraq

18 March 2003

The last 25 years

At the end of the 1970s, Iraq was one of the richest and most developed nations in the Middle East, with a thriving economy fuelled by sales from its huge oil reserves. From 1975 to 1985, massive social investment by the Government raised standards of living and improved the country's social services.

Two decades later, the situation has changed dramatically. Two devastating wars have damaged much of the country's infrastructure, and twelve years of international sanctions have limited Iraq's ability to rebuild and invest in social systems such as health care. All of these factors have had a major impact on children.

The Oil for Food Programme (OFFP)

Since 1996, the UN has been implementing the OFFP, which allows the Iraqi Government to export oil. Some of the proceeds are then used to purchase humanitarian supplies such as food and medicines. Overall, these efforts appear to have improved the

humanitarian situation in the country and prevented a further deterioration in conditions.

OFFP, however, is only designed to ensure that Iraqis have access to food and medicine. As a result, children's long-term future remains seriously compromised. This is because key aspects of children's development, such as education, have not benefited from the OFFP and are thus not meeting children's needs.

Child health

UNICEF's 1999 child and maternal mortality survey revealed a dramatic increase in under-five mortality rates. The survey showed that, had Iraq continued to invest in its social services, between 1990 and 1998 500,000 more children would have survived beyond their fifth birthday.

Currently, one in eight Iraqi children die before the age of five – one of the world's worst child mortality rates.

Child nutrition

In 1996, poverty and a serious

Facts and figures

Population: 24.5 million

Half of Iraq's population is under 18

GNP per capita: \$700

1 in 8 children die before the age of five

Maternal mortality rate:
294 deaths for every 100,000 births

One in four children aged under five are chronically malnourished

24.7% of all children are born underweight

70% of child deaths are due to diarrhoea and respiratory disease

The incidence of preventable diseases has increased more than 100% since 1990

5 million people lack access to safe water

Not attending primary school:
Girls 31%
Boys 17.5%

Not attending secondary school:
Girls 60%
Boys 50%

70% of all schools need repairs

Teachers earn \$5-\$8 per month

lack of food resulted in acute child malnutrition in 11 per cent of children aged under five. Today, the rate has been cut to 4 per cent: the result of the OFFP, the implementation of a UNICEF-supported “early-warning” child nutrition screening programme, and two years of reliable rainfall and good harvests.

Despite this improvement, 1 million Iraqi children under five continue to suffer from chronic malnutrition.

Education

One-quarter of school-aged Iraqi children do not attend school. Within this figure, there are sharp differences between urban and rural children, and between boys and girls. Thirty-nine per cent of rural children, and 16.2 per cent of urban children do not attend primary school. Half of all girls in rural areas do not attend school, compared to one-fifth of urban girls. In addition, an estimated 70 per cent of schools are in need of repair.

Increasingly, children are staying away from school to work and help supplement their family’s income.

Water and sanitation

Water and sanitation services deteriorated rapidly during the wars and have proved difficult to repair. Part of the problem is that, while parts can be purchased through OFFP, labour, repair and maintenance costs cannot always be met.

Currently, 5 million people – more than a fifth of the

population – do not have access to clean water. The decline in the quantity and quality of Iraq’s water supply has contributed to an increase in the incidence of water-borne diseases and malnutrition among children. Each day, 500,000 metric tonnes of raw sewage are dumped into fresh water sources – 300,000 metric tonnes in Baghdad alone.

Protecting children

The jump in poverty levels and decline in infrastructure has resulted in a significant rise in the number of children in need of special protection. They include street children, children with disabilities, abandoned and orphaned children, children in conflict with the law and children involved in especially dangerous child labour.

Owing to Iraq’s relative isolation in the last 12 years, the official response to the problems experienced by such children can be outmoded, and often emphasises placing children in institutions – isolating them from their families and communities.

Child poverty

The impoverishment of the Iraqi people is having a far-reaching impact on children. The Government, for example, no longer enforces compulsory education laws, as so many children are working to help support their families.

A steeply depreciated Iraqi Dinar has affected the already-low salaries of teachers, health workers and civil servants. In turn, low salaries have forced

The monthly food ration

The UN estimates that two-thirds of all Iraqis are dependent on Government food aid. If the food distribution network broke down, the Iraqi people would be in a very grave situation. Should a breakdown occur, most households only have enough food to last for 6 weeks.

With little, or no income, some households sell part of their rations in order to buy essential clothing and medicine.

Food items in the monthly ration:

Wheat/rice/sugar/tea/pulses
Cooking oil
Milk powder
Dried whole milk and/or cheese
Fortified weaning cereal
Iodised salt

The ration costs \$24 per month and provides 2,215 calories per household per day. A nominal fee, for the ration, of 12 cents (US) is paid to the Government by Iraqis.

some workers to supplement their income with second jobs, affecting the quality of already-fragile services for children and women.

To make a donation

Call: 08457 312 312

Donate online at:-

www.unicef.org.uk/emergency

Or send a cheque (made payable to UNICEF) to Children of Iraq Emergency Appeal, UNICEF, Freepost, Chelmsford, CM2 8BR