Establishing water and sanitation programmes in conflict situations: The case of Iraq during the Gulf War

Summary

In armed conflicts, health and technical assessments made before initiating emergency water and sanitation programmes are hardly ever complete and accurate. Obstacles and constraints inherent in the initial assessment phase have an inevitable impact on the selection and ranking of priorities. The emergency phase of a programme calls for short-term objectives: the first activities are already under way as problem identification proceeds. Frequently updated assessments are an integral component of ongoing programmes, so as to ensure continuous readjustment of short-, medium- and long-term objectives and an appropriate response to needs. In this article, as an example, we describe the various stages in assessing water and sanitation problems, first in Baghdad and then in southern and northern Iraq, between February and May 1991. Our aim is to explain the background that led to the implementation of the programme in the Iraqi capital and the provinces.

A final evaluation is always done in the last stage of health programmes initiated during armed conflicts. At that point it is often difficult to understand why certain decisions were reached at the outset of the operation; the reason is that one often forgets to replace those decisions within their original context. In any conflict situation, the phase in which problems are identified involves a certain number of constraints. Some of these constraints are specific to war situations, while others occur also in the event of natural disasters. They all have an impact on the planning and implementation of health programmes—particularly water and sanitation programmes, which are often the topmost priority.

In conflict situations, continuous problem identification and analysis and the establishment of priorities are essential components of the first part of a programme, and operational objectives are constantly readjusted as a result. A major factor in the assessment phase is the extension of the geographical area covered and of the foreseeable duration of the programme. This will require a gradual increase in logistical and financial resources. It is therefore essential rapidly to distinguish between short-, medium- and long-term activities and to make sure that resources are available in time. From 17 January to 28 February 1991, Allied bombing and military operations in Iraq gave rise to a flow of often contradictory information on the country's health conditions. Some sources assumed the worst while others, such as CNN, conveyed a more reassuring view of the situation. An ICRC* team remained in Iraq during that whole period but was unable to move around freely. It therefore had only a limited vision of the problems at hand, and the fact that it could not verify any of the information in its possession made it extremely difficult to plan an assistance programme. As soon as the team became more mobile, from 23 February on, an ICRC sanitary engineer went to Baghdad to make his own assessment of the situation. A water and sanitation programme was launched immediately after his mission. When the Shiite uprising in the south and the Kurdish uprising in the north were over it became possible to assess the circumstances in those areas, too.

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This case study of the situation in Iraq in February and March 1991 clearly shows the difficulties involved in initial problem assessment. The various constraints described below led to a whole number of risky decisions. The ICRC was compelled to take them, however, on account of the urgency of the situation.

This article explains the difficulties involved in problem identification and in setting up the ICRC water and sanitation programme.

Planning the programme

Sources of information

An accurate identification of problems requires reliable sources of information. In February 1991, the following sources were available:

- The media (in particular CNN), as soon as the conflict broke out.
- Written reports sent in by the ICRC doctor and the rest of the team in Baghdad, as from 20 January. The data received were inevitably incomplete as the team had difficulty moving around the city.
- Oral reports from the first ICRC staff returning from Baghdad from 20 January on.
- The report by the first sanitary engineer who had assessed the situation in Baghdad between 23 and 28 February.
- The BSWA (Baghdad Water Supply Administration) engineers, and subsequently their colleagues working in the rest of the country.
- ICRC sanitary engineers who carried out specific assessments in Baghdad and then on the outskirts of the city.
- Other agencies and organizations working on water and sanitation projects, in particular UNICEF and OXFAM, with whom weekly meetings were rapidly organized.

As information grew increasingly reliable, it became easier to understand the problems at hand. This obviously required a continuous readjustment of the programme's objectives. The programme itself was launched as soon as the first data were confirmed and problem identification actually began.

Problem identification

The Iraqi water pumping, treatment and distribution facilities and sewage system were not directly targeted by the Coalition forces. They were, however, adversely affected by four direct consequences of the conflict:

- the overall shortage of electricity and difficulties in operating the emergency systems;
- the lack of water treatment chemicals and the fact that these were no longer being produced locally;
- the inadequate maintenance of installations because of the chronic shortage of spare parts, compounded by import restrictions;
- the lack of qualified personnel following the departure of foreigners and the mobilization of some Iraqi staff working for the various water services.

As a result, hospitals and the civilian population were subjected to severe water shortages, and in some parts of the city the water supply was completely cut off. There was also a significant drop in the quality of the water. Although the ICRC team itself did not find any evidence confirming