

Social dimensions impacting Partnerships in Higher Education – The case of „Rethink Education and Science in Iraq“

1. Introduction

Partnerships for the UN Sustainable Development Goals always take place in specific societal contexts, university partnerships being no exception. When reflecting on these partnerships from pedagogical perspective, multilayered analyses of context seem inevitable – ranging from very local factors up aspects of globalization, which Dale (2015) described as „the context of contexts“. In terms of partnerships in higher education between universities in Germany in Iraq, some research was presented in the recent years (Senger, 2024; Wendt et al., 2022). However this research focuses mostly on questions of organizational and institutional context of these academic partnerships and put very little emphasis on broader societal perspectives. In the paper presented here, I will discuss different social developments in Iraq as well as their impact on the academic partnership „Rethink Science and Education in Iraq“ (RESI). This unique collaboration between Mosul University, TU Dortmund University (Germany) and University of Graz (Austria)¹ exists since 2016 and was formed in the immediate aftermath of the terroristic reign of the so-called Islamic State. However in this paper I will argue, that there is more long term developments as well as dimensions rooted deeply in Iraqi society, of high relevance to academic partnerships.

In the following, I will give an overview to RESI as a unique university partnership and thereafter discuss four different social dimensions that I consider relevant. Thereafter, I will argue that the systematic destruction of social cohesion that dates back to the Saddam era and the hierarchical social order in Iraq has had a major impact on the conduct of academic partnerships. The same applies to the difficult labor market situation for university graduates and the long period of isolation from the international scientific community, which has characterized the Iraqi higher education system for many years.

Of course the dimensions under investigation here, cannot be considered distinct phenomena and are largely intertwined with one another. However for analytical reasons I will discuss them separately. In my investigation I will build on historical and sociological works that have been published throughout the recent years in German or English language as well as reflections on my own experiences within the RESI-Partnership where I served as a coordinator at TU Dortmund from 2019 until 2023.

2. „Rethink Education and Science in Iraq“ – a university partnership as an open, interdisciplinary and international academic platform

In 2016 when Mosul was under ISIS occupation and Mosul university operated as a university in exile, the university leadership reached out to academics at TU Dortmund requesting to build a partnership to support in their academic reconstruction process. TU Dortmund – especially at the department for spatial planning – maintained subject-related partnership projects with University of Dohuk for several years at that point. The RESI partnership with university of Mosul however was set up as a broad and interdisciplinary project. Project activities are organized by a steering committee consisting of professors of different subjects, coordinating a broad network of academics at all partnering universities and beyond and overseeing that the project activities contribute to common goals.

¹ When the project leader at TU Dortmund Dr. Heike Wendt obtained a new position as Professor in 2019 her new affiliate University of Graz became the third partnering institution. Funding for the project activities through all the years was obtained by the support of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

Starting at 2018 the main activities of RESI are large interdisciplinary and international student conferences with several hundred participants. The conferences provide a platform to students to engage in free academic debate, reflect on their experiences in the time of ISIS occupation and their perspectives for reconstruction and reconciliation in Mosul and Iraq in general. Overall in the nine years of partnership 7 student conferences with 3600 participating students were held. Intensive seminars at TU Dortmund for more than 250 lecturers at University of Mosul supported knowledge transfer and provided rare internationalization opportunities. Additional activities such as symposia, smaller conferences, art exhibitions, support activities for Mosul Universities central library etc. also have been part of the project. The partnership „survived“ the COVID-19-pandemic, when also the activities were mostly shifted online. The framework of the RESI-project therefore enables a range of academic and also non-academic activities as long as they match the projects themes of reconstruction, reconciliation and sustainability. Activities also have to be inclusive in terms of ethnics, religions, gender etc. This setup of an inclusive project, with a steering committee as decentral controlling body now encounters a historically evolved societal structure that is based in part on completely different principles, as I will discuss in the following.

3. Dimensions of Iraqi Society and their relevance for academic partnerships

a. Anxieties, distrust and resentments

Internal violent conflicts – as Iraq has experienced in struggle between ISIS and other actor groups – may „weaken[a communities‘] social fabric. It divides the population by undermining interpersonal and communal trust, destroying the norms and values that underlie cooperation and collective action for the common good, and increasing the likelihood of communal strife“ (Colletta & Cullen, 2000 , p. 3). Such a spirit of anxiety, distrust and resentment, can – following Khalils (1990) analysis – also be attributed to the rule of Saddam Hussein and the Ba’ath party from 1979 until 2003. As Khalil describes the Ba’ath era, inner and outer enemies were identified and an antizionist and antiimperialist policy framework was established. Resentments against certain groups – e.g. jews, communists, kurdish, shia muslims – were deployed in order to support the regimes goals.

In certain periods, ethnic cleansing, political assassinations and public executions were considered effective means of exercising power. At the same time, a comprehensive system of secret services was set up and numerous informers were recruited. This also affected the university sector. For example, membership of the National Union of Iraqi Students (NUIS) and the receipt of a scholarship abroad were linked to the expectation of certain informant activities (ibid. p. 61f.).

What it means for the RESI partnership:

Academic partnerships greatly depend on interpersonal trust. This especially holds true when safety during travels depends on certain information and precautions on the hosts side are necessary in order to ensure a profitable academic and intercultural experience. For university partnerships, the experience the Saddam era but also of western interventionism may for some Iraqi partnerships lead to deep distrust and skepticism towards initiatives which may be perceived as external influence (Senger, 2024, p. 144).

In the RESI-partnership however, extensive relationship work especially among the members of the steering committee over the several years, led to interpersonal connections that created an atmosphere of trust. This however, was put to the test, when certain confidential information from a RESI-steering committee meeting were passed on to the presidency of Mosul University by a member who subsequently joined the group. In addition also in the RESI-partnership especially the members of minority groups frequently reported, being exposed to resentments by the muslim majority group.

Creating a space for reconciliation is one of the main goals of the RESI-partnership, being well aware that intercommunal trust is a crucial prerequisite. Here one should keep in mind that ISIS-occupation as a rather recent event is preceding a long history of systematic destruction of the social fabric and intercommunal trust since the beginning of the Saddam-era more than 40 years ago.

b. Hierarchical orders and obedience

The Ba'ath-regime is often considered to be authoritarian in nature, and therefore strongly relied on hierarchies and obedience. However a tribal structure, a hierarchical system of family bonds and loyalties existed in Iraq long before and also did not lose its importance in the Ba'ath-era or thereafter (Hassan, 2008) . In some parts of Iraq, such as the sunni triangle or the shiite regions in the south, these family ties and traditional hierarchical structures are combined with religious authority. The Sunni triangle south of Mosul was not only the political power base of Saddam's family but also the nucleus of various Islamist groups, some of which merged into the so-called Islamic State.

John Agresto, Coalition Provisional Authority Senior Advisor for Higher Education in Iraq after the 2003-war, observes the effects of distinctive hierarchies in all areas of society – ranging from families, professional relationships to the education sector (Agresto, 2007 , p.130)

What it means for the RESI partnership:

With its network structure and student-centered didactical approaches, the RESI-partnership is at many points conflicting power structures and traditional forms of learning prevalent in Iraq. Although this regularly led to disputes with the university presidium, it also proved to be an effective way of dealing with excessive hierarchical structures.

Due to its resources, especially the rare opportunities to travel to Germany/Europe, RESI was also the project was also often the object of power interests, which could essentially be countered by referring to selection criteria set by the DAAD funding organization. In addition some lecturers have difficulties to adapt to workshop formats, where the learning process is placed in the hands of the students. Here the RESI-project can be seen as a learning opportunity in which new forms of project management and alternative didactic approaches can be tested.

c. Poor economic prospects especially for the youth

Iraq highly depends on oil and gas revenues and investments which may lead to a more diversified economy are hindered by corruption, extensive administrative routines, poor infrastructure and political instabilities (Al-Hade Hassan, 2020) . This leads to high rates of youth unemployment of more than 34% in the COVID-years but remained high by more than 32% thereafter (Statista, 2025) . In addition neo-liberal transformations in the course of US-intervention have greatly changed the economic structures in Iraq (Baker, 2014) . Milton (2018) argues that in such liberal transitions universities are often not able to meet up with the demands of the changed labor markets. For students that means that their high level of education meets very limited career prospects. This in turn may lead to dissatisfaction, frustration and even to social tensions and radicalization (Sas et al., 2020) .

What it means for the RESI partnership:

At the peak of the COVID-pandemic in spring of 2021 RESI organized an online conference titled: „Lets reflect on employment crisis in Iraq“, where students could address their thoughts and feelings in terms of limited career prospects. Besides that issues of sustainable development in the Mosul region and Iraq and therefore also questions of decent work were main themes in the RESI-Student conferences of 2022 and 2023. In these conferences the development of concrete projects, which may be the starting point of building a business or social project was included in the conference concept. With the support

of the dutch development agency SPARK, seed-capital and support in setting up a selected number of projects could be granted.

Therefore in the RESI-project, issues of the labour market and limited career perspectives of university students, were adressed frequently. RESI offers the rare oppourtunity where students can adress their concerns and dissatisfaction with their situation freely and also learn tools and skills, which might empower them to do something about it.

d. International isolation

Iraqs higher education sector has been internationally acknowledged of being one of the most advanced in the middle east in the 1970s (Harb, 2008) . Starting with the first gulf war, and even more through the UN-sanctions imposed in the 1990s Iraq became more and more isolated from the international community (ibd.). With the third gulf war of 2003 and the political instabilities thereafter, international isolation continued. In the year 2011 more than half of Iraq`s academics reported to rarely or never participate in international study or exchange programmes, common graduate programmes and international conferences/workshops (Mohamed, 2012) . With the rise of the so called Islamic State internationalization at Iraqs university came to a standstill.

What it means for the RESI partnership:

Re-connecting to the international scientific community was a major motivation for University of Mosul, as RESI in 2016 was the only international partnership existing at the time. Conducting international student conferences also in Mosul was a strong sign for normalization after ISIS-occupation and therefore of high symbolic value. However, limited experience on the international academic parquet floor and sometimes limited english language skills, often makes it difficult to fruitfully connect with academic partners. However, there are major differences here depending on individual academic experience and also depending on the time period when this was gained.

4. Conclusion

The liberation from ISIS occupation was the starting point for a number of academic partnerships designed to support a sustainable trasformation of Iraqi society. However, if one considers the social context in which these projects are embedded, it becomes clear that - in the case of Iraq - a long-term view is required. Mistrust and resentment as well as the hierarchical social order have a long history in Iraq and go back not only to the reign of terror imposed by ISIS. Poor career prospects for young iraqis in particular are closely linked to structural weaknesses in the iraqi economy. Isolation from the international science system also has a long history and reached its peak during the sanctions regime of the 1990s. The links to western economic interests and interventionism appear to be clear here. Many of these factors initially appear to be obstacles to academic partnerships, but in the context of certain social transformations they can also be a major driver for involvement in projects such as RESI. When considering the context, however, the focus should not be limited to short-term social developments, as argued here. This certainly incomplete consideration points to the need for a comprehensive analysis of the conditions of university-related North-South partnerships.

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