

The Ground Truth

The Power of Peacebuilding: An Interview with Hero Anwar Brzw

Hero Anwar Brzw saw her father taken away at the age of nine. She lived through Saddam Hussein's reign of terror and the Kurdish struggle for autonomy. EPIC talked with Hero about her hopes for the experienced in Saddam's Iraq, and her personal belief in community-driven peacebuilding and development as the best means for ending conflict in today's Iraq.

epic: Tell us a little about your professional background. How did you get started in this work?

Hero: I graduated in 1992 in civil engineering. I had rented a room that was like a small hole for me, but I didn't mind. All I wanted to do was listen to the news that year. I just wanted to learn more about political parties in Kurdistan and to have the privilege of participating and keeping our leaders to their promises.

During the fighting between the political parties, I worked in a government office in Sulaymaniyah called the Directorate of Public Works and Rehabilitation. We didn't have many projects because there wasn't a budget large enough for engineering projects. Our meager budget for rehabilitating infrastructure was from international NGOs. There were many grant proposals but little funding. I was young and new and there was gender discrimination as well, so the older engineers got the few chances to work.

I was upset because during the uprising against Saddam I thought that, as a civil engineer, I could rebuild my country. But I was bored because I didn't have a chance to do real work. I heard that some international NGOs had volunteer opportunities but I couldn't get work with them. We didn't have that sort of system in Iraq.

In 1997, a friend heard about a post in an office called REACH. When I joined REACH I felt like I was doing real work for the first time. I visited some villages and got to know the residents. I had the opportunity to apply some of the principles I had learned: that people are equal and discrimination in any form is wrong. I was lucky REACH had the same vision.

epic: What is REACH's mission? Has the mission changed since you joined in 1997?

Hero: Our mission hasn't changed, but we have changed our strategy and focus as the situation changes in Iraq. We help vulnerable groups build sustainable communities regardless of their gender, ethnicity or religious identity. We work for the vulnerable wherever they are located inside Iraq.

epic: How did REACH get started?

Hero: Oxfam Great Britain had worked all over Iraq and they had offices in Kurdistan as well. So when Oxfam left Sulaymaniyah in 1995, the Iraqi national staff decided to form their own organization.

I joined REACH two years later. The first village I worked with was called Baraw-e Taza, which was near the border with Iran. This was one of the villages that Saddam had destroyed, so we were working with returning villagers to help rebuild. They had bad experiences with some other NGOs that treated them like second-class citizens, but with REACH they felt equal.

epic: How many staff were employed when you first joined REACH?

Hero: At that time it was only the Sulaymaniyah office, which had about 20 staff members, most of them temporary. The core staff was less than 10. Today, we have



Hero Anwar Brzw grew up in Sulaymaniyah, a city in northern Iraq. During her formative years in the 1980s, Saddam Hussein launched a brutal campaign against Iraq's Kurds. Then, following the 1991 Gulf War and subsequent uprising, northern Iraq was freed of the regime and took steps toward autonomous self-governance. In 1992, Hero received a degree in civil engineering and went to work for a local public works office of the newly elected Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). From 1997 to 2007, she worked with REACH, an Iraqi NGO that implements peacebuilding and development projects in vulnerable communities. Today, Hero is pursuing her master in Conflict Transformation Program at the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University.

45 permanent staff plus some temporary staff for specific projects.

epic: Where does REACH get its funding?

Hero: Most of the funding is from international NGOs. In the beginning it came from Christian Aid and there was a contract from the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO). The UK's Department for International Development started to fund us in 1998. There were others such as Peace Wind Japan (PWJ), Dutch Consortium (DC), Oxfam Germany, Mennonite Central Committee, UNHCR, and UNICEF. UNICEF is one of the best UN agencies because most of the other UN agencies just wanted to spend Oil for Food money in the wrong way.

We haven't had any funding from USAID because it doesn't believe in working with Iraqi NGO's directly. They believe there should be six filters: some large corporations, cooperatives, then American NGOs, then some international NGOs then others. This leaves Iraqis with only 10-20% of the whole grant. But we did work with USAID partners like Mercy Corps.

epic: Where does REACH work?

Hero: Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, Kirkuk, a part of Mosul and a part of Diyala. We have presence in Baghdad but we just use it for coordinating and networking with the central government.

epic: Imagine being an American. Day after day you read the papers and see reports of suicide bombings and sectarian violence.

Hero: This only describes part of the picture in Iraq. Politicians and the media tend to focus on violence and make you feel it's the whole picture when actually it's not.

Yes, we kill each other, but why do we kill each other? Part of the reason is the occupation, but it's not the only reason. It's also that the Saddam regime made each religious and ethnic group an enemy of the other. Also, many neighbor countries have created problems. The presence of Iran, Turkey and Syria is very clear.

We—along with the media and the international community—should see hope where people work together. Nobody talks about when Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen help each other, forgive each other and do projects together.

The media rarely reports on Iraqis and NGO's that work

hard to rebuild Iraq, the peacebuilding conferences all over the country or the women's organizations that gather together. They don't talk about the Kurds helping and sharing food with the Arab population in Sulaymaniyah, Erbil and Dohuk. So many of us Iraqis are gathering together, talking about projects, and developing our own solutions, but few of our voices are heard in the media.

epic: Have economic tensions deepened divisions between ethnic communities?

Hero: Good question; my answer is yes. One of the reasons for violence is the economic situation. When people don't have enough services and when people don't have jobs, they feel angry and they lose a sense of belonging to Iraq. There are often attempts by terrorist groups and militias to offer services in order to recruit members. When people have services, jobs, and money they don't listen to these groups.

epic: Can you give an example of peacebuilding in an economically diverse area?

Hero: There were Iraqi Arabs from south and central Iraq who moved to Kurdistan under the Hussein regime. The regime basically said, "We'll give you a plot of land in Kirkuk and some money if you move there and occupy Kurdish houses." Some Arab tribes didn't agree to it and the Kurdish people still remember and respect that decision, but others agreed to the policy and we considered them occupiers. I hated them for many years.

When the regime fell in 2003, the Kurdish communities and families that

had been ousted out of their homes returned, which in turn displaced many Iraqi Arabs. An international NGO funded REACH to help the secondary Arab Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Hawija. However, the NGO ran out of aid money for the last group of IDPs before they could be helped. I demanded the rights of these IDPs and they finally increased the budget.

It was the most difficult thing that I did in my life. I mean, if someone had told me ten years ago that one day I would argue for aid to Arabs who occupied our lands, I wouldn't have believed it. But because of REACH I have been convinced to work for all vulnerable groups regardless of their gender, ethnic, and religious affiliations.

There are many people in Iraq who need help. We never exclude particular groups because when we exclude them we make them angrier: they feel isolated, they can't inte-

"We created a space for dialogue where shared problem solving built a community across dividing lines... [The U.S. should] send peacebuilders and mediators instead of the army."

grate and they might resort to violence. There's a pact to be one society, one Iraq. To have peace, we should have the ability to forgive and try to start again. To bring people together and find ways of living side-by-side: this is the way to build Iraq's future.

epic: Some areas where REACH implements projects are very unstable, like Diyala. How can you implement projects when it's so unstable?

Hero: We involve the community in all aspects of the project cycle, beginning with the assessment until evaluation, so that they are a part of every step in the process. We don't do anything by ourselves; we depend on them for security, to protect us and to tell us when it's dangerous. Sometimes it even got too dangerous for them to work with us and we no longer have access to some of these areas. Nevertheless, we still work in Diyala, where we have served over 70 communities. Since 2003, REACH has implemented projects in over 250 communities across Iraq.

epic: Some of the contractors and Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) approach security with humvees and body armor. Is this the best form of protection?

Hero: No. Local protection and ownership is. Some NGOs waste money on armored vehicles and body armor, which costs half of their budget. Local protection and ownership doesn't require any money. Most NGOs have come to realize that.

We don't have concrete walls. We never have guards when we go to another location. It's forbidden for any REACH staffer to carry weapons. We don't have armored vehicles. We keep a low profile. We don't put the name of the NGO on our vehicles, especially in dangerous areas. We build trust with people in the community and they protect us. It is important to respect the tradition in any area, to let people understand that you respect what they believe. Thank God, we've never had any victims.

epic: Have any projects been attacked?

Hero: No, we've never been attacked, but sometimes we've stopped a project because we've received more than one threat. For example, in some areas there are extremist groups, violent groups, or so-called terrorist groups that are part of the community. Some people believe NGOs are spies or that they work for the British or American government.

We once received a threat in Diyala and we asked the community what they think we should do. We discussed it and found the solution together. They decided

to contact that extremist group, violent group, or so-called terrorist group and to explain that REACH is not some kind of company; it's an NGO and these are their beliefs. They had some meetings and they solved their problems. We ultimately saw the project through to completion.

epic: How much does a project normally cost?

Hero: On average for a small project it's about \$3000-\$4000, but it varies. Larger projects might cost \$50,000 to \$100,000. We spend about \$1 million every year, some of which is for salaries and offices.

epic: Give us another example of peacebuilding through development.

Hero: There were some Arab and Kurdish villages between Erbil and Mosul with some problems between over water distribution. One of the villages controlled the water valve and the amount of water that went to every village. They didn't provide enough water to some villages, so it was a good place to solve the conflict through a project. We talked with them and explained how we operate, then we told them that if they can't work together then we won't work with them.

In the beginning there was tension; they felt forced to be in the same meetings. We were patient and there was progress at every meeting. They agreed on the project implementation and the amount of water increased. Today, every village gets enough clean water if they use it wisely. We created a space for dialogue where shared problem solving built a community across dividing lines.

epic: How can successes like these be duplicated elsewhere?

Hero: It's not difficult. Peacebuilding through development can be time-consuming, but it's possible. As word spreads it becomes easier for other communities. There are many examples in which two ethnic groups live in the same village and we give them tools to deal with their own problems and conflicts.

epic: If the funding was there, what kind of a budget could REACH operate on in, say, 2008?

Hero: If REACH offices work with the CBOs, we have a capacity to spend \$5 million per year. If we work with Iraqi NGOs--we have worked with other NGOs in the south and center of Iraq that we have close relationships with--we might spend another \$2 million.

epic: Did many women participate in the community development programs?

Hero: Women participate with CBO's at a rate of about

35% to 39% and about 98% of CBOs have female members. Women's participation in rural areas is difficult to achieve. Although the villages are more conservative, we feel there's progress. There are gender workshops and training and there are some success stories of women participating and being very active.

epic: How do villagers respond when you visit to monitor and evaluate women's participation?

Hero: Most of the time they don't have problems. For most of the men it's okay. Of course we do our best to make them comfortable. For example, I don't wear "non-conservative (avant-garde)" clothes when I go to a village. They would feel offended because it's unacceptable for them. So we adjust everything--the words we use, the expressions, the clothes--to work with them.

epic: What do you feel the U.S. can do to foster better relationships among Iraqi communities?

Hero: First, the U.S. should think about the roots of the conflict and do more research. The U.S. must withdraw its combat forces. They can provide services, jobs and education opportunities, and send peacebuilders and mediators instead of the army. Then the mediators can create space for the conflicting parties to settle their difference and foster greater cooperation among all Iraqis. We can convince the conflicting parties that they have a common interest in Iraq so that they can pursue their interests through non-violent means.

There are many experts in the U.S.: experts in mediation, peacebuilding and negotiation. Not the ones who one day provide weapons and the next day become

peacebuilders. I mean real institutions such as Eastern Mennonite University (EMU). The U.S. can use these institutions to train peacebuilders and send them to Iraq.

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epic: You would like to see American combat troops replaced with peacebuilders and educators?

Hero: Yes. My understanding is that the politicians just want to withdraw forces without any alternative. The U.S. government contributed to destroying Iraq so they have a responsibility to contribute to its reconstruction. They have to do it via development and peacebuilding. Experts in the U.S.—meaning the professors and those who believe in peace

and justice and have overseas experience—can train the Iraqi people and they can bring the conflict parties together and create a safe space to transform their conflict. This is what the U.S. government has to do. They have the power to do this.

epic: Is there hope for peace in Iraq?

Hero: There's a little hope. If there was no hope I wouldn't come to attend Eastern Mennonite University's Peacebuilding Institute. There are many people in Iraq who want to learn about peacebuilding and therefore we educate people and we give them tools to deal with their problems. We can build on this hope every day. When I meet concerned citizens and see real NGOs in Iraq and the U.S. that work hard for change, I feel there's more hope. These groups, these events, and even one march in the U.S. gives me hope. There are people who feel how much we suffer, and they genuinely share our desire for a better, more peaceful world.

The Ground Truth Project is a unique series of interviews with Iraqis, aid workers, and others who have lived, worked or served in Iraq. By offering perspectives about Iraq that can only be gained from being there, EPIC hopes these interviews will inspire meaningful policy change and citizen action in support of a better future for all Iraqis. To support the Ground Truth, please visit <http://www.epic-usa.org/Donate>

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