



Field Report, 12 September 2022

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These Field Reports are prepared by the field staff of UNAMI's Development Support Office (DSO), who are based in Iraq's governorates, where they coordinate with local government officials, NGOs, community groups, and other development actors. They also monitor socio-economic and development trends to improve the UN's understanding of events in Iraq.

1. Basra – Solar Energy Gaining Popularity



Power generated from solar energy initiatives has notably increased in Basra recently. Today, many houses and small to medium businesses are highly reliant on photovoltaics (PV) as a source of electricity.

The climate conditions in Iraq are ideal for solar energy. Iraq is known to have lengthy periods of daylight, and the desert areas especially near the Saudi Arabian empty quarter, are areas of high solar density. According to local studies, on an annual basis, Basra receives over three thousand hours of solar radiance.¹

However, the transition to solar energy as an alternative power source needs pioneers to ramp up the PV market and raise awareness to reduce dependence on the national grid and other non-renewable sources.

Saif Dakhil, the owner of Basra Future Energy Company, says that his company sells about 250 solar panels per month, ten times what he sold in 2019². He added that companies providing solar energy are increasing in the local market. More than twenty of them already sell and offer free PV system installation and maintenance services.

The growth of this sector will also add jobs and provide a safer, more reliable, and sustainable energy supply.

Despite the benefits of renewable energy, including lower greenhouse gas emissions and pollution, most consumers in Iraq lack knowledge about solar energy and its feasibility as an alternative power source. For others, it is unaffordable, as the cost related to the installation of a solar unit that feeds one house costs around \$2,400 - \$3,500.

Some people who make the transition become champions. Mahdi Saleh is one of the first few people who covered his house's roof with solar panels.

"I wanted to get solar panels for a long time. This was one of my most challenging decisions, but so rewarding. Now, I have no diesel generators, no worries about fuel scarcity, or national grid shutdowns," he said, adding, "I encouraged my neighbors to install solar."



Solar well pump system © Basra Agriculture Department



Solar panels on top of a school constructed by UNICEF in Basra © UNICEF

¹ Iraq is affected by the incidence angle of the rays of the sun on Earth, as well as by the amount of radiance and the number of daylight hours, which lengthen on warm summer days (approximately 14 h) and shorten on cold winter days (approximately 10 h).

² The solar energy unit that supplies 200 kW (4 Amps), is normally sufficient for a small apartment or house. It costs around \$2400. The price includes the main components of the system (Solar PV array, a charge controller, a battery bank, an inverter) as well as installation and maintenance service.



Batool Hamid, age 47, is another user of solar panels. “Last year, I got an electricity bill for one million Iraqi Dinars (\$680), plus monthly fees that I had to pay to the private generator,” she said. “This summer, I decided to have photovoltaics installed,” adding that another benefit is the hot sun no longer beats down on her roof directly — it is instead being absorbed by the panels, keeping the house temperature lower.

According to the Director of Electricity, Zeyad Fadhil, the country’s energy demand is fast growing, causing inadequate supply from the national grid. In Basra, the main power supply is hydroelectric, which depends on water flow in the rivers to generate electricity. During the recent severe droughts, electricity generation is less reliable. Fossil fuel production also requires significant water resources and causes water pollution. Adopting solar power systems does not require water to generate electricity or strain the water supply.

Today, there are more than 5,000 remote tomato and dairy farms in areas where no national grid is available. Farmers increasingly use solar-powered well pumps for irrigation. Governmental efforts are also being made in Basra to install solar-operated street lighting, traffic light systems, and some water desalination units. Dozens of schools and primary health centers are fully equipped with solar panels to generate power, some of which were implemented by UNICEF and WFP.

Locally, Basra Solar PV Park is a project planned by the French Total Energies to provide 1,000 MW. The project construction is likely to commence in 2023 and is expected to enter operation in 2024 to supply 7% of Basra governorate with renewable power.

2. Kirkuk – Angry Unemployed Protestors in the Streets



“I feel like a volcano of anger,” says a recent graduate, who prefers to remain anonymous. “I studied hard in the hope of pursuing a career. Instead, I sit here on the pavement, unemployed, in the summer heat.”

Most university students hope to find a good job upon graduation. Unfortunately, the chances of that happening in Kirkuk are slim. The majority of graduates end up being unemployed. According to ILO, the labor force participation among Iraqi youth is only 26%.

Groups of extremely angry, but not yet violent, young people block the entrances to the Kirkuk Government Building, waving flags and banners. The demonstrators prevent staff from reaching the UN office, which is located as an annex in the same compound.

Sometimes, security forces clear a path for UN and government employees. Protesters grab this opportunity to talk with DSO staff to make their grievances known.

Layla, a 22-year-old graduate from the Kirkuk College of Engineering, said unemployment crushed her dreams. “I hoped the elections would bring change. With no prospects and no new government, I plan to emigrate to Europe.”



Many women are protesting for jobs. Some are considering emigrating, which would be a brain drain for Kirkuk. © Shafaa



Layla’s 16-year-old brother does not attend school at all. He thinks his sister’s education is useless and works at a market stand.

Mohammed, a 23-year-old graduate in geology, pickets at the North Oil Company. “After 17 years of rigorous study, all I ask is to work in my field of expertise. Kirkuk has plenty of oilfields to explore, but the North Oil Company is not hiring due to favoritism, nepotism, political deadlock, and quotas,” he says.

He adds that with cheap equipment, he could do some prospecting, but access constraints and bureaucratic regulations prevent wildcatting.

The economic crisis has been prolonged because of the delays in the formation of a government. The recent graduates do not have much hope that the elected politicians will find a way out of the current crisis soon.



Layla and all her former classmates from the Kirkuk College are unemployed. © Shafaa.

The protestors confirm that many have college degrees but lack job opportunities. Some female graduates add that they moonlight as cleaners and nannies but prefer to work in their chosen profession of engineering.

The unemployed graduates put their unused hard hats on the pavement, as a portent symbol that they are ready for work.

3. Thi-Qar – Poverty Rises Dramatically



Shatra district (northeast of Thi Qar) witnessed a very strange incident that reflects the worsening social problems caused by poverty. A person stole an air conditioner from a mosque and left an anonymous letter of apology for his crime. In the letter, the thief explained the reasons for his theft, blaming the government and society for his suffering.

Not far away lives Um Muhammad, age 58, a widower who lost her husband after he volunteered to fight ISIS in 2017. She did not receive any compensation after his death, as her husband was not officially registered with the Popular Mobilization Forces.

Every Friday, she wakes up early and walks a few kilometers to reach one of the food distribution centers for poor people. She stands in a long queue with hundreds of other women to get food and medicine donations. Um Muhammad suffers from a stroke and now needs continuous medical treatment. She lives in a mud house, which does not exceed 100 square meters, in one of the poorest slums of Nassriya.

“We no longer have money for food since my sons Mohammed and Reda (ages 17 and 15 respectively) lost their jobs in the local market due to COVID-19,” she explains. She adds that before, they used to get 8,000 Iraqi dinars (about 6 US dollars) a day, half of which was used to secure their food, while the rest went to buy medicines for her little boy (age 14), who suffers from severe shortness of breath and needs medicine and oxygen.



Iraqis have faced a surge in prices, a fall in the buying power of the Iraqi dinar, and an increase in unemployment³. During Eid al-Adha, the streets of Thi-Qar were bustling and vibrant, even at night. Tempting windows displayed sparkly clothes and cascades of candy in rainbow colors. But shopkeepers say no one bought much since Iraq devalued its dinar against the dollar last year.

The poverty rate in Thi-Qar Governorate, which includes hundreds of historical sites that witnessed the first human civilizations in Mesopotamia, is 48%, according to the Ministry of Planning's official statistics published in February 2020, up from 44% in 2018.

But those numbers have risen lately due to the repercussions of COVID-19. Thi-Qar is still among the poorest governorates, also ranked first in the number of suicides and drug abuse in the last few years.



DSOs visit to a slum in Nassriya @ DSO

The poor economic status and deteriorating living conditions prompted the citizens to take the streets of Thi-Qar. These protests continue almost daily to demand jobs, fight corruption, and improve basic services.⁴

According to civil society organizations, the government failed to devise a clear policy to fight poverty after 2003. The local government has no data on the number of beggars and street children. Although this phenomenon has increased significantly lately, warning that rampant poverty increased the numbers of those dropping out of school, and delinquency rates among young girls.

According to the Directorate of Planning in Thi-Qar, the Central Bank of Iraq currently has an initiative to reduce unemployment and poverty by supporting small, medium, and large enterprises. The local government has called on international organizations and UN agencies to support poverty reduction efforts through micro-projects, micro-finance services, and income-generating projects in the governorate.

Representatives of IOM, FAO, and UNDP in the southern region say that they have ongoing projects in some districts and sub-districts of Thi-Qar, such as the Sumereen project.⁵ These projects aim to increase economic growth and create jobs with a focus on youth and women to enhance the living conditions for vulnerable families. However, they are mostly demonstration projects and not on a large enough scale to have a big impact until they are scaled up.

³ In 2021, the MoLSA announced that the number of unemployed persons registered only in its database was 1,600,000, whose ages range from 15 - 50 years. As for Thi-Qar, the number of registered unemployed was 100,800 according to the Director of the DoLSA in Thi-Qar.

⁴ In October 2019, protests erupted in Thi-Qar, where 140 protesters were killed and more than 4,000 wounded. Within one year, four governors were changed in response to protesters' demands and de-escalation. Any of those governors did not get the public's trust, as they did not achieve any progress on the ground and did not complete any of the stalling projects, despite the additional financial allocations allocated by the Council of Ministers

⁵ Sumereen is a two-year project, funded by the EU and implemented by UNDP, which is part of the programme Supporting Recovery and Stability in Iraq through Local Development. The programme aims at contributing to stability and socio-economic development by enhancing good governance at the local level.

4. Wasit – A City of Dreams for Families



Eid Al-Adha and other traditional holidays unite families and remain an opportunity to gather with loved ones and take a breather from the weight of life. These occasions are especially meaningful for children as they grow up and bond with their relatives.

The only outdoor fun for children is at crowded local playgrounds in those neighborhoods that are equipped with swings and slides; some have small Ferris wheels. There is a strong demand for an organized high-occupancy amusement park with rides for families in Kut City and other districts in the province.

This summer, to coincide with Eid Al-Adha, the Wasit local government and the Investment Commission in the province inaugurated the City of Dreams Amusement Investment project in Kut City.

The City of Dreams represents the first of its kind in Wasit in terms of its facilities and size, which covers 20 acres of land. It integrates games and rides, giving fun experiences to all ages. The park also has other services like a swimming pool, gardens, cafes, restaurants, and a small zoo.

According to Engineer Adel Al-Zerghani, the Deputy of Wasit Governor, the project was granted an investment license at a cost of more than IQD 5,725 billion, (four million USD).

The park has the capacity to meet the city's needs, especially on holidays and occasions, and it will contribute to the local economy in terms of job opportunities for locals. The surrounding areas of the amusement park are expected to be economically revived.

According to owners of small private shops near the amusement park, their sales have increased, especially during the Eid days, while many taxi drivers indicated that the trips to the amusement park area have significantly increased, opening a new preferred destination.

“Every day, I bring people visiting the amusement park from different places in Kut city. During the holidays, my work has doubled both ways,” said Firas Al-Attabi, a taxi driver.

Um Rami, with a family visiting the park, was also grateful. “The amusement park is a unique opportunity for social gathering while families can spend some of their time for fun and enjoyment and work out their stress in this recreational place.”



Aerial view shows the Ferris wheel, one of the landmarks of the amusement park in Kut City© Wasit Investment Commission



Inflatable bouncy slides and the entrance of the digital games' hall in the amusement park in Kut City© Wasit Investment Commission

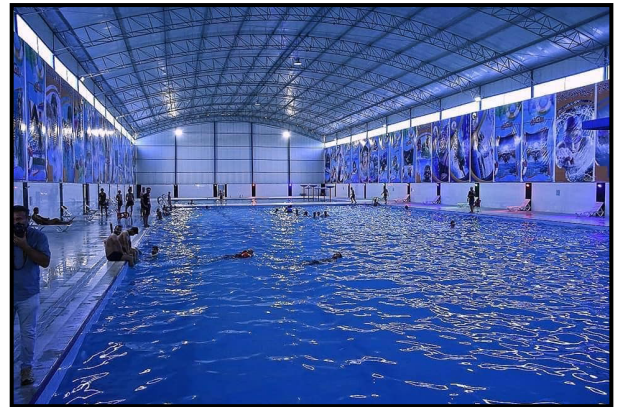


According to Dhea’a Helal, the Deputy Head of the Wasit Investment Commission, the amusement park is a profitable project. More investment opportunities are possible in the tourism sector for establishing similar parks in other districts of the province.

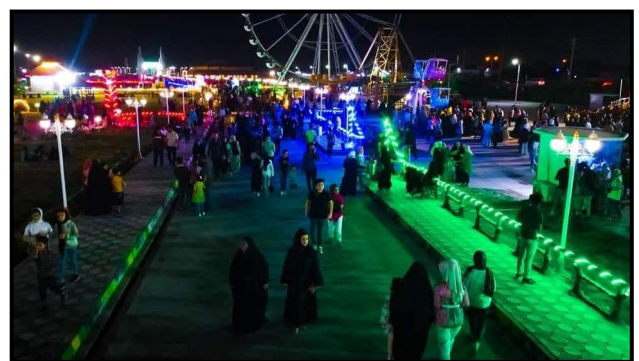
Families in Wasit governorate are no different from other families in Iraq, sharing the same Eid and other traditional rituals, such as gathering in large numbers for prayers, putting on their best clothes, and eating festive food with the family.

“Stuffed with dates, pistachios, and walnuts, baking Klecha (cookies) is a symbolic sign of Eid and a tradition,” said Um Mustafa, adding Eid is not complete without eating delicious Eid Klecha.

During Eid, families exchange visits, and children get candies and the Eidia (some cash) which is one of the most important Eid rituals for children, so they rejoice a lot when they receive it from family members and relatives, no matter how simple, they are always looking forward to it.



The swimming pool of the amusement park in Kut City© Wasit Investment Commission



Families enjoy their times in Dream City amusement park in Kut City© Wasit Investment Commission

5. Najaf – Construction Sector Shrinks



Adnan, a 38-year-old government employee, is currently in a dilemma. He started building his own home after renting for almost 12 years. Amid the construction process, the prices of construction materials had a spike that goes beyond his financial limits.

“I am already over budget and indebted,” said Adnan to Najaf DSO, pointing to a structure rising a few inches above the ground.

Adnan is joined by many other people building their long-awaited homes. They face challenging times coping with the growing construction material prices, casting shadows on what was hoped to be a post-COVID sector recovery, promising jobs creation and back to normal economics.



Contractors are in the worst position, as they had to sustain huge losses, as explained by Ahmed Al-Rikabi Contractor's Union representative in an interview with Najaf DSO. The increase was about 38% in major materials like cement, brick, and steel. Al-Rikabi says that 50-60% of construction materials are imported and steel, with its main source in Ukraine, witnessed a sharp 60% increase during the past couple of months.



Construction suspended due to high prices - courtesy local contractor

Karar Oda, a local supplier of construction materials, complains to DSO that his sales, and eventually his profits, have dropped by one-third in the past three months.

“People can't afford such soaring prices,” he added, explaining that part of the increase is due to the global rise in transportation costs for imported materials.

Government projects are not immune to the impact. On the contrary, they suffered the most, as they constitute the larger portion of the construction portfolio in the governorate compared to the private sector.

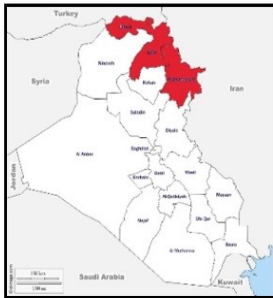
Najaf DSO discussed this issue with Construction Commission legal advisor Qasim Al-Haini, who stated that the number of legal disputes with contracts reaches the same level as faced after the pandemic strike. Contractors demand compensation for their losses and seek to renegotiate contract terms and restructure the payment schedule.

Part of the insufficient government capacity to respond to this crisis is due to the delay of government formation because of the political stalemate and the fact that the country has been running without an approved budget for the past seven months. The spending rates are restricted to 1/12th of the fiscal year 2021 on a monthly basis. This scheme can cover only regular expenditures like salaries, pensions, social security, and the provisioning of goods and services.

The political stalemate is preventing the government from using the bounty of high oil prices to alleviate the impacts of higher material prices in various sectors, especially construction, as it is closely to development activities.

Najaf DSO participated in a panel discussion with reconstruction officials and local experts on the best options to overcome the price increase issue. The panel agreed on the need to review the construction materials management process and introduce tighter material waste control measures like prefabrication, reducing changes during implementation, using modern technology in design, and monitoring the construction process.

6. Sulaymaniyah – University Professors Demonstrate for Their Rights



Several times during the past few months, the teaching staff of Sulaymaniyah, Halabja, and Chamchamal universities went to the streets protesting the delay of payments of their salaries. Their protest started at the university gate, but when there was no response to their demands, they decided to escalate and block the Sulaymaniyah-Tasluja Road to force the government to pay their delayed salaries.

The protesting professors pointed out the inequality between Sulaymaniyah teachers and their peers in Erbil, who receive their salaries on time. They believe that the ruling parties, the KDP and the PUK, are using their salaries as a pressure tactic in their political disagreement and competition over power.

The ruling parties exchanged accusations about the payment delay, where Erbil claims that Sulaymaniyah is withholding local non-oil revenues, while Sulaymaniyah says Erbil is not sending a sufficient budget to pay salaries.

According to an agreement between the two ruling parties, The Kurdistan Region Government (KRG) should send 80 percent of the operational budget required for Sulaymaniyah, while the remaining 20 percent is to be generated internally from local revenues such as border crossing customs, taxes, etc.

However, in the last few months, the local government stated that the internal revenues were not adequate to cover the 20 percent required to complement the budget.

Between 2014-2018, the university teachers received 25 percent of their salaries under the austerity measures (Salaries Saving System) declared by KRG. They were relieved when KRG finally stopped the saving system, thinking their suffering was over, but the government started to delay their salary payment again since October last year.

By the time they went to the streets protesting, they had been without salaries for almost three months.

In addition to the salary delay, KRG suspended promotions and salary increments for civil servants since 2014, which they consider as a clear violation of their rights.

The professors DSO met with were physicians, engineers, lawyers, and journalists. They either have jobs in the private sector or run their own businesses to



University professors blocking the main streets of Sulaymaniyah © a university professor



Protestors blocking Sulaymaniyah university gate © media



cope with the salary delay. However, those who do not have such specialities are working in evening, doing part-time jobs to keep life running.

“One of the main causes of exhausting the payroll and budget deficits is the considerable number of ghost employees appointed in the universities. The political parties employed a large number of their followers without taking into consideration their scientific qualifications to hold the positions they are currently occupying,” a professor at the College of Law says in a tone tinged with bitterness and despair.

In Sulaymaniyah, there is a notable sense of disappointment and frustration among the civil servants. The people are tired of hearing the officials’ claims about budget deficiency and the necessity to wait for months to receive salaries, which is one of their basic rights. They are convinced that protesting is the only way of making changes, and they are determined to continue protesting until they get a response to their demands.

They are not calling for paying their salaries in time only, but for releasing their salaries held in saving accounts, reactivating the promotion system, and increasing their current salaries. With the possibility of other sectors joining the teachers’ protests, Sulaymaniyah expects more demonstrations in the street and an increase in social unrest in this part of the Kurdistan Region.