

COMMENT ON IRAQ AGRICULTURE

AIASST SEMINAR 5 OCTOBER 2004

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Australia has had a solid range of contact with Iraq on agriculture since the end of the war. This is natural given our longstanding ties to Iraq (especially northern regions of the country) from the late 1970s when the WA and SA governments were extending their dryland farming advisory services.

Last year, in 2003, in October and November we had the Minister (Dr Abdul Al-Abood) and Deputy Minister of Agriculture (Dr Sawan Al-Sharify) visited Australia and we have had several agricultural delegations come under state and AusAID auspices. These will continue under current plans.

We have in the audience tonight about half a dozen people who have spent time in Iraq and Syria who help make up Australia's body of direct experience in agricultural co-operation.

Only recently we saw off a group of 10 Iraqi diplomats who were here for 4 weeks training in Canberra at the ANU.

At an expert to expert level, we have good networks with Iraq.

On several occasions, Australian Ministers have said that our main sector in Iraqi reconstruction activity will be in agriculture. At this point, and well into the next year, tasks facing Iraqi agriculture will be in stabilising the sector rather than seeing export of services and supplies. There will be opportunity to assess the application of Australian approaches to land use and production in an environment which has some similarity with parts of our own agricultural resource base and economy.

Australia and Iraq share similar issues such as salinity (which affects 75% of Iraq's irrigated land of between 2.0-3.25 million ha), erosion, desertification of pastoral areas, debate and worry over water rights and supply of water (Iraq's river flows in the Euphrates and Tigris are down 50% on 10 years ago due to Turkish accessions), and plant protection.

Iraq's farm sector has been severely hit by war, sanctions, drought and disinvestment.

Australia has had agricultural advisory missions in Iraq since April 2003 and they have made considerable positive impact in rehabilitating the Ministry of Agriculture and later RAFI funded missions have suggested a range of possible bilateral projects.

While Iraq is seen as an oil economy, its social and economic structure retains a significant rural sector; employing – according to uncertain statistics - between 20-50 percent of the labour force. About 1.5-2.0 million are employed in agriculture which delivers between 6-8% of GDP. Iraq is classified as a mixed oil economy by Arab analysts. In 1995 it was assessed as having a GDP of US\$2,386 per capita. In 2001 it was about US\$770 and has fallen further. Agriculture has followed this trend and since the late 1980s production has fallen by 1.1% pa.

Agriculture in Iraq expanded after 1914 when earlier and usufruct title based Ottoman land ownership laws were practically supported by the commencement of work to control the enormous variability in river flow and provide for the extension of irrigation services to land along and between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers notably south of Baghdad.

A striking feature about 20th century agriculture in Iraq has been its rollercoaster history of policy change, if not reversal and review of its legislative foundations (such as control of land

ownership, expropriation of farm and grazing land and establishment of socialist models of farm production arrangements).

In Iraq's modern history – since the establishment of increasing nationalist and statist governments in 1958 – agrarian reform has arced through ambitious but unsettling and, unlike Australia's incremental adjustments, unpredictable directions.

Agrarian reform laws of 1958, 1969 and 1970 expanded land under cultivation. In 1958, land releases added to the expansion of farmed land previously strongly advanced in 1932 when Iraq clarified private and semi private land ownership (akin to long term intergenerational leasehold).

In 1958, Iraq had over four times the area under nominal cultivation than in 1914.

Settlement policy in Iraq was (and is still) however on moving sands, a situation which does not favour sound resource use or investment. By 1952 the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development found up to 30 per cent “cultivated land” was already abandoned due to salinity and remaining land had yields down between 20-50 percent. (USAID considers that irrigated land area is now only 30% of that available in the 1970s.)

To maintain national, political and social balance, the Ba'ath Party from the late 1960s took steps to emphasise agricultural development. It created the Higher Agricultural Council in 1970 and placed farming as a priority for its Planning Board's program of advice to Saddam Hussein's Revolutionary Command Council.

Ba'ath Party structures and their patronage system operated through its consolidation of 300% growth of farmer cooperatives in less than ten years up to 1977. At that point, privately held land was in small plots of 5 to 50 hectares acres depending on its quality and

relationships to water usage. Cooperatives channelled government assistance for seeds, fertilisers, tools, market promotion and agronomic advice, housing and finance to farmers.

At this time Iraqi agriculture was competing for budget support with the oil and industrial sectors and losing. The state propped up farmers through price guided but not price fixed “peoples markets” operating in government locations, and setting production goals through Soviet Union modelled groups as the Institute for the Marketing of Fruits and Vegetables and the Organisation of the Grain Trade and Dates Trade. State companies continue to dominate input supplies, animal health services and seed supply. Post-war direction from the US to privatise has met great inertia and resistance as the sector will not be able to meet prices boosted by cuts to subsidies.

Farming has suffered from structural loss of manpower to the oil and industrial goods sector as well as irreplaceable loss of workers as casualties in the 1980-88 Iran Iraq war and to a lesser degree in 1991 Desert Storm. Under impoverishing sanctions, agriculture continued to collapse both productively, and socially. Iraq imported vast numbers of Egyptian farm workers to make up for these war losses even offering land ownership to some.

There are few statistics to show the extent of this collapse. One observation is that despite the Green Revolution, state planning and subsidisation of production, Iraq has gone from food exporter to importer since World War Two while other importers such as Turkey and Algeria have reversed the equation while facing high population growth rates.

Compounding this trend is now the complete upset of the Ba'ath organisation. Iraq is decapitated and so are its agricultural industries which were based on state direction. Without Ba'ath security, all Ministry facilities were looted. Many destroyed.

Rural Iraq was inflicted with a disciplining fear created by the Ba'ath Party's use of state terror. Papers available from the Iraq Foundation and an associated Harvard University documentation project show that village life was no escape from anxiety and repression. The removal of the Party has affected both positively and negatively all levels and localities of Iraqi life.

"De-Ba'athification" left the agriculture sector to re-establish a coherent organising force. The sacking of the Ministry of Irrigation (now Water Resources) and the Ministry of Agriculture created problems of tracing tenure, resource rights, debt, extension and financial responsibility to manage the needs of farmers.

Abandonment of agriculture, poverty driven tension in rural areas and the lack of grower based leadership put new risks on the sector as well as any plan to establish local democratic processes and stable provincial and material governments.

Australia should consider the following as a mixture of our aid program.

First, stabilise Iraqi agriculture's farm support network as remains after the Ba'ath defeat. This means kick starting pre-existing networks and creating credible support for dialogue with rural areas and their people, especially women and youth

Second, farmers should be assisted in creating their own grassroots representative organisations to facilitate political expression, policy demands and engagement in wider national socio-economic reconstruction. These groups can also act as channels for delivery of material and services including projects to their members.

Third, the absence of land use data, natural resource data, population and economic information has to be addressed to support decisions on future policy.

Fourth, farmer education and training has to occur as an identifiable part of research and extension projects. (This is accepted in USAID, World Bank and AusAID assessments.)

Fifth, a commodity approach to farm advice and support can draw on Australian expertise in wheat, barley and dryland irrigated rice production. Australia cannot assist on Iraqi's important date crops but we can help on rangeland grazing and pastoralism and associated land management issues covering techniques to regenerate native plants and develop shallow level fresh water supplies.

Reintegration into multilateral organizations is an early goal and essential to get access to current scientific and management information. Basic professional journals are scarce and most agricultural institutions cannot afford internet equipment and regular high usage access.

Since 1991 Iraq has fallen progressively from international, even Arab League agricultural development mechanisms. Arab conferences on farming especially on arid land agriculture point to the same issues that confront Australia growers, state and federal governments: property rights, drought policy, rangeland management problems improved information services, plant suitability to local conditions, market signals and their effect on allocation of investment.

Subjects where Australian information, management approaches and R&D/technology are relevant are as follows:

1. **Data collection**

- GIS and remote sensing of crop health, land use change, land and vegetation quality, cadastral support
- Water flow measurement for permanent and intermittent streams and waterways
- Establishment of data based benchmarks of indicators of health of dryland irrigation areas eg water table sensing, salinity assessment

2. **Natural resource management**

- Measurement of rangeland erosion
- Re-establishment of native pastures
- Design of participatory approaches to irrigation management at a local level
- Application of participatory local approaches to land management eg Landcare, Rivercare

3. **Animal husbandry**

- Computer based livestock breeding techniques
- Genetic improvement of herds
- Animal health processes and related quarantine principles and disease control
- Discussion on drought resistant animals
- Herd management including dairy

4. **Crop management and handling**

- Post harvest packing and transport techniques to reduce losses
- Grain storage and transport advice

5. **Communications support**

- Interface with recognised Arab farm support information services such as the Arab Authority for Agricultural Investment and Development's extension journal
- Increase contribution to IFAD/FAO etc information materials to support Iraqi extension

This is my assessment drawn from an April 2003 survey prepared as informal advice to the Commonwealth Government.

The role of government in Iraqi agriculture will remain high for the foreseeable future and this in turn makes Australian contact easier in view of the role of the states here and our own public sector focus on farm development.

Broad priorities for agriculture as seen by Iraq during 2003/04 are:

- Rehabilitation of research facilities
- Rehabilitation of training facilities
- Improved statistical collection
- Improved agricultural college services
- Rehabilitation of irrigation infrastructure
- Improvement to plant and animal protection services

From its side, the World Bank in 2003 assessed that US\$3.03 billion are needed to address:

- Agricultural production services
- Water management
- Provision of credit to farmers and related SMEs
- Catchment management activity
- Institutional capacity building
- Land conservation