Concrete, cables and civil works

UNDP's stabilization programme in and around Mosul, 2017–2022

CRU Report

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Contents

Executive summary

This paper analyses the implementation and impact of UNDP's Funding Facility for Stabilization (FFS) in Iraq between 2017 and 2022, based on the experience of the FFS programme coordinator for Mosul. The FFS was launched in 2015 in the wake of the military effort against Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). With time, it became the largest single rehabilitation programme in the country, with donors investing US$1.5 billion to finance more than 3,000 projects across five previously occupied governorates in northwest Iraq.

Over six years, the programme managed to rebuild more than 35,000 houses and hundreds of key buildings, including schools, water treatment plants, electrical substations health centres, hospitals, university buildings, repair workshops, police stations and courts, roads and bridges. The programme created thousands of temporary construction jobs, 45,000 temporary cash-for-work jobs (such as rubble clearing) and provided over 6,000 grants to support the development of local businesses. In total, an estimated 8 million people benefited in one way or another from the FFS, including 4.9 million internally displaced people (IDPs) who were supported to return home. Mosul – the main city of the north and ISIL's 'capital' – became a hive of activity for the FFS in particular.

Key FFS programme success factors included high-level UN and Iraqi government support and quick results on the ground by using a relatively simple, straightforward approach, with project delivery being organised via the private sector. During its lifetime, the FFS had to deal with two major challenges. The first was the government's lack of planning, capacity and budget to staff, operate and maintain some of the more complex structures the FFS rebuilt, such as hospitals. The second was dealing with corruption. UNDP set up a multi-layered system and safeguards for dealing with less-then-scrupulous local authorities and construction companies and double checked everything on site. Such measures notwithstanding, it was impossible to prevent all wrongdoing across a portfolio of over 3,000 projects. This was a pre-identified risk that donors and UNDP were willing to take.

In 2020, the momentum of the FFS started to slow when differences of view between the Government of Iraq and the programme's donors started to manifest themselves. Donors were disappointed that after five years of

'frontloading' projects, the government had not stepped up and invested more in reconstruction. The government felt it was funding as much as it could, and that the FFS should expand further rather than close. Donors put their foot down, and the FFS closed at the end of 2023.

Ultimately, the FFS did largely what it was supposed to, which was to rebuild critical infrastructure and provide temporary jobs on a large scale that allowed Iraqis to return to the area where they had lived before fleeing ISIL. 'Beyond the numbers', one could argue that the FFS did not significantly increase trust in the government. The programme was innovative in *how* it operated rather than in *what* it did, as it kept its scope of work focused on 'concrete, cables, bricks and mortar' – at scale. It is not clear whether and, if so, to what extent, the FFS influenced local conflict dynamics, since few conflict or context assessments were undertaken.

UNDP has used the FFS as a model for its stabilization 'value proposition', developing policy and expertise in-house and rolling out smaller stabilization programmes in different contexts. Whether the policies, practices and lessons of the FFS will have long-term influence depends on whether they will be used in high-profile contexts with similar-ish levels of urban destruction and displacement like, for example, Ukraine and Gaza. It is worth noting, however, that Iraq had some particular features. These included a reasonable level of post-ISIL security, strategic alignment between the government and international partners, high-level political support for the FFS's approach, the availability of extensive donor funding and the presence of adequate local implementing capacity. These conditions may not be found in other contexts.

Introduction

The military campaign to oust the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) between 2014 and 2017 caused billions of dollars in damage to infrastructure and displaced 6 million people across northern and western Iraq. In 2015, a coalition of international donors, UN agencies and financial institutions came together to support the Government of Iraq with the daunting process of reconstruction.

The largest international rehabilitation programme in Iraq between 2017 and 2022 was the *Funding Facility for Stabilization* (FFS), managed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).[1] The FFS mobilized an unprecedented US$1.5 billion and rehabilitated thousands of houses, water treatment plants, schools, hospitals and other infrastructure, and provided thousands of temporary jobs.[2] The programme quickly earned the confidence of national and international partners and has become a new model for UNDP to undertake post-conflict rehabilitation.[3]

The purpose of this paper is to explain how the FFS was implemented in northern Iraq, especially in Mosul, from the perspective of one of the programme's coordinators. It discusses how the FFS dealt with competing priorities, local authorities and corruption, how it managed to achieve the results it did, and what it could have done differently. Through the lens of the FFS, the paper reflects on the wider political economy of Iraq and the opportunities and potential pitfalls of implementing a post-conflict rehabilitation programme in a complex environment.

The first chapter explains how the FFS was set up, its aims and objectives, and how it was rolled out across western and northern Iraq. The second chapter

1 This paper generally refers to decisions made by the organization as 'UNDP' and to activities undertaken under the programme as 'FFS'.

2 Funding Facility for Stabilization (FFS) Annual Reports 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022.

3 UNDP, *Guidance Note on Stabilization Programming, draft*, April 2024. In the UNDP's 2019 Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) *Independent Country Evaluation: Iraq*, 2019, pg. 15, a major donor calls the FFS 'a miracle programme'.

zooms in on Mosul, ISIL's former 'capital city' and one of the most badly damaged areas in the country, and how the programme contributed to the city's revival. The third chapter discusses how, while insecurity and coordination were relatively minor issues, government capacity and budgeting were a constant challenge to the programme's implementation. The fourth chapter explores the challenge of corruption, and how the FFS handled provincial elites and contractors on this issue. The fifth chapter explains briefly the gradual dismantling of the FFS in 2020–2022, as priorities shifted, and the donor community and the Iraqi government grew apart. The last chapter goes 'beyond the numbers' and argues that, while the FFS did what it was set out to do and achieved its programmatic outcomes, questions can be asked about its wider impact on Iraq, whether the programme was as innovative and sustainable as it could have been, and whether it might have harmed local dynamics.

In a context where there is increasing criticism of multilateral aid, this paper tries to provide a balanced overview of the successes and questionable aspects of the programme, so that these can inform future programmes and practitioners.

1 A stabilization programme for Iraq

Iraq returned to the global stage in 2014, when Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) invaded northern and western Iraq. The international coalition that supported the Iraqi government realized that, in addition to military support to counter the extremist movement, it was going to need a post-war approach for reconstruction. A fundamental part of this approach would be the Funding Facility for Stabilization (FFS).

1.1 In the wake of the liberation battle

In 2014, ISIL spread across Ninewah, Anbar, Salaheddin, Diyala and Kirkuk provinces, threatening even the capital, Baghdad.[4] Six million people were displaced. By August 2014 ISIL controlled an estimated one-third of Iraq as part of their transnational 'caliphate', with its capital in the northern city of Mosul. The military campaign to liberate Iraq from ISIL was long and violent, but by mid-2015 the extremist movement was slowly being pushed back by the Iraqi army, supported by a variety of Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the Kurdish *Peshmerga* and the international coalition for the fight against ISIL.[5] The army would surround ISIL-held cities, leaving one flank open through which civilians could flee. The (presumed) absence of civilians from urban areas incentivized the military to undertake more air strikes, bombing ISIL targets inside civilian structures.[6] ISIL was being pushed back, but cities and towns were left badly damaged in the offensive's wake. A World Bank study estimated the damages to Iraq's infrastructure at some US$88 billion.[7]

4 This chapter focuses on the context in which the FFS stabilization strategy was developed, not on the politics of Iraq and ISIL. For good primers on ISIL in Iraq see, for example, Warrick, J. *Black Flags. The Rise of ISIS*. Corgi/Penguin, London, 2015; Kilcullen, D. *Blood Year. Islamic State and the Failures of the War on Terror*. Hurst and Co., London, 2016.

5 The *Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve* (CJTF-OIR). The task force was largely led by the USA but included 76 other military partners.

6 Human Rights Watch, *World Report Iraq*, 2015, 2016 and 2017.

7 World Bank Group. *Iraq reconstruction & investment. Part 2: damage and needs assessment of affected governorates*. January 2018. In the context of this figure, the FFS undertook around 1.6 per cent of the task of reconstruction.

The Iraqi government and the international coalition agreed that a reconstruction programme was needed for areas liberated from ISIL. Such a programme, it was thought, would help the millions of displaced Iraqis to return home, show a 'peace dividend' and restore some faith in the government. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi recognized that in predominantly Sunni northern Iraq, his predecessor Nouri al-Maliki's policies were seen as having given a helping hand to Shi'a militias and opened the door to ISIL by weakening the country's army and crippling service delivery. Abadi wanted to show that his government was willing to fight for their Sunni compatriots and re-gain their trust.

Since 2014, the international coalition had included a stabilization 'line of effort,' under which future reconstruction efforts were being discussed. However, the international partners were initially hesitant to commit to a multi-billion-dollar effort without a limited set of priorities, government commitment and a timeline to guide their efforts. They did not want to get drawn into a repetition of the post-2003 reconstruction effort.[8] Abadi's government tried to reassure its partners that any reconstruction programme would be time-bound to the years it would take Iraq's oil economy to recover from the financial exhaustion caused by the war; straightforward, focusing on a limited set of priorities; and supported by the highest levels of the Iraqi government. The international partners agreed, with the precondition that such a programme would be run by an international organization. Initially, UNDP was not the preferred partner as donors had concerns that it lacked the ability to manage such a large project portfolio. However, at the time there were few other options. There was a concern that the World Bank would take too long to implement programmes and would add risk by working through government structures, and that INGOs were too small and lacked the political 'clout' to take on such a large effort.

The head of UNDP and Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the UN (DSRSG), Lise Grande, was in charge of coordinating the UN's humanitarian and development activities in Iraq. She promoted UNDP with both the government and donors, especially with the US embassy, arguably the largest and most influential member of the coalition. By March 2015, Diyalah, Tikrit and Sinjar had been liberated by the army and pressure grew on the international

8 Brookings. *Getting Reconstruction right and wrong: lessons from Iraq*. 1 October 2019, for example, shows how the US government was wary of investing in Iraq having spent more than US$200 billion after 2003 and being disappointed in the results.

community to start funding projects. USAID decided to give UNDP a few million dollars for an initial set of rehabilitation and livelihoods projects in recently liberated governorates, so the agency could prove that it was capable of running such a programme. By November 2015, the first projects were underway. USAID now threw its support behind UNDP, and this started the ball rolling, with other donors coming on board. Grande was seen by some humanitarian actors as linking the UN too closely to the US's (military) agenda in Iraq, but it positioned UNDP as the go-to implementing partner for the government and members of the international coalition.[9] Over the next six years, 30 donors would fund UNDP's stabilization work, including several European states, the EU, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the United Arab Emirates, and others.[10]

1.2 The Funding Facility for Stabilization (FFS)

UNDP rapidly needed a framework for the new programme and in June 2015 the FFS was set up with two uncommon particularities for a UN programme First, it would be kept simple, focusing on straightforward bricks-and-mortar rehabilitation and temporary job creation, speed and scale. Second, it would be implemented only by UNDP, using the Iraqi private sector.[11]

The FFS was kept as straightforward as possible and the programme designed with two objectives: first, to create the conditions for the return of IDPs to their area of origin by restoring basic services and essential infrastructure

9 Medicins Sans Frontières (MSF). *Emergency Trauma Response to the Mosul offensive, 2016–2017. A review of issues and challenges*. March 2018, pg. 14; IEO evaluation, 2019, op. cit.; UNDP's *Guidance Note on Stabilization Programming* 2024, pg. 104, recognizes this: '...stabilization involves taking sides and not being neutral. It actively supports the legitimate authority and is thus political.'

10 As of December 2022, the largest donors to the FFS were USAID with US$434 million, the German foreign ministry and the German development bank KFW with $381m combined, the Netherlands with $107m, the EU with $4m, Norway with $72m, the UAE with $60m, Sweden with $59m, Denmark with $53m, the UK with $41m and Japan with $36m.

11 The programme was originally called the 'FFIS', with the 'I' for 'immediate', as it was meant to undertake rapid projects of three to five months, lasting only one year in each governorate. As it became apparent that more extensive works were required, the one-year limitation was dropped and the 'FFES' ('extended') was started for longer-term projects. While some donors separated the FFIS and the FFES, for everyone else the approach was basically the same just with different timelines, and the strategy was referred to as the 'FFS'.

and stimulating economic activity; and second, to restore confidence in local authorities and show a peace dividend.[12] The FFS had a lively discussion with donors about the meaning of 'stabilization' but it was recognized that it was difficult to see too far into the future with the military campaign still underway. Keeping the goals of the strategy relatively broad and using a catch-all term like 'stabilization' allowed it to fit donors' different conceptions and funding streams. To the teams on the ground, the FFS was always more about the *what* and the *how* than about the *why*. The strategy would have four 'windows' of work:

1. Rehabilitation of infrastructure for basic services. This would be, by far, the largest part of the effort, consuming around 75 per cent of its budget. The focus would be on rehabilitating houses and restoring basic services, especially water, electricity, health and education.

2. Livelihoods. Here, the initial focus was on cash-for-work projects, allowing returnees to make some money while clearing rubble and debris. Later, people were also given grants and provided with skills training.

3. Capacity building. Most of this window took the form of rehabilitating government offices to allow officials to return, rehabilitating repair workshops and providing specialized equipment, heavy machinery, and IT. It also provided technical expertise in the form of stabilization specialists, engineers, municipal advisers and others to work directly with the government to plan and implement activities.

4. Reconciliation between returnees and communities. This pillar took significantly longer to define, as the government initially preferred the focus to be on less politically sensitive infrastructure and livelihoods, and because other UN agencies and NGOs were already working in this space. The reconciliation pillar would not really start being implemented until 2021.

By mutual consent, there were several things the FFS did not get involved in, even if all parties were aware that these were serious issues for Iraq's future. First, the FFS would not construct new infrastructure. It would only rehabilitate

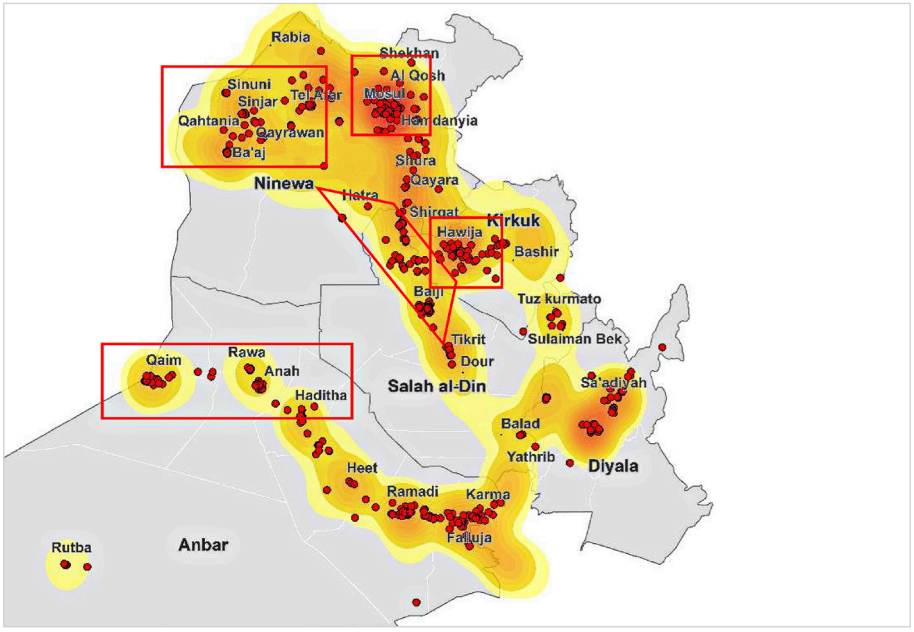
12 The FFS programme framework's outcomes were based on the percentage of returnees who returned to FFS-supported locations and found basic services good enough to stay, livelihood recipients who reported being better able to meet their needs, government beneficiaries who were better able to provide core services and increased levels of community engagement.

existing buildings (even if they were completely destroyed) that the government had secured the running costs for in their budget. Infrastructure would be rehabilitated back to its pre-war condition, albeit with more sustainable materials and equipment to increase capacity.[13] Second, the programme would not get involved in the staffing and use of the structures it rehabilitated. Once completed, structures were handed back to the Iraqi government, and UNDP's responsibility for the project would end. Third, the FFS would not get involved in political discussions, about for example the government's budget for ISIL-liberated areas or the possible demobilization of the PMF militias. This was simply too sensitive, and in any case not something one can programme one's way out of. Focusing on infrastructure and livelihoods without engaging in the wider political dimensions of stabilization meant the government could throw its full support behind the FFS and difficult conversations could be avoided, at least for the time being. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, this would in the long run lead to questions about the FFS's impact beyond the outcome level.

By keeping the FFS approach relatively simple, it could be rolled out in parallel based on a similar template across the five previously ISIL-occupied governorates of Anbar, Salaheddin, Diyala, Ninewah and Kirkuk. Aside from population centres like Ramadi, Fallujah and the Ninewah Plains, five so-called 'red box' geographical priority areas were selected for the FFS work: Western Anbar, the Baiji-Hatra corridor, Hawija, Mosul, and Western Ninewah. Each of these areas had a different context. For example, Anbar had long been disenfranchised by the Maliki government and was the gateway through which ISIL had pushed towards Baghdad. Its western area was porous and state authority had to be extended to stop cross-border infiltration. Mosul was the largest population centre in the north and had become a symbol of ISIL's control. Western Ninewah and the Ninewah Plains were home to religious minorities, including Christians, Yazidis, Turkmen, Shabaks, Kakai and Shia's, who had been prosecuted by ISIL and had been been trying to flee the country before ISIL was defeated. Despite these different contexts, the approach to all the areas was pretty similar: infrastructure, jobs and capacity building.

13 The FFS consistently avoided using the words 'construction' and 'reconstruction' in its programme documents as reconstruction implied that a building would be completely rebuilt to new standards and functions. Instead, the FFS used 'full rehabilitation' for structures that had been completely destroyed. Hospitals were an exception as these had to be entirely redesigned. The distinction between 'reconstruction' and 'full rehabilitation' was not always easy to explain to Iraqi counterparts.

Figure 1 FFS projects and 'red box' priority areas



The way in which the FFS was implemented was also unique for a stabilization programme. In other contexts, programmes such as these would often have been collaborations between different UN agencies and NGOs, with each doing what traditionally they are known for. Under an overarching framework, UNICEF would build schools, UNDP would do livelihoods, UNOPS would build roads, etcetera. While this sort of approach would build on the partners' expertise, it could also lead to drawn-out starting times, coordination issues and additional overhead costs for each agency.[14] Instead, the FFS was put under the direct management of the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General (DSRSG)'s office and implemented entirely by UNDP using its own procurement structures, via the

14 See Pilay, R. *A Selective review of literature relevant for the preparation of a stabilization offer for UNDP in the Arab states*. UNDP, New York, April 2018. An example of such a multiagency approach was the International Security and Stabilization Support Strategy (I4S) in the DRC, where coordinating UN agencies had become 'herding cats'. See Vries, Hugo de. *Going Around in Circles. The Challenges of Peacekeeping and Stabilization in the DR Congo*. Clingendael Conflict Research Unit, The Hague, 2015.

Iraqi private sector.[15] This 'firewall' around the FFS was considered controversial inside the wider UN at the time, but donors supported the approach. For a programme that had to be implemented rapidly, this would keep all eggs in one basket and the contractual- and decision-making process straightforward.

The decision to implement rehabilitation projects through the private sector rather than through NGOs shortened the lines and increased control as well. The Iraqi construction sector had sufficient technical capacity and the field presence to start working immediately in recently liberated areas, and by working directly with these companies, wages would stay in Iraqi workers' pockets. Cost-wise, there was not a great difference between using the private sector or going through other agencies or NGOs that would also have had to hire private construction companies to do the rehabilitation work and add their own overhead costs. The money saved on NGOs' overheads was spent on the large number of site engineers and procurement staff that UNDP had to hire to implement the FFS and oversee the work of the construction companies.[16] This would also mean UNDP itself taking on the responsibility of preventing corruption and other risks, which will be discussed later in this paper.

The Iraqi government set up its own parallel reconstruction fund, which would turn into the country's second-largest infrastructure programme. In 2015, the *Reconstruction Fund for Areas Affected by Terrorist Operations* (REFAATO) was set up under the management of the Council of Ministers.[17] It was partially funded by the government, to the tune of US$500 million, and by donors like the World Bank, the German development agency KFW, the government of Kuwait and the Islamic Development Bank.[18] In some ways, REFAATO was similar to the FFS. It worked in the same governorates (it just added the 'Baghdad belt' around the capital city and northern Babil) and also rehabilitated infrastructure through

15 The FFS was eventually moved from the office of the DSRSG to the office of the Resident Representative of UNDP when the functions of the DSRSG and UNDP Resident Coordinator were uncoupled in 2019.

16 UNDP. *FFS financial overview*. Presentation, 21 March 2024. By 2022, the FFS spent around 7 per cent of its overall expenses on consultant engineer salaries.

17 See International Organization for Migration (IOM). Iraq Returns Working Group meeting, 31 September 2021.

18 REFAATO does not publish its funding figures, but the government contribution has been communicated. Al-Jazeera. *Mosul's damaged bridges frustrate residents and efforts to rebuild*. 10 July 2019.

public tenders to enable people to return home.[19] In many ways, however, it was quite different. For one, it was less flexible. Projects had to be selected a year in advance and then had to wait for the government budget to be released, usually in April, meaning four months of implementation time were lost. It focused on infrastructure that was destroyed by more than 70 per cent, and did not undertake small, housing or livelihoods projects. REFAATO also seems to have experienced more political interference than the FFS.[20] Although the FFS coordinated with REFAATO and compared project lists to make sure there was no duplication of work, it never undertook joint projects.

By late 2016, the FFS was largely set up and rolling out projects. It had a straightforward, output-focused infrastructure- and livelihoods approach, high-level support from the Iraqi government, internal support from the DSRSG, and funding was increasing exponentially.

1.3 Rolling out across the north and west

The FFS did not start out with US$1.5 billion and a blank slate but was rolled out across the previously occupied governorates through a dynamic process. It depended, first, on the pace of the army offensive. In 2015, the Iraqi army took back Diyalah province, Tikrit and Sinjar and, in 2016, Ramadi, Fallujah and surrounding areas were liberated. In October 2016 the joint Iraqi army and Kurdish *Peshmerga* operation, 'We are coming, Ninewah', started on three fronts around Mosul and by the end of the year the battle for the city had started. Although parts of the countryside remained in ISIL hands, the extremist movement was now being pushed northwards and westwards towards the Syrian border. By early 2017, eastern Mosul, the Ninewah Plains and parts of western Ninewah had been liberated, and in July western Mosul was also liberated. By October, Hawija in Kirkuk had been liberated, and by November ISIL's last holdouts in Al-Qaim and Rawah, in Anbar, were retaken by the army. In December 2017, prime minister Abbadi announced that the government had reclaimed all occupied lands from ISIL. The FFS came in the wake of these operations, so areas

19 Reconstruction Fund for Areas Affected by Terroristic Operations (REFAATO). By late September 2021, it had completed close to 1,000 projects.

20 REFAATO staff told FFS staff informally that they were under pressure from national authorities to change priorities to quick and visible projects, like roads, during the 2021 election period. The REFAATO director was dismissed for allegations of corruption in June 2023.

that were liberated first, where security was manageable and more people had returned home, on average received more projects than others.

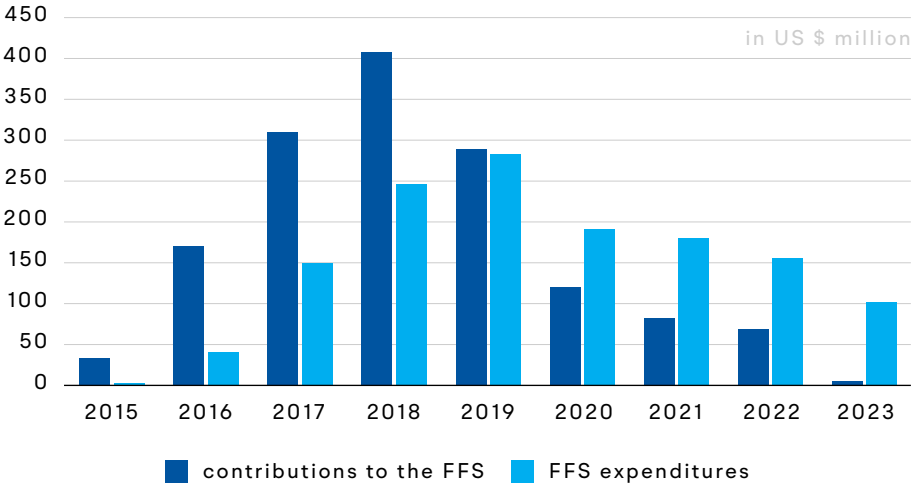
Second, the rollout depended on levels of damage. More funding went to the larger governorates of Anbar and Ninewah – which have sizable urban centres such as Mosul, Fallujah and Ramadi, and saw heavier fighting – than to the smaller governorates. Because the FFS worked only in areas that had been occupied by ISIL, parts of some governorates were also excluded.

Third, the rollout depended on the pace at which donors scaled up funding. The FFS received US$33.5 million in 2015 and $170.7m in 2016. Funding then went up sharply to $310.1m in 2017, peaking at $408m in 2018. It then gradually declined, to $289m in 2019, $120.5m in 2020, $83m in 2021, $69m in 2022. In its last year, 2023, it had dropped steeply to $5m. Because the FFS had been instructed by its donors and the government to spend whatever funding it received immediately, to show people a 'peace dividend', no funds were saved for later when new geographic areas became accessible for programming.

Fourth, and finally, the rollout depended on donor earmarking. The FFS was meant as a multi-donor trust fund without earmarking and, while most donors allowed the FFS to pick priority projects together with the local government, some of the bigger donors insisted that their contribution would go to specific areas. For example, once the Trump presidency took over the White House in 2017, USAID insisted on a sizable chunk of their FFS funding going to Christian areas in the Ninewah Plains.[21] Other donors, such as the KFW, preferred more thematic earmarking, for example for higher education and health. When politically prominent areas like Mosul and Sinjar were liberated, nearly all donors asked to fund projects there to increase their visibility to their domestic parliaments and the Baghdad government.

21 For a good overview of the White House's insistence on prioritizing funding to Christian areas and some of the problems this caused, see ProPublica. *How Mike Pence's Office meddled in foreign aid to reroute money to favored Christian groups*. July 2019.

Figure 2 FFS annual contributions vs expenditures[22]



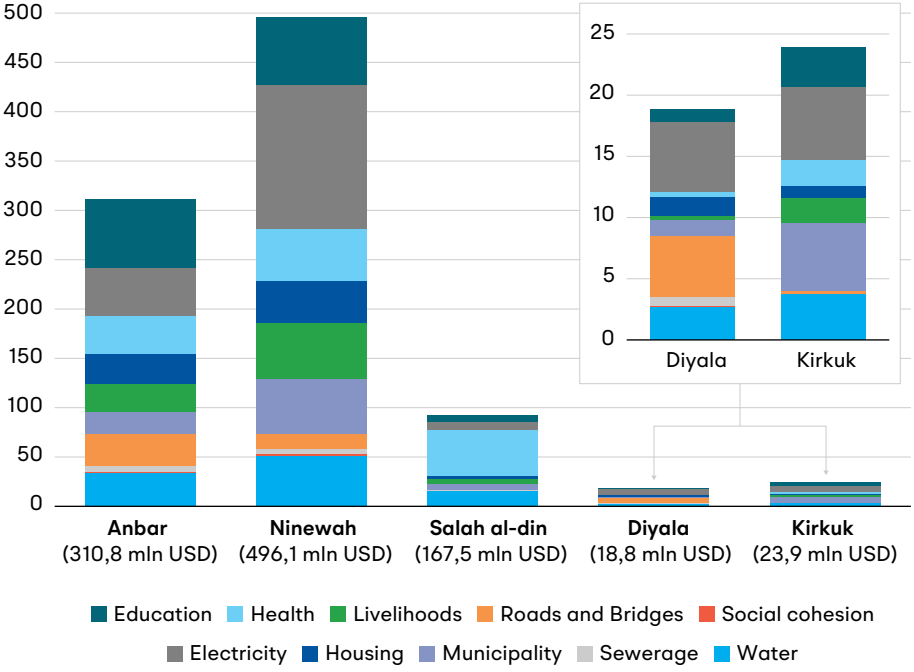
With so much funding at stake, it was always difficult to get a political consensus between the provinces on where the projects should go. The smaller governorates would have preferred a percentual budget division between the five provinces. The governor of Kirkuk, for example, complained about how few projects he had been given compared with other provinces. Kirkuk received 'only' US$23.9 million worth of projects up to the end of 2022, but this was because the province was liberated late, a large part of the province was never occupied by ISIL, and decision making there was complicated by political wrangling between Baghdad and Erbil.[23] The government of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) was frustrated that the FFS did not undertake any projects on its territory because it had not been occupied by ISIL. The KRI argued that as its Peshmerga units had fought against ISIL and because it hosted a significant part of the IDP population, it had a right to FFS support as well.[24]

22 FFS 2024, op. cit.

23 Both federal Iraq and the autonomous Kurdistan region consider Kirkuk part of their territory. This has led to a long back-and-forth with them trying to replace local administrators and outmaneuver each other.

24 The KRI government would occasionally raise this topic with UNDP and the federal Iraqi government but were told that as Kurdistan had not been occupied by ISIL, FFS donors were not willing to expand the programme. Moreover, there was already a separate UNDP programme for the KRI. The FFS would not become active in Kurdistan until 2020, when it built a few Covid clinics there.

Figure 3 Sectoral expenditures per governorate between 2017 and 2022[25]



At the national level, the DSRSG and the Secretary of the Council of Ministers (COMSEC) coordinated the programme and undertook high-level troubleshooting where needed. For the first years of the programme, the then-COMSEC, Dr Mehdi al-Alaq, took a proactive role in the FFS, pushing through approvals, bypassing ministerial bureaucracies where needed and troubleshooting with generals and provincial governors. In each province, a 'command cell', led by the governor, coordinated the line directorates, which worked directly with the FFS team and their engineers to assess potential projects, prioritize the most important ones and monitor implementation. Provincial Council politicians and Members of Parliament were not involved in the process to prevent politicization and keep the process as technical as possible.

25 UNDP. *FFS Annual Report*, 2022.

The extent to which governorates had a 'master plan' for reconstruction differed per province. Pre-war development plans were often outdated, government budgets unclear, there were barely any digitized data available, and government institutions were in a shambles. In some cases, governors had to force line directorate staff to return to work in areas vacated by ISIL. The directorates and FFS had to determine the needs almost from scratch. The FFS hired a 'small army' of local supervisor- and quality control engineers across Iraq on consultancy contracts. At the peak of the programme in late 2018, the FFS had almost 130 engineers for the three northern governorates – Ninewah, Kirkuk and Salah-al-Din.[26] It was easy for these engineers to travel in their own cars whereas (international) staff had to use convoys and get special permissions. The FFS developed a strong footprint in the areas where it worked. UNDP engineers worked closely every day with line directorate officials and local mayors and neighbourhood leaders, which built a level of trust, especially once projects started being implemented. The FFS had the luxury of sufficient funding, so it did not have to make too many difficult choices about which projects to do and which not to. This, and the need for speed, meant that assessments were carried out locally, and priorities were set without 'workshopping it to death' in provincial capitals.

To give an example of how hands-on these assessments often had to be, in early 2017, the line directorate of education in West-Mosul was unable to give the FFS a list of all the schools with their coordinates and classroom capacity, and line directorate engineers were afraid to go into badly destroyed neighbourhoods. Over a few weeks, FFS and UNICEF organized two dozen missions to check the level of damage in more than 200 schools in West Mosul. Education directorate engineers joined FFS engineers and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) teams managed by the UN demining agency UNMAS in their armoured cars. FFS then roughly calculated repair costs and the Education directorate prioritized schools based on geographical spread and coverage. It then divided the schools to be repaired between UNDP, UNICEF and different NGOs. This sort of 'hands on' priority setting was repeated many times across the country.

26 This number would go down later, based on the workload. By late 2022, the team in northern Iraq consisted of around 50 engineers. Iraqi staff were always in the majority in the FFS. International staff were concentrated in management, reporting, communications and finance roles.

1.4 Infrastructure and jobs

In most locations, the first work to be undertaken was cash-for-work rubble clearance from the main streets, houses and government structures. This not only provided a quick source of income for people but also made engineering assessments and subsequent rehabilitation work easier. Rubble clearance would continue for the next few years. Infrastructure projects had different timelines. Rehabilitating schools and primary health centres (PHCs) usually took around four to six months to complete, depending on levels of damage. Housing work was a bit slower to start, mainly because it took time to set up the local decision-making structures in the neighbourhoods. Once started, the average project to repair around 400 houses took about four months. Complicated projects – like water treatment plants, electrical substations, bridges and the provision of specialized equipment – took around a year and half as this work required longer assessments and bringing in technical equipment from abroad. The longest running projects – of up to two or three years – were hospitals and the provision of medical equipment, as these required consultancy work to redesign structures in line with modern medical standards.

Wherever possible, structures were 'built back better' – water treatment plants' capacity was boosted with new pumps, hospitals were rebuilt in line with international hospital standards, high-quality power transformers were installed at electrical substations, durable air-conditioning systems and specialized vehicles were provided, projects were delivered with sets of spare parts, etcetera. Government staff were also trained on maintenance and the proper use of equipment.

Infrastructure projects were implemented in a straightforward way. FFS engineers and line directorates drafted the project documents ('bill of quantity' – BoQ) together. These would be double checked by UNDP's international engineers and then procured through an open tender by UNDP's service centre. Procurement of the average project tended to take around three to six months. This may seem like a long time, but considering the risk of corruption and the need to make sure companies were legitimate, it was a workable timeline. One weak point in procurement was the supply of medical equipment, especially after 2020 when the Covid crisis increased the demand (and prices) for specialized medical equipment worldwide. Procurement of such equipment took longer, with some completed hospitals waiting several months for equipment to

arrive. Nearly all projects – 95 per cent – were undertaken by Iraqi companies, using workers from the areas where the projects were being implemented.

Implementation was managed by the FFS team and monitored by the local line directorates representing the federal government. After completion, projects were handed back to the local directorates, which made sure they were put to use. Livelihoods projects were also implemented through local contractors, though a few were carried out by NGOs. Livelihoods projects hired local people, including as many women as possible, and tried to ensure that no one was hired twice to spread the benefits of the project as widely as possible. To mitigate the cultural bias against women working in public, the FFS set up a series of women-only livelihoods projects inside schools or other enclosed compounds, away from the public eye. Workers on all projects were trained in explosive hazard awareness by UNMAS. Companies coordinated with UNMAS and other demining agencies to remove unexploded ordnance and with the civil defence agency to dispose of bodies found under the rubble.[27]

Between 2016 and 2019, the FFS became the biggest rehabilitation programme in Iraq. By the end of 2022, it had mobilized an unprecedented US$1.5 billion for projects, making it UNDP's largest programme worldwide.[28] Across five governorates, the programme had undertaken more than 3,000 projects and, among others, rehabilitated almost 35,000 houses for some 150,000 people, 165 water treatment plants, 126 electrical substations, 118 primary health centres, 16 hospitals, 568 schools, 109 university buildings, 149 government offices and workshops, 18 bridges, and 34 police stations and courts. After Covid broke out in 2020, the FFS built and equipped 19 Covid wards across the country. The programme provided 45,000 temporary cash-for-work jobs and distributed more than 3,800 business grants and more than 6,200 cash grants. According to its estimates, the FFS provided help to some 8 million beneficiaries and supported the return of 4.9 million people.[29]

27 FFS contractors found many dead bodies during rubble clearance and infrastructure projects. For example, 105 bodies were dug up during reconstruction of the playground at Ibn Sinaa school in Mosul, which was used as a burial ground during the occupation. The remains of (suspected) ISIL members were removed by the armed forces, those of other people by the civil defence.

28 Before the Taliban took control in Kabul in 2022, UNDP's largest programme worldwide was the Law and Order Trust Fund (LOTFA) in Afghanistan. However, LOTFA was a fund to pay police salaries. It did not implement projects like the FFS.

29 UNDP. *Transition Strategy: Funding Facility for Stabilization*, August 2022.

2 Rebuilding Mosul

Once the liberation of Iraq was gathering steam, all eyes became fixed on Iraq's second city, Mosul, where the FFS would undertake some of its most extensive and complicated work.[30] Mosul had been the great commercial and academic hub of the north, and one of the largest Sunni-majority cities in the country. It was also a symbolic city for ISIL, where its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, had proclaimed ISIL's 'caliphate' from the minbar of the Al-Nouri Mosque.[31] It was ISIL's last great urban hold-out because when it was driven from the city it had to fall back to the smaller towns and rural backcountry and deserts of western Ninewah and Hawija.

2.1 Moving into Mosul: 2016–2017

The liberation of Mosul, between October 2016 and July 2017, has been compared to the Second World War Battle of Stalingrad in terms of the destruction it left in its wake. The city's east bank was less damaged as ISIL had crossed the Tigris River in the face of the army offensive and dug in on the west side. Much of the damage on the east bank was the result of air strikes targeted at ISIL positions and workshops, or ISIL's destruction of specific infrastructure like bridges and theft of equipment and machinery. The army surrounded the west bank in a semicircle and army units gradually moved inwards, fighting ISIL back into the old city where it held out for a few months with the river at its back. It was in this last phase of the war, when the small streets of the old city forced the army to revert to bloody street-by-street fighting, when a few neighbourhoods were practically levelled. By July 2017, when the Iraqi government announced the defeat of ISIL and the liberation of Mosul, some 900,000 people had fled the city and were staying in IDP camps or with family elsewhere in the country.[32]

30 For good sources on ISIL's occupation of Mosul and the liberation battle, see Al-Aqeedi, R. *Caliphatelism?* The American Interest Vol. 10(4), February 2015; BBC. *How the battle for Mosul unfolded*, 10 July 2017; Sallon, H. *L'Etat Islamique de Mossoul. Histoire d'une entreprise totalitaire.* La Decouverte, Paris, 2018; Verini, J. *They Will Have to Die Now. Mosul and the Fall of the Caliphate.* W.W. Norton, 2019.

31 The 12th century Al-Nouri Mosque may have been chosen for this announcement because ISIL tried to symbolically associate itself with its builder, Nour ad-Din Zangi. Zangi united the governorates of Aleppo and Mosul into a single state in 1149 and had fought in the Second Crusade.

32 MSF 2018, op. cit., pg. 10.

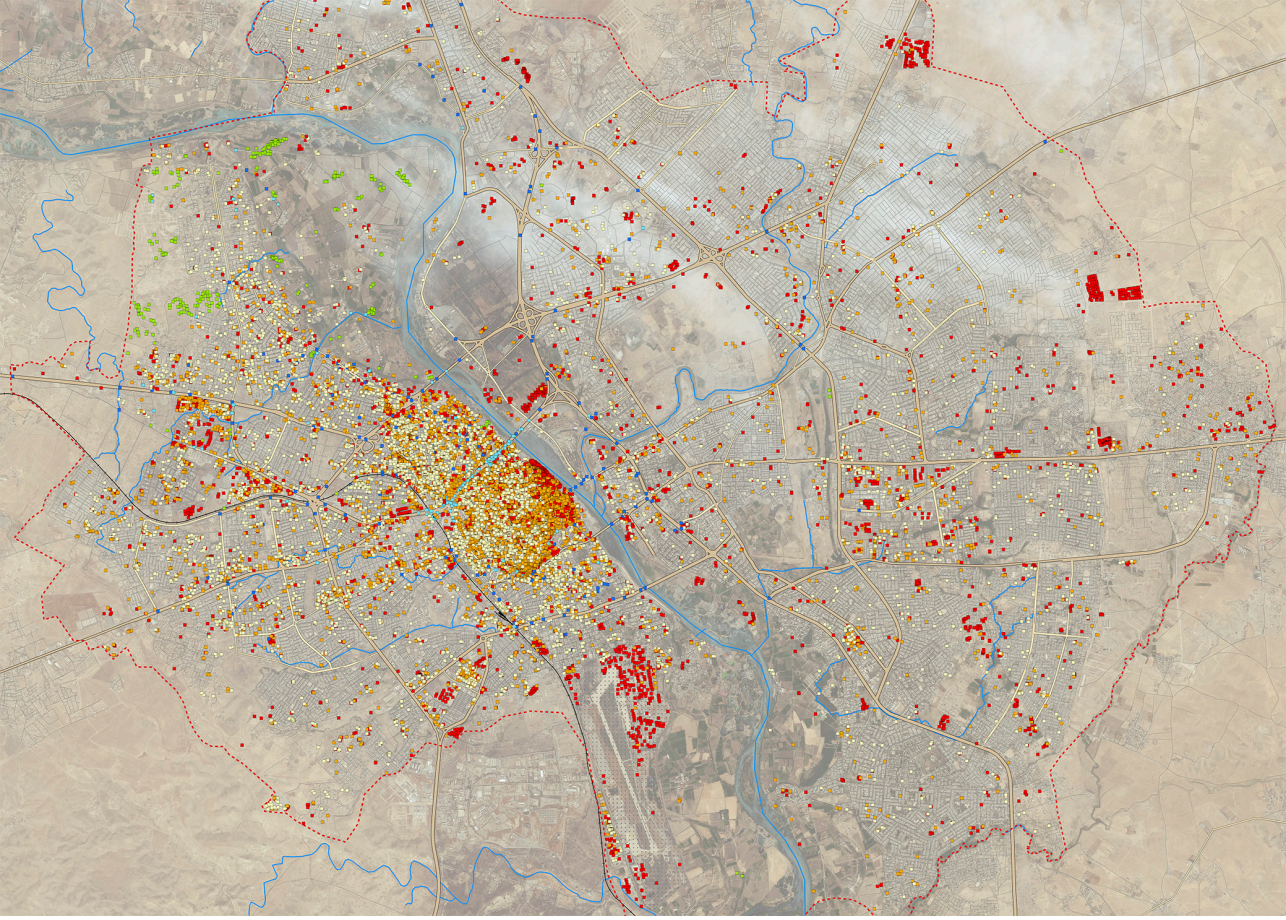


Figure 4 Levels of damage across Mosul, August 2017[33]

The FFS started assessments in eastern Mosul in December 2016 and gradually moved into the city behind the advancing front line. Assessments on the southern outskirts of western Mosul started in April 2017 while fighting was underway in the city centre, a few kilometres away. The further the assessment progressed into the centre of the city, the more apparent it became that the FFS would not only have to deal with the sheer scale of destruction, but also with more structural problems. Mosul had been growing rapidly over previous decades without its infrastructure keeping up and was already 'creaking at the seams' when ISIL invaded it. Its latest urban development plan dating from 2008 had barely been implemented. There was a shortage of houses for the tens of thousands of people who had moved there from the countryside in search of jobs.[34] The city received only between 40 and 60 per cent of its the electricity it

33 UNOSAT-UNITAR, imagery analysis, 4 August 2017.

34 UNDP. FFS sectoral assessments, 2021 (unpublished, in possession of the author). Government estimates from before the war showed that around 100,000 new homes were needed for Baghdad and Mosul together, as the two fastest-growing cities in Iraq outside the Kurdistan region.

needed from the national grid, leading to frequent cuts and load-shedding.[35] Mosul needed additional water treatment plants and an overhaul of its leaking water pipe system. It did not have a sewer network, and reliance on septic tanks had gradually polluted the city's groundwater. Schools were overcrowded, and few and far between on the periphery of the city. Many hospitals had been built in the 1980s and no longer met modern medical standards.

The Iraqi government and international partners did not have the patience to wait for a worked-out urban plan before projects in Mosul could start. The FFS had organized workshops in October 2016 to set priorities for Mosul's reconstruction, but the governor's representatives had provided only very limited inputs. The FFS was told to start work, while UN-Habitat and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) worked in parallel with the Ninewah authorities on the *Initial planning framework for the reconstruction of Mosul*. The idea was that these efforts would dovetail at some point, but the urban plan that was presented in January 2019 was never really adopted by the provincial government. This had a lot to do with mismatched expectations. For the UN, the framework served as the start of a conversation towards a concept of urban reconstruction, whereas the provincial government was mainly interested in using the framework for immediate fundraising. As such, the FFS rehabilitation works were never based on a wider urban vision but worked sector-by-sector with the relevant line directorates to restore what existed and build it back better where possible. This meant that some of the pre-2014 capacity problems would remain an issue in the long term.

35 Ninewah governorate receives approximately 9.4 per cent (around 850–950 MW) of Iraq's electrical power. This covers around 60 per cent of the province's needs in summer, and only 40 per cent in winter. FFS sectoral assessments, 2021 (unpublished, in possession of the author).

2.2 A hive of activity: 2017–2022

Between 2017 and the end of 2022, almost 1,000 stabilization projects were undertaken in Mosul for some US$300 million. In no other area in Iraq was there such a concentration of financial resources.[36]

Over five years, around 1 million people came (back) to Mosul, most of whom (900,000) were IDPs from the city. Thousands more came from elsewhere looking for safety, or because their houses had been destroyed and they were moving in with family, or from the countryside in search of jobs.[37] This added pressure on the available homes. Tens of thousands of houses in Mosul had been badly damaged in the fighting, especially in the old city. There was little government support to rebuild private homes. Although it had a compensation scheme for people to rebuild their homes, obtaining the grant was a long and complicated process and the government seemed to have little budget to reimburse people.[38] As a result, most of the housing work was done either by the people themselves, or by international actors, of which UNDP was the largest. Between 2017 and 2022, the FFS rehabilitated more than 12,000 houses in West Mosul, supporting around 110,000 people to return home.[39] This was a labour-intensive process. The FFS housing team coordinated with the local *mukhtars* (neighbourhood leaders) and had to go street-by-street, house-by-house to assess damage. These assessments showed how socially diverse Mosul's neighbourhoods could be. In the early stages of the assessments, people in the more conservative neighbourhoods on the periphery of the city could be quite suspicious and unwilling to share information with the FFS engineers. Their attitude changed markedly once rehabilitation began.

36 Mosul's budget of around US$300 million represented almost 21.5 per cent of FFS resources. Almost one-third of FFS projects were undertaken in Mosul.

37 IOM. Displacement Tracking Mechanism (DTM), Iraq Master List Report, April–June 2022.

38 Global Protection Cluster. Housing, Land and Property (HLP) sub-cluster, Iraq. *Property Compensation Guidelines*, 2022. The Compensation Committee for Victims is responsible for all cases of lost property dating back to 2003 and there is a backlog of tens of thousands of cases. The application process consists of a dozen steps and takes on average three to six months. Even if a claim is granted, the committee usually only reimburses 50 per cent of the requested sum.

39 The project only worked in West Mosul as houses in East Mosul tended to be less damaged and because the majority of IDPs (705,000 out of the 900,000) came from West Mosul.

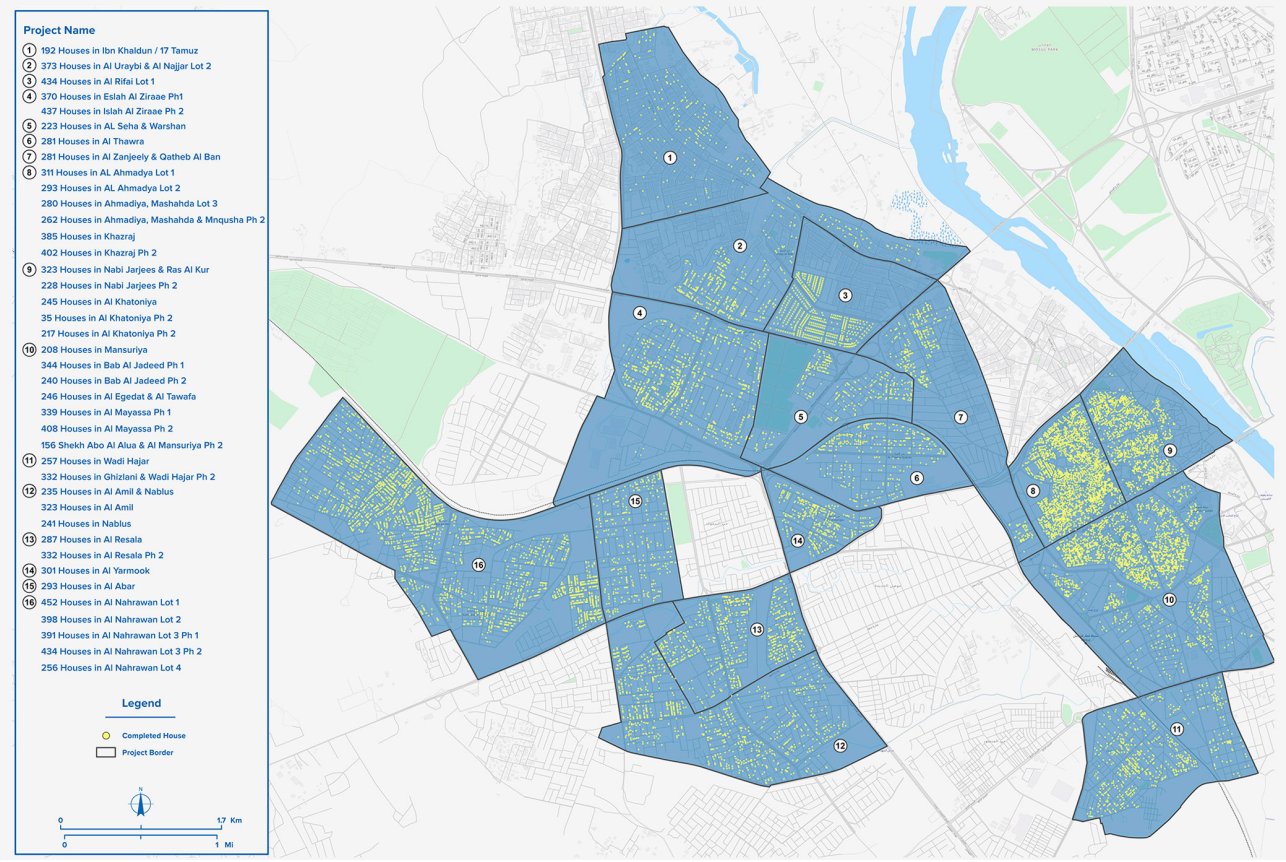


Figure 5 FFS housing programme in Mosul 2017–2022[40]

Any privately owned house that was damaged by fighting or terrorist activities by less than approximately 60 per cent could be repaired. This cut-off point was important, even if it seemed cruel to exclude people who most needed support. As the budget was limited, repairing houses that were partially damaged allowed the FFS to repair more homes and enable more people to return.[41] It also prevented having to make difficult choices between destroyed houses, or people 'double-dipping' by also approaching the government reparations committee. Each homeowner signed off on the proposed works with the *mukhtar* as a witness.[42] Houses in the old city were repaired according to criteria set by the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and UNESCO to ensure that they were in line with heritage requirements. These repairs were not always easy, as the scale of

40 Map by UNDP, November 2022, unpublished, in possession of the author.

41 Exceptions could be made if a house had structural damage that endangered the family inside, in which case additional budget could be spent to secure the structure. In some cases, however, the FFS engineers could only advise people to leave their house as it could collapse on top of them.

42 If a homeowner no longer had property documents, or they were made out in someone else's name, FFS engineers would check with the neighbours and the mukhtar to confirm that they were the rightful owners.

destruction in the old city was enormous, meaning tough choices had to be made about what to repair and what to leave. Also, the brittle structure of the old walls meant that some repair work was damaged by heavy rains in 2019 and 2020 or a year later had stains revealing leaks.

A particular complication came with the so-called 'ISIS homes' – houses owned by relatives of suspected members of the extremist group. UNDP did not differentiate between homeowners and tried to repair the homes of supposed 'ISIS families', but this did not always go down well with their neighbours. In more peripheral, conservative neighbourhoods, where people had migrated from the countryside in tribal 'blocs', ISIS-associated families seemed more accepted[43] than in other neighbourhoods and in the old city. FFS engineers would be prevented from including such homes by the local authorities, *mukhtars* afraid of being arrested for supporting such renovations, the police or even neighbours.[44] While 'ISIS families' gained a lot of attention, it is important to note that they made up less than 1 per cent of the assessed houses.

In terms of infrastructure for basic services, the FFS focused on water, bridges, electricity, education, healthcare, police and justice, and municipal projects.[45] Some of the key results were as follows:

– Forty electrical distribution and transmission sub-stations were repaired, which increased the power supply from the grid from a few hours per day in 2017 to around 12–13 hours per day in summer, and 6–8 hours per day in winter. Hundreds of distribution transformers were replaced, and the government's transformer repair workshop was rehabilitated and equipped.

43 UNDP's C2RI conflict analysis (2022) notes that tribal elders and notables were more likely to forgive former ISIL associates than others, to calm tensions in their communities. UNDP. Community-based reconciliation and reintegration in Iraq (C2RI) conflict analysis, August 2022. Overall, Moslawi reactions confirmed the findings of the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative's perception survey of 2020, where half of Moslawis wanted all ranks of ISIL to be held accountable without amnesty (53%.) Harvard Humanitarian Initiative. *Never Forget. Views on peace and justice within conflict-affected communities in northern Iraq*. 2020.

44 In such situations, the FFS would complete all the houses in the contract first and then return at the end of the project and again ask the local community if the house of the 'ISIL family' could be repaired since their own houses had already been repaired.

45 The data in these paragraphs is based on the FFS's sectoral assessments, undertaken in late 2021 by UNDP consultants working directly with the line directorates in Mosul (unpublished, in possession of the author).

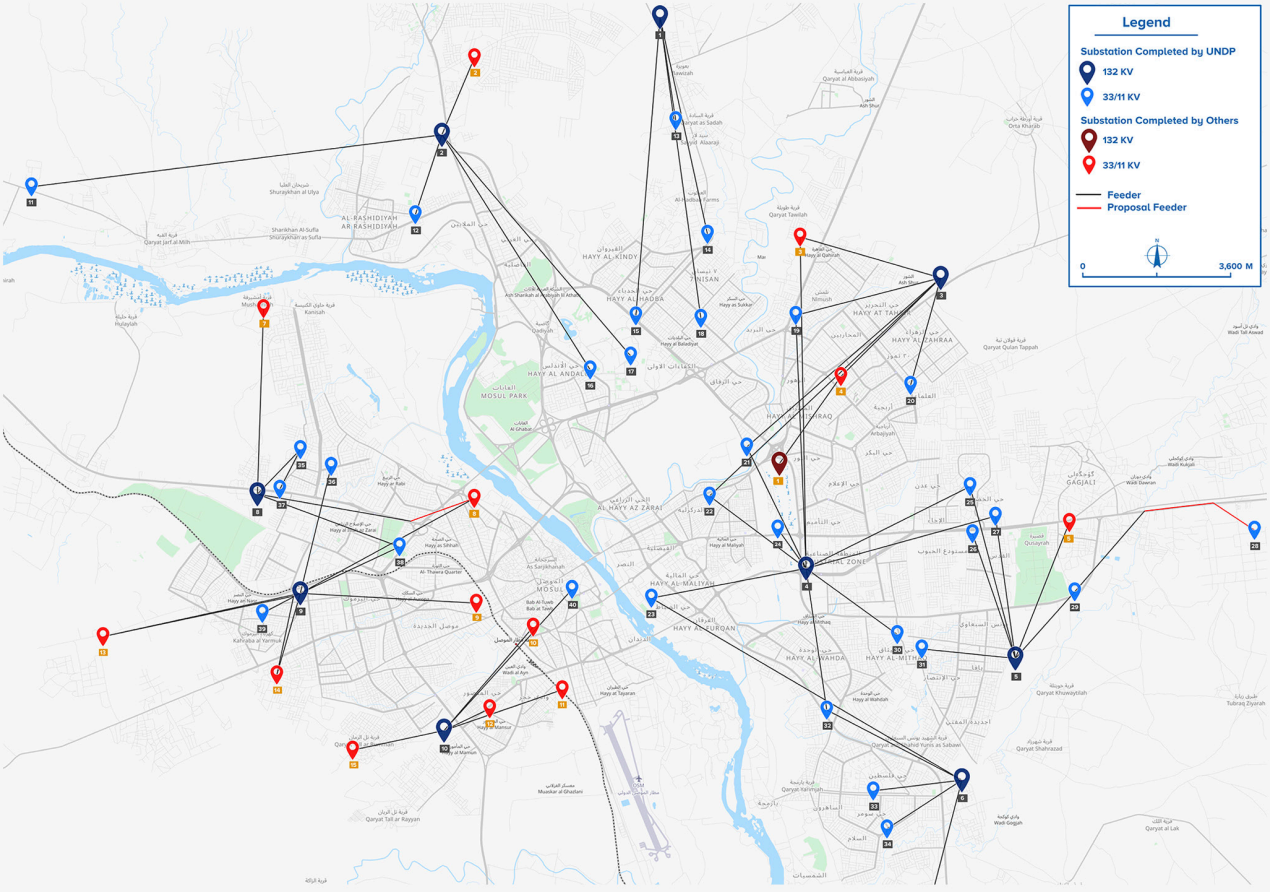


Figure 6 FFS electrical substations in Mosul 2017–2022[46]

– Nine of the eleven water treatment plants in the city were repaired, and by 2022 were pumping around 61,000 cubic metres of drinking water per hour, 20 per cent more than in 2014. While the FFS was working on the plants, ICRC and various NGOs were repairing the pumping stations across the city to stabilize the water pressure. Water lines, sewage pipes, box culverts and storm drains were repaired in more than 70 locations. The sewage treatment facility at the hospital complex was repaired. The water and sewerage directorate buildings and the groundwater directorate building were also rehabilitated.

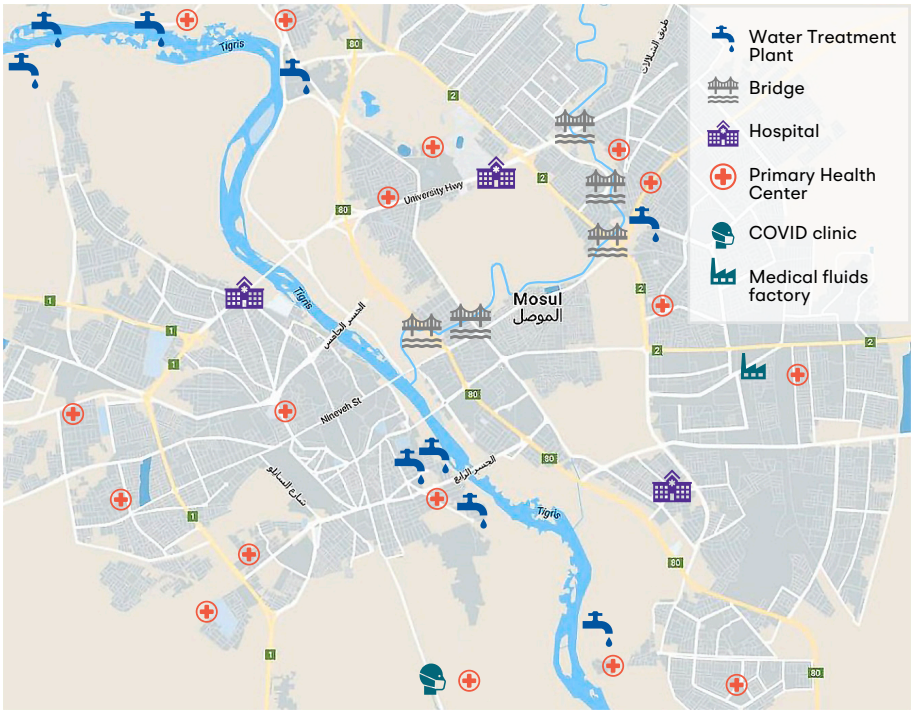
– The FFS rebuilt five bridges – Muthanna, Sukar, Saidati Jamiliya, Sanharib and Suess – across the Khosr river, a tributary of the Tigris. At the same time, the bridges across the Tigris were being repaired by the World Bank and REFAATO.

– The most complicated sector was health. By the end of the war, 14 of Mosul's hospitals were in ruins, and health services reorganized across ten poorly equipped container-based hospitals. Of the city's 3,200 hospital beds, only

46 Map by UNDP, November 2022, unpublished, in possession of the author.

1,000 remained. At the government's request, UNDP focused on specialized hospitals and hired international companies to fully redesign and rebuild six hospitals: Ibn al-Atheer Pediatric Hospital, Mosul Oncology Hospital, al-Batool Maternity Hospital and its Fertility Clinic, the Blood Bank and the Radiology Unit.[47] The FFS also rehabilitated and equipped a surgical unit at al Salam hospital and built and equipped a 20-bed container-based Covid hospital. In addition, 17 of the city's 39 primary healthcare clinics were rehabilitated and provided with specialized medical equipment and furniture. Sixteen ambulances were repaired and equipped. Finally, the FFS rehabilitated and equipped the medical (intravenous) fluids factory, which served hospitals across Iraq.

Figure 7 Water, bridges and health projects in Mosul 2017-2022[48]

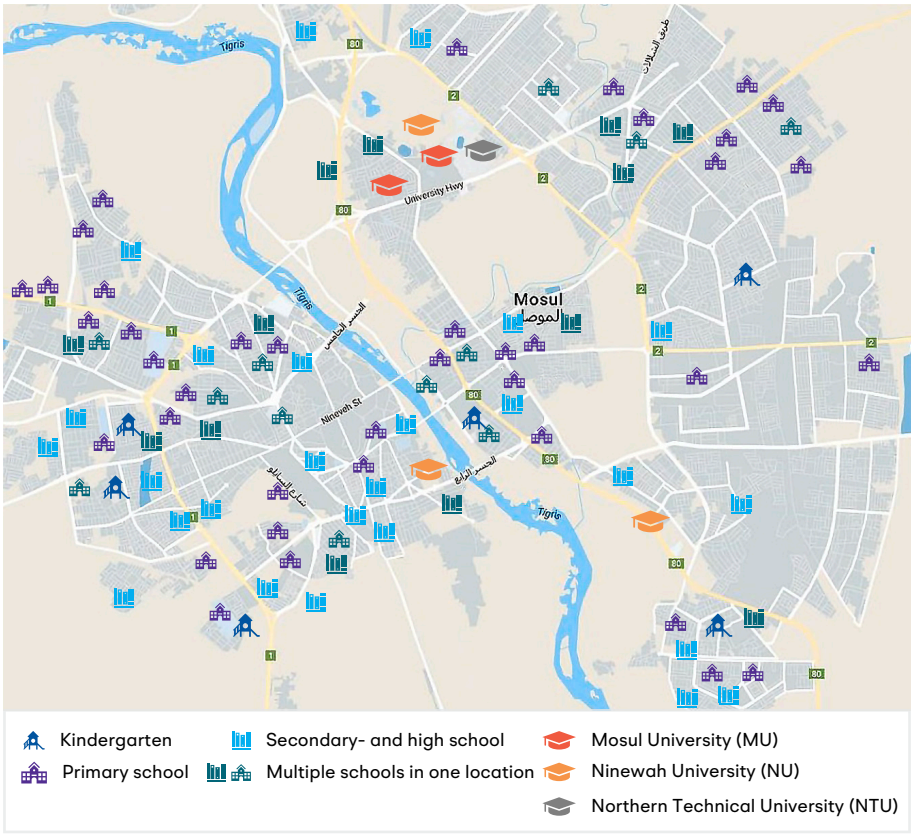


47 At the time of writing (April 2024), the Oncology hospital is still under reconstruction. Originally the FFS commissioned a new design for the West-Mosul General Hospital as well, but as the rebuilding of the Oncology hospital was estimated to cost considerably more than expected, the government asked UNDP to use the general hospital budget for the oncology hospital instead.

48 Map by the author, based on FFS project locations.

– In terms of education, 164 primary, secondary and high schools were rehabilitated and furnished, enabling around 90,000 students to go back to school. One of these schools was Sharqiyah high school, the oldest school in Mosul, dating from 1905. Five vocational training institutes were rehabilitated and equipped.

Figure 8 Education projects in Mosul, 2017-2022[49]



– The FFS invested heavily in Mosul University, the second university in Iraq, rehabilitating lecture halls, laboratories, student facilities and other structures, including the university's famous Central Library, which was touted

49 Map by the author, based on FFS project locations.

internationally as a sign that the city was 'returning to normal'.[50] By the end of 2022, 121 higher education-related projects had been completed at Mosul University as well as the two smaller colleges in the city, Northern Technical University and Ninewah University, including the latter's Jawsach campus on the west bank and its Nursing and Pharmacy College. By late 2022, Mosul University took on more students than in 2014, going from 40,000 to 60,000 students.

- The FFS was one of the few international agencies to support 'blueing the green', supporting the police to take over security tasks from the army. ISIL had blown up nearly every police station in the city, so the FFS rebuilt and furnished nine police stations and the police's administrative HQ to support the deployment of several thousand police officers. Two vetting centres were also rehabilitated, to better enable the security services to screen returnees to the city.

- The three main courts of Mosul's 'justice city' were rebuilt – the Court of Appeal, Criminal Court and Property Court – allowing the various temporary courts scattered across the province to be once again centralized in Mosul.[51] The destroyed Mosul prison was not rehabilitated, however, due to donor concerns over possible future human rights abuses in the prison system.

- The FFS undertook a variety of projects under the general heading of 'municipality', which included the provision of more than 80 specialized garbage-, tipper- and water trucks, the rehabilitation of municipal buildings, warehouses and vehicle repair workshops, and the repair of public markets, intersections, parks and around 100 km of internal roads.[52]

- Finally, a limited number of infrastructures were rebuilt to provide jobs, though only after careful market assessments. Mosul used to be home to several dozen publicly owned factories, which had been kept in business by

50 The 2022 re-opening of the library was covered in The Guardian, France24, BBC News and Al-Monitor.

51 Nine different courts operated out of these three buildings: appeals, personal status, torts, investigations, domestic violence, first instance, integrity, criminal investigations, and juvenile courts. The specialized court for terrorism operated out of Tel Keyf.

52 Despite frequent requests from the government, the FFS usually did not get involved in providing vehicles that could be used for a different purpose, such as cars or motorbikes, and did not provide 'consumables' like petrol or generator oil.

protectionist policies.[53] Not only would it have been prohibitively expensive to rehabilitate factories, but there was also active pushback from factory management against anything remotely sounding like privatization. Because there was a market for their goods, works were undertaken at the city's stone crusher, cement factory and Waladi textile factory, but not in other industrial areas.

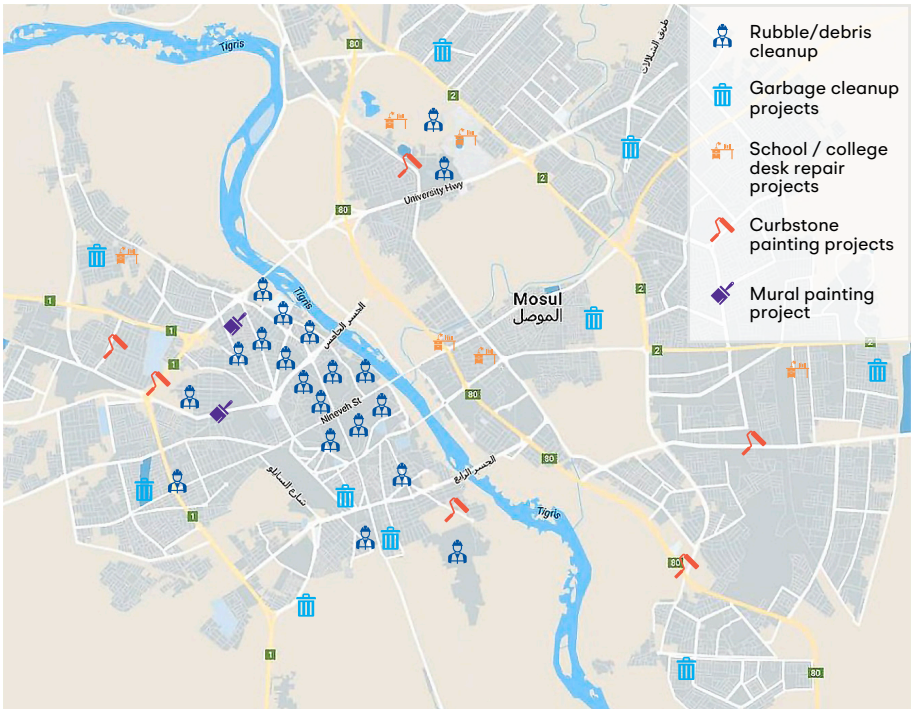
Figure 9 Police and justice, municipality and industry projects 2017-2022[54]

53 The UNDP's IEO evaluation (2019, op. cit.) notes that only one-quarter of state-owned factories are profitable.

54 Map by the author, based on FFS project locations.

In addition to the rehabilitation works, the FFS ran livelihoods projects in Mosul to provide people with a small income to keep their heads above water. In total, some 22,000 people were provided with short-term, usually 40-day cash-for-work, jobs. These people cleared 1.2 million tonnes of rubble, debris and garbage from the streets, repaired almost 20,000 school desks and painted many kilometres of curb stones. Workers were recruited through public announcements and paid US$20 a day, significantly more than the average for a daily worker on the public payroll.[55] In later years, the livelihoods project also provided cash grants to 1,400 female-headed households and skills training to 1,100 people in small- and medium sized enterprises.

Figure 10 FFS cash-for-work projects in Mosul 2017–2018[56]



55 20 US$/day is based on the UN livelihoods cluster criteria. The average salary for a daily worker in the public sector is around 8 US$/day.

56 Map by the author, based on FFS project locations.

By the end of 2022, significant challenges remained in the city. Exact numbers are difficult to come by, but some 22,000 houses seem to still be destroyed, and another 13,000 or so badly damaged. Water pipes across the city are old, broken and leaking, losing up to half of their water every day.[57] Climate change is affecting water levels in the Tigris and the depth of the city's aquifer, requiring a fundamental re-think of how water is stored and managed. Iraq does not produce enough electricity for its population's needs, and Mosul is at its limit. Ideally, the city would build additional distribution systems to stabilize the power flow. Thinking about solar power as an alternative to running diesel generators with cheap petrol is only in its very early stages. Schools are still overcrowded, with many schools running double (some even triple) shifts with up to 80 children per classroom.[58] Around one-third of teachers in Ninewah province are not salaried or trained as teachers but, for example, engineers teaching mathematics or translators teaching English.[59] The health sector needs an investment of billions of dollars to rebuild hospitals and provide modern medical equipment. The police indicated that it was understaffed, with 27,000 police officers (of which only 57 are female) for the whole province, each police station responsible for protecting tens of thousands of people. The city has no decent detention cells and no central prison.[60] There are only 50 judges handling almost 6,000 court cases per year, with no digitized case management system. The city has no integrated waste disposal and recycling system, and no sewer system. Garbage is either burned in old, polluting incinerators, or dumped outside of town, so Mosul's environment is getting unhealthier every day. Unemployment remains rampant.

57 West-Mosul loses up to 60 per cent of its water, East Mosul loses up to 37 per cent. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). *A comprehensive assessment of potable water supply services in Mosul city. Short-term and long-term planning for the urban water system.* Hydroconseil, Urba consulting and Ax'eau. June 2021.

58 Mosul has 674 schools for some 400,000 students. The average over-subscribed rate of these schools is 178 per cent, although there are significant differences between neighbourhoods.

59 The Department of Education has 43,000 teachers on the payroll across Ninewah, and 22,000 unpaid volunteer teachers.

60 There were only 31 holding cells in the city, usually converted rooms in houses.

Even so, Mosul in 2022 was visibly on the mend.[61] The streets were cleared of rubble; the majority of IDPs had returned home, even if many in West Mosul were still living in damaged houses; electricity and water were back on, even if there were still power shortages and water pressure was down; children were going back to school, even if the classrooms were overcrowded; PHCs and hospitals were gradually coming back online; Mosul university was booming; and police were once again patrolling the streets. The FFS was only one of several contributing actors, with extensive works having been undertaken by the Iraqi people themselves, REFAATO and the government, and other UN agencies and NGOs. However, as the largest infrastructure rehabilitation programme in the city, even the most ardent UN critic would probably agree that the FFS had played an important role.

61 It is not easy to quantify to what extent Mosul has recovered. There is little digital data from before 2014 available, there were no baselines set before the work started, and no overall 'master tracking sheet' for the city that recorded all the work done and results achieved by national and international actors.

3 Three implementation issues in and around Mosul

Besides corruption, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, there were three topics that came up as potential concerns during the design stages of the FFS: insecurity, coordination and government capacity. Insecurity and coordination turned out to be less problematic than expected, but government capacity was a sizable challenge.

3.1 Insecurity

The FFS rolled out right behind the frontline, sometimes with fighting still ongoing a few kilometres away. This was rather a new experience for UNDP, which usually comes in only once fighting has ceased. UNDP set up its own security section rather than relying on the UN's security division UNDSS and got the programme criticality of FFS missions changed to PC1, the same category as urgent humanitarian missions. The DSRSG had earlier set up a civil-military coordination cell (CIMCORD) that undertook frontline missions and coordinated with the Iraqi army to facilitate missions such as the FFS's. This allowed UNDP teams to go behind the front line with army escorts to assess projects.

Once the battle to liberate Mosul was over, insecurity wasn't as bad as initially feared. The chief concern at the time was that ISIL would launch attacks, or that rehabilitation works would come to a halt due to the presence of unexploded ordnance (UXOs) or improvised explosive devices (IEDs). In reality, a few attacks occurred, but these incidents often seemed to be linked to conflicts between the PMF and local actors and did not target rehabilitation works.[62] Access was

62 In 2018, there were clashes between the PMF and the SWAT police in east Mosul and threats made to shop owners. See IN2. Mosul: at a glance. Mosul atmospherics summary: 21 October 2018, 22 March 2019. Unpublished, in possession of the author. There was a brief spike of violence in early July 2018, when a gunman shot at UNMAS contractors at the Mosul airport, the army undertook operations in Abu Sayf village to the south of the city and three people in Rabee area were found beheaded. UN missions to the city were halted for about two weeks. No further halts to missions occurred in the following years, except during the Covid lockdown.

occasionally an issue outside Mosul, where the PMF controlled certain areas and did not always respect UNDP's access letters from the Iraqi military, leading to (manageable) delays. Since the PMF was not involved in securing Mosul and only manned checkpoints at the edge of the city, security coordination was through army channels, which had a well-defined procedure. Right after the liberation, army units were lodging in schools, water treatment plants and other infrastructure that the FFS had to assess. This occasionally led to delays, some generators were stolen, and in some cases army units tried to push FFS cash-for-work crews to clean their lodgings. After about six months, most army units had been redeployed outside the city, and there were no further issues with them.

Unexploded ordnance (UXO) was a major issue in Mosul. Between 2017 and the end of 2022, UNMAS cleared more than 62,000 UXOs across the city, the majority of which were mortars and rockets left over from the fighting and could be cleared relatively quickly.[63] Fortunately, IEDs and boobytraps made up only around 4–5 per cent of all finds and were mainly clustered in former ISIL command centres like Al Shifaa hospital complex. FFS provided UNMAS with lists of project sites to check and clear, and the demining agency worked its way through them methodically. UNMAS teams initially accompanied FFS engineers during assessments, to make sure they stayed safe. FFS contractors and daily workers were trained by UNMAS in UXO awareness, and UNMAS had teams on standby in case explosives were found during the work. In almost 1,000 FFS projects in Mosul, not a single worker was hurt by a UXO.

The FFS was fortunate with its timing for UXO clearance in Mosul. UNMAS was relatively free to undertake the work up to about 2020, after which most of the city had been cleared. From 2020 onwards, the Ministry of Defense and the government demining agency (DMA) increasingly complicated UNMAS approval procedures, which slowed down the work. If this had been the situation in 2017, infrastructure rehabilitation would probably have proceeded much more slowly.

63 Author's notes from an UNMAS presentation in late 2022. UNMAS received considerable funding by linking its work to the FFS. DSRSG Grande strongly promoted UNMAS with donors as the 'enabler' of the FFS.

3.2 Coordination

There was initial concern that, with the number of resources and aid organizations coming into northern Iraq, government partners would 'shop around' projects and coordination would become an issue. As it turned out, the technical scope of the FFS made coordination less of a problem than expected. Few other UN agencies or NGOs rebuilt electrical substations or hospitals or provided specialized medical equipment. If there was overlap with the work of other organisations, which mainly happened when rehabilitating schools, PHCs and houses, and when undertaking livelihoods projects, there was so much work to do that projects could be moved between organizations relatively easily.

That is not to say that there were no complaints about FFS coordination from other international actors. FFS staff rarely joined cluster coordination meetings, which gave it the image of a big and rather aloof steamroller programme that 'did its own thing'. UNDP's 2019 Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) interviewed several agencies and NGOs in 2019 who spoke of a 'love-hate relationship' with the FFS. As one UN agency member said, 'Everyone criticizes UNDP, including us, but it's also true that we couldn't have achieved the same.'[64] Cluster meetings were indeed rarely attended but, especially in the first years, they tended to prioritize humanitarian interventions with a different scope than that of the FFS, and meetings could be time consuming. Instead, the FFS provided programme updates to cluster coordinators when asked, and bilateral collaborations with other agencies and INGOs arose more spontaneously. For example, FFS divided the work on two water treatment plants in Mosul with the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) based on discussions by the two engineering teams on site.

Because the FFS was a technical programme executed in collaboration with the directorates, coordination with national partners was relatively straightforward. The FFS set priorities and agreed on project selection with the line directorates and the government's reconstruction programme, REFAATO, without too much trouble. The programme had purposefully been set up to not coordinate with political actors like the provincial parliament, although there were some attempts by politically connected individuals to elbow their way into the coordination

64 Quote from a UN agency in the IEO team presentation to the FFS team on the 2019 evaluation (UNDP IEO 2019, op. cit.). This view was also reflected in an internal evaluation of the FFS by SREO Consulting in 2018. SREO Consulting. *Lessons learned study on UN Humanitarian, Civil-military Coordination and Stabilization efforts in Mosul*. October 2018.

of international programmes in Ninewah province. When Governor Nawfal al-Qub was in charge of the province (about whom more in the next chapter), the FFS was approached by some influential individuals who tried to eke out a role as middleman and help coordinate with the governor's office. In late 2019, when a conflict broke out about the removal of Mansoor al-Mureid, Al-Qub's successor as governor, the Umm al-Rabeain organization, with high level support from Baghdad, tried to promote itself as a coordinating body for international programmes in Ninewah.[65] The FFS did not engage with any of these attempts and continued to work with the technical counterparts as before.

3.3 Government decision making and capacity

A constant challenge for the programme was the government's informal and small-group-style of decision making, lack of effective internal communication, and the absence of budgets for maintenance or infrastructure investment. Over the decade preceding 2014, the Iraqi administration had expanded exponentially as political parties created public jobs to win influence. The number of people working in the public sector had tripled between 2003 and 2020, the public wages and pensions bill had grown by 400 per cent, and an estimated 40,000 public staff were said to be superfluous to requirements.[66] The national budget was barely able to cover these expenses. In 2021, the cost of pensions and wages amounted to 122 per cent of Iraq's oil income, which in turn represents around 95 per cent of the economy. Line directorates spend almost their entire budget on pensions and salaries, leaving very little for investment. Budgets are handed down from Baghdad to line directorates late and inconsistently. Between 2020 and 2022, for example, the Ninewah Directorate of Health had no formal budget because the Ministry of Planning did not approve it. The Directorate of Health budget was based on what it had been three years before and was

65 Umm al-Rabeain was perceived to be linked to former PM Maliki's party and was influential enough to be able to call a meeting in Baghdad in December 2019 with the heads of several UN agencies and propose a role for themselves in coordinating aid in Ninewah. The next Governor of Ninewah, Najim al-Juboori, impressed on all international actors not to work with Umm al-Rabeain.

66 Chatham House quotes studies that the average Iraqi state employee does an effective 17 minutes of work per day. Mansour, Renad and Al-Shakeri, Hayder. *Can Iraq's new government reform the corrupt system?* Expert comment, 30 November 2022. The Ministry of Finance notes that Iraq had 4 million people on the public payroll, out of a working population of 24 million – almost one in eight people. Government of Iraq. *White Paper of the Emergency Cell for Financial Reforms.* October 2022.

released to them on a monthly basis. The Directorate of Water's 2019 expenditure bill was ten times higher than its revenues.[67] This made forward-looking public financial planning nigh on impossible.

Public institutions were often slow and indecisive. There was usually a small core of politically appointed decision makers under a director-general (DG) who decided on matters either verbally or through written communications – hardcopy letters (not even emails) that were rarely shared beyond a small group. There were many times when UNDP had to inform line ministries in Baghdad or directorate staff about decisions taken by their own DGs. Below the DGs there was a group of technical staff, such as engineers, planners and medical doctors. These were usually professional and collaborative, and the first line of communication for the FFS. However, they were often overstretched and given little decision-making authority by their managers. They were also underpaid, or not paid on time, and some took jobs on the side.[68] The third and largest group consisted of so-called 'administrative' staff, an overarching term for a plethora of advisers, clerks, IT staff, repairmen, message runners, drivers, kitchen staff and others. Offices were often overcrowded with people who were not always part of the functional organogram. Hospitals and PHCs, for example, usually had as many administrative staff as they had doctors and nurses combined.[69] The FFS was asked to prioritize office building by directorates because they needed more space to house their enormous staff.

In the meantime, there was no budget for additional police officers, teachers, nurses and other urgently required professionals. Public sector jobs were an economic lifebuoy for people and seen as a type of social security, and no government official wanted to take the political fallout for trying to reform the system. Even discussions about retraining existing staff to fill gaps were resisted. For example, when the FFS was asked to provide ambulances for Ninewah province, it found that there were only 57 ambulance drivers for 237 working

67 Public revenues were practically non-existent to begin with as water, electricity and health are (almost) free and people expect them to remain that way. Even public factories have to send their profits to their line ministry first, which then reverts a percentage back to the factory, which just about covers staff salaries. ICRC, 2021, op. cit.; UNDP FFS sectoral assessments, 2021.

68 For example, many doctors and nurses had side jobs in private hospitals. UNDP FFS sectoral assessments, 2021, ibid.

69 For example, al-Karama PHC had 7 doctors, 27 nurses and 35 other staff. Salam teaching hospital had 369 doctors, 666 nurses and 972 other staff.

ambulances in the whole province, while the health directorate had more than 200 'regular' drivers on its payroll. Suggestions to retrain some of these drivers as ambulance drivers were rejected because the directorate felt the drivers would resist changes to their position.

With little room for budgetary manoeuver and shortages of competent staff, directorates usually avoided discussions about reconfiguring service delivery, even if this was urgently needed. In 2017, for example most of hospitals had been destroyed. The health sector could have reconfigured and prioritized which services should be delivered by which hospitals and moved staff around accordingly. The electricity directorate could have considered solar power pilots with so many electrical substations destroyed. The water directorate was putting needless pressure on the fragile water grid by insisting on using pumping stations instead of 'old fashioned' water towers.[70] Budgetary and personnel restraints, and fear of being held responsible for a 'wrong' decision, led to a markedly conservative response. Overall, the directorates wanted the FFS to rehabilitate structures back to more or less how they had been in 2014, but 'build them back better', with better equipment and machinery. Directorates were always concerned about how to maintain the structures the FFS had rebuilt. As they had little or no maintenance budget, they would insist on using only materials and brands they knew and could potentially get spare parts for.[71] There was little 'out of the box' thinking when it came to the rehabilitation of infrastructure.

70 ICRC 2021, op. cit.

71 Line directorates often insisted on receiving European, American or Japanese brands and not, for example, Chinese ones. In line with international procurement rules, UNDP provided equipment according to specifications rather than brands, meaning equipment could come from anywhere in the world. Equipment came with a year's warranty and spare parts.

4 Dealing with corruption

Iraq is considered one of the most corrupt countries in the world, and a large programme like the FFS had to cope with different types of (attempted) fraud.[72] It is important to consider how Iraq's political economy organizes corruption and how the FFS's risk management practices sought to avoid its worst excesses. Corruption plays out differently at different levels. The FFS had to deal with the PMF (indirectly), Governor Nawfal al-Qub and the Ninewah line directorates, and with various construction company scams.

4.1 The PMF and provincial authorities

The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) had not been allowed to deploy military units inside Mosul as part of a deal with the international military coalition. However, they did set up 'economic offices' in the city and ran protection rackets, as well as checkpoints on the edges of Mosul, where trucks had to pay to be let through.[73] The PMF controlled the recycling market, taxing trucks filled with iron and steel that would be repurposed for other projects. Contractors never raised the PMF as a problem with the FFS, although this does not mean they did not interact with them or never paid any checkpoint bribes. The FFS was only indirectly hindered by the PMF in Mosul during the (very) few times when there was a delay in moving the scrap metal removed from demolished buildings. On a few occasions, the PMF and a government department seemingly got into an argument over who would obtain the scrap metal and the recycling proceeds. The PMF never approached the FFS directly. If they tried to profit from the programme, they did so via government proxies, presumably to keep a low profile.

More direct in his attempts to benefit from the FFS was Governor Nawfal Hammadi Sultan al-Qub, who was in charge of Ninewah province from 2014 to

72 In 2022, Iraq ranked Iraq 157th out of 180 countries. Transparency International. Corruption Perceptions Index, 2022.

73 Gotts, I. *The Business of Recycling War Scrap: The Hashd al-Sha'abi's role in Mosul's post-conflict economy.* LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series (34), 2020.

2019, when he was fired and arrested for corruption.[74] The FFS was in a tricky position in Ninewah. To build people's confidence in their national leadership, the programme was supposed to put local authorities up-front and have them lead. This was problematic with Al-Qub, who was deeply unpopular in Mosul and owed his position to the PMF. The FFS had to undertake a balancing act, working with the governor as every UN organisation is mandated to do, while not being naïve about his agenda. The governor tried to exploit the FFS in different ways. Occasionally he showed up at FFS project sites accompanied by the media to inaugurate a building (even if it was not yet fully completed) in an attempt to increase his popularity.[75] While this was annoying for the FFS, it was relatively harmless. More problematic was that he and his brother were linked to several construction companies and tried to steer FFS projects their way.[76] Al-Qub shared a list of pre-approved contractors, who supposedly had been cleared of ISIL affiliations, with the UN agencies and promoted them for contracts. He also insisted that the FFS share all the priced bills of quantity (BoQs) with him for sign-off, which would have allowed him to share cost estimates with his companies and give them a leg-up in the procurement process. When UNDP refused, he instructed the line directorates not to sign off on any projects for the organisation. Much as he tried, however, Al-Qub never really got a grip on the FFS. UNDP attended Al-Qub's meetings and invited him for project openings, but at the same time worked directly with the line directorates to get things done. The directorates often ignored their governor and signed off projects themselves. The few times when Al-Qub instructed the directorates not to hand over projects to UNDP, the COMSEC intervened from Baghdad and signed off the project list.[77]

74 On Governor Al-Qub, see among others Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS) and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. *Mosul and Basrah after the protests: the roots of government failure and popular discontent*. Zmkan Ali Saleem and Mac Skelton, IRIS working paper, 6 October 2019; Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCRRP). *Iraq issues warrant for Mosul's provincial governor over corruption*. 27 March 2019; France24. *Three years after IS, slim funds keep Mosul in ruins*. 10 July 2020.

75 This included the opening of the water and sewerage directorate buildings, one span of the Sukar bridge, and the Danedan Water Treatment Plant in 2019, all FFS projects.

76 IRIS (2019, op. cit.) argues that the governor appointed his brother to operate as the 'governor in the shadows', demanding kickbacks from contractors. OCRRP (2019, op. cit.) states that the governor's brother was responsible for skimming an estimated 30 per cent off the top of government contracts.

77 In October 2018 for example, the governor sent a letter to all line directorates not to work with international organizations or approve any project unless it was through his office.

Baghdad's influence over al-Qub was limited, however. The prime minister's office tried to replace him several times, but the governor relied on the provincial council and certain national politicians to keep him in place.[78] In October 2017, the Council of Ministers had appointed the president of Ninewah University, Dr. Muzahim al-Khyatt, as the focal point for all international projects in the province but Al-Qub started a smear campaign and set the provincial parliament against him.[79] From late 2018 onwards, Al-Qub was increasingly less in the picture as he spent most of his time in Baghdad, fighting corruption allegations. When the PMF withdrew their support for the governor and Parliament sacked him in the wake of a ferry boat sinking in March 2019, the Ministry of Finance opened an investigation into him.[80] The FFS was approached by the ministry with a list of projects that Al-Qub claimed he had undertaken with public funds, and confirmed that several of these projects had been undertaken by the FFS.[81] This was part of the evidence that sent him to prison. The two subsequent governors of Ninewah, Mansoor al-Mureid and Najim al-Juboori, were supportive of the FFS, and collaboration improved markedly.

The FFS also had to deal with corruption attempts by local authorities. This could take the form of individuals within the line directorates trying to cut a deal with FFS contractors by pushing UNDP to change certain items in the project. They would then split the profit from these (more expensive) items with the company. The Directorate of Health (DoH) was particularly notorious for insisting on design changes. The rehabilitation of one major hospital in Mosul, for example,

78 IRIS (2019, op. cit.)

79 In April 2018, the provincial council voted to 'dismiss' Dr Al-Kyatt's assignment, which they had no authority to do. In a public meeting in November 2018, the Governor threatened the directorates that anyone working with Dr Al-Khyatt would be fired. He also sent a letter to various embassies in January 2019 asking them not to work with him.

80 On 21 March 2019, an overcrowded ferry capsized on the Tigris in the centre of Mosul, drowning more than 90 people. Public anger focused on the governor, who had apparently ignored warnings from his water directorate that the river was too swollen and the current too strong for the ferries. Parliament voted to sack Al-Qub for dereliction of duty on 24 March and an arrest warrant was issued on charges of corruption on 27 March. In February 2021, he was sentenced to five years in prison.

81 France24 quotes government reports that state that US$60 million was stolen by the former governor. France24. *Amid regime change demands, Iraq's Mosul gets not one, but two governors*. 26 November 2019. The UK government put sanctions on Al-Qub for, among other things, wasting US$3.5 million on fictitious public works. The National. *UK slaps corruption sanctions on former Iraqi Governor*. 22 July 2021.

got delayed by months as the DoH committee insisted on rotating the entire position of the building, doubling the bed capacity, quadrupling the number of lead shields, and doubling the thickness of the concrete around the radiation rooms. None of these requests was based on patient needs or on engineering specifications, and all were turned down. The behaviour was considered highly suspicious by the health department's own line ministry, which had approved the original design and pushed back against the proposed changes.

Different authorities tried different tricks. Some directorates tried to get their own staff appointed to cash-for-work projects as they paid more, and the managers could take a cut. However, the FFS would only hire people who were not government employees. The mayor's office tried several times to elbow into the approval for cash-for-work projects, which was normally discussed only with the municipality directorate. Some police commanders tried to push contractors to install luxury furniture in their police stations, which was not part of the project. Two or three municipality representatives tried to get homeowners to pay an 'administrative fee' of 1,500 Iraqi Dinars (the equivalent of about US$1) to 'register' for the UNDP housing programme. UNDP had to threaten to halt the housing works, which made the representatives drop their claim. Some directorate staff threatened the implementing companies that they would refuse to sign off on the completed project unless they received a bribe. These attempts were usually uncovered relatively quickly and rarely went anywhere as companies were made aware that it was UNDP, not the directorate, that had final sign-off authority for a project.[82] UNDP not only had a sizable presence of engineers and liaison officers on the ground but had good connections inside the directorates and government offices. Many civil servants and engineers were unhappy with their managers' corrupt behaviour and would act as whistle blowers to UNDP.

4.2 Companies and procurement

At the implementation level, contractors used different tactics to try and get extra money out of projects. Sometimes a bigger company won a UNDP bid, but

82 Companies were informed about this at the start of the project and would usually come straight to UNDP complain if the authorities asked for such bribes. UNDP would usually handle this diplomatically, but in one or two cases had to threaten to sign off on a project unilaterally.

then secretly sold the contract to a smaller sub-contractor, while keeping part of the profit. While this is a regular occurrence in the construction sector globally, it is not allowed under UNDP rules. In such cases, the FFS would end up with a company that could run into cash flow problems, struggle to pay workers on time and constantly lobby to change items in the rehabilitation work to cheaper versions to increase their profit margin. In other cases, contractors tried to fake laboratory tests, switch soil samples, or bring in fake brands or outdated models of what was in the material specifications. Such attempts at fraud increased during 2020 when there was a worldwide increase in the costs of building materials, especially copper, steel and concrete, which reduced companies' profit margins.[83] In the livelihoods sector, some companies tried to take a percentage of their workers' wages, promising them a job on the next project if they agreed. A construction site is a rich ecosystem of gossip and information, so UNDP was usually on top of these attempts fairly quickly.

The FFS maintained different layers of control to prevent fraud which were diligently applied and 'widely believed to be among the most robust the organization has ever put in place'.[84] The government formally handed a site over to UNDP's responsibility and, while there was a joint monitoring committee with the relevant line directorate, UNDP was in charge of all decisions until the project was completed and handed back. UNDP quality control engineers and supervisor engineers were on site each day to check the works and would even stay overnight, for example, when concrete was cast, to make sure the procedure was done properly. Construction materials were sent to independent laboratories to check their quality.[85] Specialized electrical and mechanical equipment was factory tested before shipping and, for important equipment, UNDP engineers attended factory tests abroad. All this testing led to frequent (and sometimes heated) discussions with contractors who tried to find ways round the contract specifications. But the FFS did not budge unless there were valid engineering

83 Between 2019 and 2021, the prices of copper went up by 25 per cent, steel rebar and plates by 50 per cent, cement by 45 per cent and PVC by 30 per cent. Iraqi construction companies and unions lobbied the government to force international agencies to increase the price of (already signed) contracts, to no avail.

84 Quote from the IEO evaluation (UNDP IEO, 2019, op. cit.), page 20.

85 For example, a concrete sample was taken on site with the UNDP quality control engineer present. He signed the sample and made sure that the same sample went to the laboratory. Test results were then checked by different engineers. If there was any doubt, the sample would be sent to a different laboratory for a second opinion.

reasons to do so. Contractors were paid in milestone installments, based on the work completed. For every payment, UNDP rotated quality control engineers to measure the completed works, as an extra check. Contractors provided bank guarantees when signing the contract, which were held until the warranty period ended, so part of the financial risk was covered. Up to 10 per cent of the contract value could be held back in damages if the works were completed late. Even if a contractor sold the contract to a sub-contractor, the work would still be done correctly at the same price, but at a loss to the sub-contractor. UNDP hired a separate company to monitor livelihoods activities, and FFS livelihoods officers were present to witness the weekly payments to workers and discuss complaints. If there was evidence of fraud, the company's contract was halted, and the case referred to the UNDP investigations team.[86]

Finally, it is worth discussing the sensitivities in UNDP's procurement process, after the Guardian newspaper in early 2024 made allegations that staff helped some contractors navigate the system.[87] A prospective contractor must go through different layers of checks in the UNDP procurement system. To qualify for bidding, contractors have to provide bank guarantees and affidavits to show their financial capacity, as well as references from previous employers. Bids must be submitted in an online e-tendering system and remain closed to UNDP staff until the deadline expires and all bids are opened at the same time.[88] This makes it difficult for staff members to give contractors information about competing bids. The received bids are evaluated by a procurement team which rates the bids based on technical quality and cost, and proposes a contractor, usually the cheapest technically compliant bidder. This rating- and selection process is put

86 When UNDP's Office of Audit and Investigations (OAI) receives an allegation, it acknowledges receipt to the sender and conducts a preliminary investigation to assess whether there are sufficient indications to warrant a formal investigation. If so, a fact-finding mission is sent to the country to interview stakeholders and review documentation. The subject of an allegation is given the chance to tell their version of events and submit their own documentary evidence. OAI's report is sent to UNDP's Legal Support Office (LSO) to decide on disciplinary or administrative action.

87 The Guardian, *UN Staff on GBP 1.5 billion Iraq aid project 'demanding bribes'*. 22 January 2024.

88 The original priced Bills of Quantity (BoQs) were only seen by four or five UNDP staff before procurement, and never by government counterparts. The unpriced BoQs on which contractors bid were all in English. The FFS briefly experimented with dual language English-Arabic BoQs but this was halted when some contractors used the nuances in the translation to insist on different items.

in writing and kept for the records.[89] The choice is signed off by the head of the service centre and, above a certain amount, by regional procurement. Even if a contractor were to bribe someone to help them navigate the system, it is not easy to win a contract through corruption alone. A contractor's bid has to go through a committee and is evaluated against the other bids, so it would still have to be technically sound and competitively priced.

In addition to the on-site and procurement checks above, UNDP and its donors had different monitoring mechanisms to detect fraud. The FFS was successfully audited every year between 2019 and 2022, covering around US$1 billion of expenses.[90] UNDP had a free hotline that anyone could call with complaints and information. Its Office of Audit and Investigation (OAI) followed up on accusations of fraud and corruption from either external sources or from its own staff and contractors. The office had a full-time investigator dedicated solely to FFS cases. OAI investigated 137 cases of corruption related to the FFS and substantiated 56 of them, barring guilty vendors from further work for UNDP. The FFS's major donors also undertook their own monitoring as well. USAID, KFW and the UAE had their own roving consultants who visited work sites to check the works and made recommendations.[91]

4.3 Corruption: a reality check

It is important to emphasize that 'corruption' means different things to different people, and not every allegation was equally meaningful. For some Iraqis, 'corruption' seemed to be part of daily discourse. There appeared to be an assumption that all politicians and construction companies were corrupt and, as

89 The UNDP procurement centre was staffed largely by internationals, to be better protected against pressure from local authorities and vendors than national staff were and limiting the risk of conflicts of interest. Engineers based in Baghdad and Erbil would check each other's BoQs to further reduce the chances of collusion. The BoQs of each bid were compared to the original BoQ to check for any similarities between prices or item descriptions that could indicate collusion.

90 For example, the 2018 audit, which looked at US$250 million worth of projects, found only eight cases where the advertisement period was too long, three cases where the bid validity was too long, and four payments which were not made in accordance with the contract stipulations.

91 They rarely found serious implementation issues. For example, in 2017–2019, during the peak of the FFS work, USAID monitors submitted 830 monitoring reports and found only 35 'red alerts', which mainly had to do with issues out of the FFS's hands, like access to sites being controlled by the PMF.

the FFS operated in that environment, it had to be corrupt by association.[92] It was impossible to implement the FFS without a constant swirl of rumours following it around. People would tell me, 'We know what is *really* going on' when they had no connection to the programme whatsoever. To others, corruption allegations came from resentment or were an instrument for leverage. Less-then-scrupulous local authorities and contractors who were displeased about where the funding went or which company had been selected to implement the work knew that making corruption allegations could get UNDP into trouble with its donors and launch internal investigations that would slow down the programme. There were a few occasions when political authorities or disgruntled companies started a whispering campaign about supposed FFS corruption in the various ministries and local media.[93] Some contractors accused UNDP engineers who forced them to toe the line of 'being corrupt', intending to get them off their back or to resist the purchase of specific items.[94]

That said, corruption was a major challenge and required constant vigilance. Every accusation was followed up – trying to triangulate information, listening to phone conversations (which engineers were advised to record), and trying to find anything in writing, any texts or receipts or inconsistencies in budgets, or any test results that could prove collusion or corruption. Anything that looked 'dodgy' was reported to management and, if needed, to OAI. As a result, several contractors were blacklisted and a few engineers fired.

The fact remained, however, that there were allegations that UNDP simply could not prove. Some allegations came from single and anonymous sources, who did not give specifics and did not explain who was being corrupt or how, or from which items someone was supposed to be making an illegal profit. They could not point to evidence that was recorded or visible in technical specifications,

92 For example, IRIS (2019, op. cit.) mentions a constant refrain from their interviewees in Mosul and Basra saying, 'it's all lies, there is no government, they're all thieves,' an 'expression of disgust towards the entire political class'.

93 These whispering campaigns were rarely subtle. FFS staff would be asked out of the blue in different meetings by different directorates about the same allegation. Government engineers would also tell FFS staff what rumors were going the rounds inside their directorates.

94 For example, a contractor would ask the UNDP engineer to recommend a good local supplier of doorframes. When the engineer did so, the contractor would claim to UNDP management that the engineer was trying to 'force' the supplier on him and that he had a financial arrangement with him. For this reason, engineers were instructed to always record phone conversations and put any advice in writing.

budgets and invoices. This made their evidence largely anecdotal and, while this does not mean the allegation was not true, it may not have been sufficient to substantiate it. Firing or blacklisting a company or a person without sufficient 'hard' evidence could lead to legal proceedings. This is not specific to UNDP. Any public or international organization would have to follow the same standards of evidence.

It is important to be realistic about what any programme in Iraq can and cannot control. As UNDP puts it, 'zero tolerance (for corruption) does not mean zero risk.' It would be impossible for any organization to exercise full control over everything that happens across more than 3,000 projects, there are too many moving parts. Donors not only accepted this, but funded the FFS because it was prepared to take calculated risks.[95]

Undoubtedly, things happened that were not supposed to happen.
Three questions come to mind guiding assessment of the resulting damage. First, was corruption incidental or widespread? While there were plenty of attempts at corruption, it is much harder to say how many attempts 'got through'. The 56 confirmed OAI cases could either be a realistic reflection of corruption across the programme, or the tip of an iceberg. To answer such a 'known unknown' is very hard. With many allegations being anecdotal, one can really only speculate. The answer may be subjective, depending on how seriously the commentator takes UNDP's anti-corruption measures. Second, did corruption negatively affect the programme outputs? As the FFS controlled most of what happened during project implementation, this is unlikely. Projects were (mostly) completed within the agreed time span, price and specifications, which can be 'proved' by engineering tests and budget versus expenditure overviews.[96] At the end of the day, donors got the projects they paid for. What UNDP cannot control is what a contractor does with his profit margin, his 'take-home pay', which some may have used for illegal ends. But one can hardly hold UNDP responsible for what a contractor does with his earnings. Third, was there more that UNDP could have reasonably done to reduce the risk of corruption, beyond the extensive checks and controls described in previous pages? For the FFS implementation

95 UNDP IEO evaluation (2019, op. cit.).

96 An internal assessment of FFS contracts in July 2020 showed that 73 per cent of contracts had been completed on time, with most of the delays in complicated projects like hospitals and because of external factors like Covid. FFS. *2022–2023 Priorities. Severity of conditions and results of assessments*. July 2022.

team, which built this system and constantly adapted it based on new scams that contractors or government actors tried to pull, it represented the best trade-off between thoroughness and speed. One could design a more ironclad system, but this would slow implementation.

It is worth considering what an alternative implementation modality to the FFS could have been, which would have been less open to corruption. NGOs or the World Bank could have also done the work, but they would have run into many of the same corruption risks, and some additional ones to boot. NGOs lack the sort of convening power with government that UN agencies have, so they would probably still have to work under the umbrella of a UN agency. This would add layers of sub-contracting and NGOs would still have to hire local construction companies to implement the work, in the same way that the FFS did.[97] The World Bank has good government connections and the capacity to roll out large-scale programmes, but it usually implements through government (procurement) structures such as REFAATO, which adds to the risks of political interference. A rehabilitation programme that would not spend a penny until every risk was entirely covered would never get off the ground.

97 In addition, while the FFS had the contractual right to check the financial accounts of contractors, it did not have this same right with international NGOs, giving it less possibility to exercise oversight.

5 Slowdown and transition 2020–2022

The original end date for the FFS was December 2020 and this was initially a hard deadline for donors. However, the programme was extended to the end of 2023 for two reasons. First, the FFS was the only programme with the procurement system and 'boots on the ground' to build Covid wards when the Covid crisis broke out in 2020.[98] Second, the government decided to close many of the IDP camps in the country by the end of 2020 forcing around 55,000 people to return home, so donors approached the FFS to scale up programming in areas of return.[99] The FFS was given another US$31.5 million to build and equip 19 Covid wards across the country and some US$170 million for other projects in 2021–2022. By this time, the situation in the country was shifting, with a transition away from the humanitarian response model to so-called 'durable solutions'.[100] The Iraqi government was keen for the FFS to continue, but over the previous few years its views and those of its donors had grown apart.

Donors seem to have had three principal reasons for scaling down the FFS. The first was that, since the FFS was set up as a stabilization programme in the wake of the fight against ISIL, five years down the line and with ISIL mostly gone, it was time to consider replacing the FFS with a more long-term development focused approach. Other donors pointed out that, in many ways, the FFS was already 'doing' development, rehabilitating large-scale infrastructure, providing grants and undertaking livelihoods works just as a development programme

98 The FFS was given a special dispensation by the Iraqi government to keep working during the Covid lockdown as the programme was considered too important to suffer delays.

99 United Nations Organization for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Reliefweb. *Iraq: IDP camp profiling – round XV, situation overview.* June-August 2021.

100 The humanitarian cluster system was gradually closed down and regional durable solutions (DS) strategies developed. This meant different things to the donors and to the government. For the donors, durable solutions were an exit strategy and a gradual transition of (financial) responsibility to the government. For the government, they were about fundraising for new projects. The UN and INGOs were stuck in the middle between these two views.

would.[101] Moreover, Iraq was not on a homogeneous 'arc' from stabilization to development. There were many areas, especially in western Ninewah and around Hawija, that were still in the early stages of recovery and required basic rehabilitation work. The second reason was budgetary. With major humanitarian crises in other parts of the world, and especially once the war in Ukraine broke out in 2022, Iraq stopped being a funding priority. The third reason was that donors were increasingly disillusioned with the Iraqi government. Iraq, they argued, has a substantial income from oil production and the FFS had been set up with the understanding that at some point the government would start funding its own reconstruction work. Gradually, donors arrived at the view that the government provided too little funding, had not reformed the bloated public service that soaked up the budget, and did little against corruption, yet kept asking for more funds. Donors had 'tested' the government in 2019 by asking it to contribute financially to the FFS and promised that they would match what the Ministry of Finance invested. The government initially promised to invest US$100 million in the FFS. This dropped to US$31 million, which was then split into three tranches. By the end of 2022, only US$16.8 million had been transferred. To donors, this was very discouraging.

On the government side, things were changing as well. The FFS had been strongly supported by the government when Haider al-Abadi was Prime Minister and Mehdi al-Alaq was secretary of the council of ministers (COMSEC). Things started to shift under the premiership of Adil Abdel Mahdi (2018–2020), when Al-Alaq was eventually replaced as COMSEC by the Sadrist Hamid al-Ghizi, when Mustafa al-Khadimi became prime minister (2020–2022), and when more southern and pro-PMF politicians joined the government.[102] To these parliamentarians, the FFS was the biggest international infrastructure programme in the country, and southern provinces urgently needed water treatment plants and housing as well. They had little interest in supporting the FFS in the north unless it could also be directed to the south. With Al-Alaq gone, the Ministry of Finance dragged its feet on the government contribution to the

101 For example, in Mosul, the World Bank rebuilt several bridges across the Tigris River as a 'development' programme; while at the same time the FFS, under a 'stabilization' moniker, built very similar type bridges across the Tigris's tributary, the Khosr river, a few kilometres away.

102 International Crisis Group. *The Iraqi elections: a way out of the morass?* 18 May 2018 and *On third try, a new government for Iraq*. 8 May 2020.

FFS and high-level stabilization meetings were held less frequently.[103] In private, government officials would admit that their public service soaked up their budget (they said so themselves in their 2022 white paper), but argued that it was unrealistic to expect them to sack or re-assign tens of thousands of people during economically difficult times.[104] Also, government actors did not agree that they were not funding enough. They paid for the salaries and pensions of the estimated 57,000 civil servants, teachers, police officers and others who staffed the buildings rehabilitated by the FFS and had provided US$500 million to their own reconstruction programme, REFAATO, since 2015.[105]

As a precondition for the FFS extension up to the end of 2023, UNDP developed a transition strategy in 2021.[106] The 'transition' FFS was not fundamentally different from its first incarnation but would have different emphases, safeguard the gains of the strategy and support the handover. A series of provincial assessments were undertaken to see what major works remained in the fields of water, electricity, health, education, etcetera. More attention was paid to environmental projects, capacity building, social cohesion activities and security sector reform (SSR) than before. Throughout the debates, the government in Baghdad often seemed to be somewhat tone deaf. They argued not only to extend the FFS but to expand it and roll it out in the south of Iraq and in Kurdistan as well. This was resolutely shot down by the donors. The financial 'ask' for the last two years of the FFS was around US$300 million but it was clear from the start that donors were not interested in funding that amount.[107] The programme received another US$69 million over 2022 but most donors indicated that this would be their last contribution. For its last year, 2023, the FFS received only US$5 million.

103 For example, there was no Stabilization Steering Committee meeting held between November 2020 and March 2022.

104 Al-Monitor. *Iraq's plans to cut salaries face strong backlash*. 23 June 2020.

105 The National. *Iraqi official leading post-ISIS reconstruction dismissed over corruption claims*. 25 June 2023.

106 UNDP, *Transition Strategy: Funding facility for Stabilization*. August 2022. The transition strategy was originally called an 'exit strategy' but this term was considered sensitive because UNDP intended to continue FFS-type works after closure, and because government actors were not happy with the idea that the FFS was closing.

107 Projects were divided across priority categories 1–4. The sum of all priority 1 projects was around US$300 million, and this was presented to donors. All categories put together came to around US$1 billion.

6 Stabilization beyond numbers

It can be argued that the FFS did largely what it was supposed to do. It rapidly rehabilitated infrastructure on a large scale and provided temporary jobs for people to help them return home. From a programmatic point of view, it was a success.[108] However, it is worth going 'beyond the numbers' and digging deeper into the wider impact of the FFS. Was it as innovative as it claimed to be and how sustainable were its interventions? Did the programme do harm to local dynamics? Even if the FFS was not designed to address such issues, lessons can be learned for future programmes.

6.1 Impact

While it is difficult to question the outputs of the FFS – the thousands of buildings rehabilitated, and services restored – it is harder to argue that the programme had a substantive effect on the Iraqi political-development landscape. Since the FFS had been designed to do a limited set of things, it was not supposed to have such far-reaching results. But it is worth returning to the two original objectives that constituted the 'impact' of the FFS and assess to what extent they were achieved.

The FFS's first objective was to create the conditions for the return of IDPs through rehabilitation and livelihoods work. This is where the FFS had its best results. It is impossible to attribute returns directly to the FFS, as people move for a myriad of reasons of which security is probably paramount. However, in many newly liberated areas the programme was the largest funding channel rehabilitating homes and restoring services. It was also one of the larger employers in the country, supporting livelihoods not only through cash-for-work programmes, but indirectly by creating thousands of jobs on construction sites over the years. It is fair to say that if service delivery and the availability of jobs

108 This was also confirmed in evaluations among donors. The 2019 IEO evaluation for example surveyed donors' 'extremely positive' views, noting that 'the concrete, measurable results of the FFS rendered it relatively easy to justify contributions in their capitals.' UNDP IEO, 2019, op. cit.

– in addition to a decent level of security – were key factors in enabling returns, the FFS played a positive role.

The FFS's second objective, to restore confidence in national authorities by having them visibly in the lead and showing a peace dividend, was more problematic. First, there is an inherent paradox in expecting people to trust their government when so much of the actual rehabilitation work was being done by an outside party.[109] If anything, it showed the government's weakness. Iraqis would mention to me in conversation how it was a shame that the state was relying on outside donors, because (they claimed) politicians and the PMF were diverting its oil income. Second, and more importantly, confidence in a government relies on many variables of which an infrastructure programme, no matter how large, is only one factor. For many people in the north, the government had lost a lot of its authority after the liberation from ISIL. Not just because of the lack of government investment, but because the continuing presence of the PMF and Baghdad's seeming unwillingness to get rid of a deeply mistrusted governor like Nawfal al-Qub made many people feel that their government was falling back into its pre-2014 patterns of disenfranchising the Sunni north and west.[110]

It was also unlikely that the government would start investing more in its own reconstruction programmes once the war against ISIL wound down. The Iraqi political economy is such that, once salaries and pensions are paid for, and corruption siphons off another part of the budget, there tends to be little (if any) money left to invest. The government did, however, make some investment in reconstruction. REFAATO was provided with US$500 million from the government budget, but that was nowhere near enough to meet the country's needs. While the FFS could not influence the government's lack of spending, it is also important not to push this argument too far into 'donor dependency' and say

109 In the early stages of the FFS, the programme didn't brand any of its activities, to make it more ambiguous who had done the work. However, it was always clear to local people that the work was done by a UN agency. Some people even complained that if the work was *not* done by an international party, it would be sub-standard as the government would divert part of the funds. The non-branding was dropped sometime in 2018. After this, (with a handful of exceptions) all projects would receive the same sign, stating simply that this was an FFS project and mentioning the donor and the Iraqi government, but giving no details about the works undertaken. A fully rebuilt hospital would receive the same sign as a school where the toilet block had been repaired.

110 For example, a USIP survey shows that 78 per cent of people in Mosul have 'little confidence' in the central government. United States Institute of Peace (USIP). *Conflict and Stabilization Monitoring Framework*. March 2023.

that *because* the international community invested so much in programmes, the government felt less pressure to do so itself. Baghdad did not invest much in infrastructure or jobs in the southern provinces – where the FFS did not work and which is the government's political base – either.[111]

6.2 Innovation and sustainability

The FFS was arguably more innovative in *how* it did things than in *what* it did. The way the FFS was set up and implemented was novel for UNDP. A limited thematic focus on infrastructure and jobs and implementing through the private sector allowed the programme to scale up quickly. While this was probably the right approach for the first few years of the programme, when speed and scale were key to show a 'peace dividend', one could question whether the FFS could not have enlarged the scope of its activities in later years. After all, it was one of the few programmes with a budget large enough to experiment. However, as the Iraqi government kept asking for more infrastructure and livelihoods projects, and donors kept funding them, there was no real incentive for the programme to push the envelope and develop creative new projects that could have served the same stabilization purpose in a more holistic fashion, i.e. beyond concrete, bricks and cables.

Notably, the FFS did not get involved in planning, did not get involved in as much agency-to-agency collaboration as one would expect from a programme this size, and only got involved in innovative pilot projects late in its lifecycle. For example, in terms of planning, there were no efforts made to support government institutions to write urban plans or undertake sectorial priority setting, which could have helped the development of new projects. The initial attempts at planning in 2019 were not a great success, but with a new provincial government and renewed efforts, maybe this could have worked. Regarding agency-to-agency collaboration, while there was coordination, there were few actual examples of joint programming. IOM and UNEP, for example, started a pilot programme in Mosul for rubble crushing, which the FFS could have supported, to recycle the tons of debris removed from work sites. In terms

111 The mass protests that rocked Iraq in 2019-2021 had started in Basrah, in the south, where people protested against a lack of service delivery despite it being the richest oil-producing governorate, before spreading across the country. The lack of service delivery and infrastructure was an important part of the protesters' discourse.

of innovative new projects, it was only in the last stages of the programme when a pilot project for the construction of two 'eco buildings' (built using environmentally friendly methods and materials) was set up. Solar panel projects were undertaken relatively late. While it is not likely that such activities would have fundamentally changed the approach or impact of the FFS, it could have given the programme some fresh ideas and lessons could have been learned for other contexts.

In terms of sustainability, one could argue that the FFS 'built back better' *technically* but not necessarily *functionally*. FFS programmes would rehabilitate infrastructure using high-quality building materials, modern and easily maintainable water pumps, electrical generators, machinery, etcetera, and trained government staff on how to use them. There was a one-year warranty for repairs. Hospitals were redesigned in line with international standards and top-notch medical equipment was installed. Many of the rehabilitated structures functioned better than they had before the war. However, there was – purposefully – little engagement with how this infrastructure was later used. Once a building was handed over, the FFS's responsibility ended. Getting staff to return to work was not too much of a problem. The majority of FFS- rehabilitated buildings were staffed as soon as the keys were handed over, although there were a few exceptions in far-off insecure areas where some government officials dragged their feet to return.[112] However, government infrastructure was not optimally staffed, government capacity remained a problem and maintenance budgets were often lacking.

It is unlikely that the FFS and its donors had the leverage to fundamentally influence the government's budgeting, or get it to reform its service delivery, or engender large-scale behavioural change through training programmes.[113] However, the programme could have tried to undertake more 'soft' activities to build capacity and accompany the infrastructure-and-jobs approach, at least

112 This was particularly visible in the medical sector where doctors and nurses had side-jobs in private hospitals in Erbil, Dohuk and other cities. There were some delays getting medical staff to return to rehabilitated medical structures in Qayarah, Sinjar and Hatra, for example.

113 One group of Iraqis on which the FFS unarguably had a long-term impact were its engineers. Many were with the programme for years, received training and learned new skills in project management, international engineering standards, reporting and speaking English. Most of them easily found jobs after the programme ended and, according to my recent conversations with them, still use what they learned in their jobs today.

after the hectic first two years. The FFS started training government officials in topics like project management, budgeting and finance only towards the end of the programme, in 2022. It could have done so from the start and used the rehabilitation programmes to give government officials on project oversight committees a chance to use their new skills 'on the job'. The FFS could have had a more sustained discussion with the government on retraining superfluous staff in required skills, for example retraining regular drivers to drive ambulances. These are difficult discussions, and no success was guaranteed, but UNDP could have tried harder.

6.3 Doing no harm

Whether the FFS did harm to local dynamics is a sensitive and difficult question to answer. The most honest response is that it is not very likely, but it is impossible to be entirely sure. The introduction of a multimillion-dollar programme into Iraq's political economy was always going to lead to rent-seeking behaviour and have the potential to create tensions between beneficiaries. However, the FFS never undertook baseline studies or conflict assessments. While this was perhaps understandable in the first year of the programme, when there was an all-encompassing sense of urgency, speed and scale were key and many people were still displaced, conflict assessments could have been started at some point and woven into the programme's roll out. This could not only have acted as a conflict mitigating factor, but also protected the programme against critiques that it was blind to conflict or acted like a big construction company that did not think with any nuance about the political context. There were two particular risks that the FFS had to contend with.

The first risk was that the FFS could have legitimized unscrupulous politicians and provide them with an entry point to seek rents from the programme. The obvious example here is the former governor of Ninewah, Nawfal al-Qub. In terms of his legitimization by the FFS, this is difficult to argue. The governor was deeply unpopular for a wide variety of reasons and being seen as the patron of an impactful infrastructure programme would probably not have changed this much. In fact, he may well have damaged the FFS's reputation more than the

FFS managed to improve his.[114] He apparently used the FFS to divert government funds for his own purposes, but not even the Ministry of Finance had a grip on this issue until the Governor was fired. It is also doubtful whether a different programme would have been less likely to be targeted by the governor.

The second risk was that the FFS could have had a negative impact on local dynamics or increased inequality. This is where conflict assessments or perception surveys could have played a useful role. There are a few caveats here. First, the FFS spread its projects relatively equally across most areas of return, rural and urban, and purposefully targeted minority communities. By 2022, it was hard to find (sizable) communities in the liberated areas that did not have at least some houses, schools or water plants rebuilt. In cities like Mosul, the rehabilitation of infrastructure was based on the 'catchment area' it served and geographical spread, to serve as many people as possible. Second, the FFS never received much negative feedback from people, be they beneficiaries, government officials, NGOs or civil society actors. The programme had a free hotline, a group of roving liaison officers, and a consultation and feedback mechanism in its housing programme.[115] There were occasional perceptions of inequality. In the first two years of the programme, especially, people in West Mosul sometimes thought that East Mosul received more support, or people believed that Christians in Ninewah received more support than other religious groups.[116] These were relatively rare complaints, however, and did not lead to organized action or petitions to UNDP or the government to change where

114 See, for example, a post by the well-known blogger Mosul Eye on 3 May 2019: 'Dear EU, western governments and organizations, a short and frank note: if you keep dealing with the current governor of Mosul, people there will hate you so much.' As one Moslawi told me during an inauguration, 'no matter how well you rebuilt that water treatment plant, that thief Nawfal is cutting the ribbon on its gate."

115 Between 2019 and 2022, the housing team received a total of 891 calls for a programme that repaired more than 12,000 houses. Nearly half of these callers asked to add more items to the works or complained about delays. Another 135 calls were people asking if their destroyed house could be added to the works.

116 These perceptions were incorrect. By 2022, East Mosul had around 570 projects worth approximately US$185 million and West Mosul had around 390 projects worth approximately US$184 million. West Mosul projects were generally more expensive and took longer to implement because the levels of damage were higher. The predominantly Christian Ninewah Plains had around 600 projects worth some US$95 million, out of almost 2,000 projects and US$496 million across Ninewah province.

projects went or how they were implemented. In fact, in most conversations, people asked for more of the same projects rather than anything different.[117]

However, without conflict assessments or perception surveys – which were not undertaken due to the aforementioned sense of urgency – it is impossible to say whether the programme has done harm at the meso- or micro-level and, if so, to what extent. Local dynamics can be incredibly complex and rehabilitating a certain structure in a certain location and handing it over to certain authorities can lead to resentment. Considering the widespread perception that all construction programmes are corrupt, there is a possibility that people did not trust UN hotlines to begin with and felt that complaining would not do any good. The FFS never set up an in-person consultation mechanism, for example a committee of beneficiaries from different social groups. For several reasons, this would not have been easy. In the early years people were still displaced, it is not easy to put together a group of people who represent an entire city, and there was the transaction cost to keep in mind. Including a consultation mechanism across sectors would almost certainly have slowed down project prioritization. However, once things quietened down a bit after the first few years, the programme could have tried to set up such a structure and weave conflict assessments into the rollout of projects.

6.4 A model for other contexts?

The FFS addressed technical problems common to many other post-conflict countries, using a rapid, top-down, private sector-based rehabilitation and basic livelihoods model that could, in principle, be used elsewhere. The FFS was also successful at fundraising: by 2022, it was the largest UNDP programme in the world. In a time when multilateral development programmes are increasingly

117 This is further supported by studies on IDP perceptions, where housing, schools and water were mentioned as top priorities to facilitate their return. IOM. *Reasons to Remain: categorizing protracted displacement in Iraq, November 2018*; IOM, *West Mosul. Perceptions on return and reintegration among stayees, IDPs and returnees.* June 2019; REACH. *Intentions survey: IDP areas of origin. August 2018.*

criticised, any programme that managed to mobilize more than US$1 billion could be a promising new model for the UN, and for UNDP in particular.[118]

Whether the FFS will influence UNDP's future approach to rehabilitation programmes and become a standard 'value proposition' remains to be seen, even though the agency has been taking steps in this direction. UNDP has developed a concept of stabilization based on the FFS, focused on rehabilitation of infrastructure, providing jobs, and delivering rapidly and at scale.[119] The model has been adapted for UNDP programming on a smaller scale in, among others, the Lake Chad Basin, Libya and Mozambique. UNDP also set up a Stabilization Academy to learn lessons from different contexts, and established a pool of stabilization experts who can be deployed worldwide. However, some internal pushbacks may be expected. Occasionally there was some unease about the FFS, and some critics felt that it had turned UNDP into a sort of 'UNOPS-plus' construction agency that sidelined more traditional development approaches. UNDP's 2024 guidance note on stabilization programming seems to be aware of this. It states explicitly that mindsets need to change, that 'business as usual is *not* an option', and that special implementation measures are needed for a stabilization programme to be successful.[120] Two interesting test cases will be if the agency proposes a similar programme for Ukraine or Gaza, where large-scale infrastructure rehabilitation will also be key. While the FFS may be an appropriate model for other countries, it is important to underline how exceptional the case of Iraq was and how it differs from many other post-conflict countries.

1. The security situation did not deteriorate fundamentally after 2017. In 2015–2017, there was a fear that ISIL would resurge or switch to large-scale guerrilla activities and make rehabilitation work impossible. Overall, this did not happen. Despite some access problems – a lingering ISIL presence,

118 The 2019 IEO evaluation notes on pg. 49 that 'The FFS has successfully demonstrated a model that could, with important adjustments and adaptations to local conditions, become a 'product line' for UNDP in such situations that involve the new type of wars that UNDP is faced with.' UNDP IEO 2019, op. cit.

119 UNDP Guidance Note on Stabilization Programming, 2024, op. cit.

120 For example, the UNDP Construction Works Policy considers FFS-like construction works to be risky. It asks to do feasibility studies, environmental studies, a sustainability plan, and an assessment of the end-user's capacity to properly use the infrastructure before works can start. UNDP Construction Works Policy and Guidance Note, June 2020.

disputed PMF control, political turmoil, turbulent elections, explosive hazards and Covid – insecurity never fundamentally hindered the programme.

2. For the critical first few years, the FFS was strongly supported by the national authorities at the highest level, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of the Council of Ministers, which facilitated a swift roll out, kept the donors focused and overcame bottlenecks at the provincial level. The national government was recognized and supported by the international community. There was a general sense that 'everyone was on the same side' against ISIL and this gave political momentum to the FFS.

3. Iraq in 2016 –2019 was seen as a key strategic arena for the international community and ISIL was seen as an urgent international threat. This led donors to pump US$1.5 billion into the FFS, allowing the programme to roll out fast and undertake sizeable interventions that made a visible difference 'on the ground'. Having this budget available also prevented long discussions about target areas, as most areas could be supported at the same time.

4. The need for rapid, visible results deterred donors from questioning the fundamental premises of the FFS – building fast, as standardized as possible and then move on –, and kept up its momentum. There is a tendency in other contexts for donors and UN agencies to add additional themes, projects and reforms to the basic 'trunk' of the programme. This can slow down implementation. The fact that the FFS kept to the straight and narrow of its minimalist design helped it to implement fast.

5. In its formative years, the FFS was provided with top-down cover by a DSRSG, Lise Grande, who was willing to break with the usual way of working. She promoted the FFS relentlessly with donors, built up the programme's own procurement and security offices and allowed it to hire scores of local engineers that were deployed across programme areas. This is not yet a common approach in the UN system.

6. Local implementation capacity was adequate. Despite corruption and planning issues, government authorities were largely collaborative and could staff the buildings the FFS rebuilt, while Iraqi companies were capable of doing most of the required work with locally or regionally available materials, at reasonable prices.

Any agency thinking of starting an FFS-type programme in other countries would do well to keep these preconditions in mind. For example, it is unlikely that the government of Syria would get the same sort of international political support, or that the Central African Republic would be seen as a top strategic priority warranting the investment of more than US$1billion' or that Houthi authorities in Yemen would support the UN the same way as the Iraqi government did, or that Congolese construction companies could obtain building materials and undertake rehabilitation works at the same reasonable prices. All in all, the FFS in Iraq was a unique case but featured elements of an approach that deserves broader consideration in other post-conflict settings.