

## **The role of *models for reality* in the transition period of communities especially in the aftermath of crises: The Kurdish experience in Northern Iraq**

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Abstract

The formerly deported people in Kurdistan in Northern Iraq were turning back to their devastated villages after the Kuwait crisis in 1991 and began to reconstruct their villages. Their former socio-cultural life-world (Habermas 1992) had been fully destroyed between 1975 and 1988. Before repatriation the deportees were forced to construct a new life-world in the alien environment of collected villages or exile, in which they were forced to live. After repatriation the returnees were under the strong influence of their newly established modern life in collected villages and/or exile; nevertheless traditions of their former village life were still determining their behaviour and minds as a model of reality (Geertz 1973).

The political environment in 1991 was fully uncertain; in the aftermath of crisis state failure caused a vacuum of power. No rules and no regulations – total freedom? The non-existent sphere of power (Weber 1998) was a source of uncertainty and chaotic development. It could not contribute to future orientation in the sense of creating a new and appropriate model for reality (Geertz 1973). Without having future oriented policies and social and financial resources (Weber 1998), reconstruction of the new villages was not future oriented, and the new villages did not become an integrated and dynamic part of the settlement system. The food distribution policy of the UN agencies further aggravated the difficulties of shaping a new model for reality because it seemed no longer reasonable for the new villagers to engage in farming activities. As a response to missing services such as schools and health care, the returnees in the newly reconstructed villages began to emigrate back to larger settlements like former collected villages and the three large cities of Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaimaniya.

The returnees were composed of different subgroups with the younger ones interested in modern life (electricity, roads, water, schools – but also radio and television) and the elderly dreaming of their former village idyll. Lack of organisation was hindering the returnees to articulate their interests; communicative action (Habermas 1992) through interaction of different actors was not possible. In this general frame of anomy (Gerhardt

2002) the international actors were not interested in the establishment of a new order and new political powers, while the local actors were not able to develop policies for future orientation.

The transition period after crisis is a period with strong impulses for social change which can be defined as a period of liminality (Turner 2008). The challenges of this period are huge but they include also chances and opportunities as the experience in Northern Iraq illustrates.

Keywords: Crisis, state failure, social change, reconstruction, regional development

## **Background**

In the aftermath of the war against Iraq in 1991 the political situation in the region changed dramatically. The focus of development was no longer the liberation of Kuwait but the very political future of Iraq after its army had been forced out of Kuwait. The change in US politics towards the Saddam regime and the use of military helicopters against Shiites and Kurds caused a humanitarian catastrophe at the borders of Iraq with Iran and Turkey. Hundreds of thousands of people from Iraq fled to the neighbouring countries. Almost one and a half million Kurds were trying to seek security in Iran and Turkey, turning major cities into ghost towns. From Dohuk's 100 000 inhabitants at the time, only 400 people had remained while all the others were fleeing through the mountains towards Turkey.

After the intervention by the UN in 1991 in Northern Iraq once more a safe haven had been defined in order to protect the Kurdish population and to try to convince them to turn back home. Back home? Rather an odyssey! One should go back to the seventies and eighties and have a closer look at the developments in Iraq.

## **Socio-political development in Iraq in the seventies and eighties**

The dispute between the Kurds and the central powers of Iraq dates back to the times of the British mandate after World War I. As Iraq was constituted in 1932 the Kurds were seen as a part of the Arab Kingdom of Iraq (Sluglett 2001, 23ff) and all attempts of the Kurds to obtain autonomy were in vain. General Qasim was the first to attempt to solve the dispute in 1958 after the proclamation of the new Republic of Iraq. The representative of the Kurds, Molla Mustafa Barzani, was called from his Soviet exile. 'The Kurds should obtain autonomy' was the proclaimed aim. However, the Kurds did not obtain autonomy and the struggle between the Kurds and central government continued. In 1970 there was a new attempt to solve the conflict. An agreement between the ruling Ba'th party and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) regulated the new approach for getting autonomy for the Kurdish people. In this agreement

„The [Iraqi] government promised Kurds full recognition of their nationality and autonomy within four years. The Kurdish language was made the primary language in the Kurdish areas, and also an official language which would be taught in addition to Arabic throughout Iraq” (Jawad 1982: 50).

And as Sluglett points out that

“(...) the new (provisional) Iraqi constitution of July 1970, stating explicitly for the first time that ‘The people of Iraq is formed of two principal nationalities, the Arab nationality and the Kurdish nationality’.” (Sluglett 2001, p. 142).

This was encouraging and a set of measures were foreseen to be implemented in that new political sense.

As the aim of the agreement had not been realised after four years, the Kurdish side started a rebellion. Interestingly, the Kurdish rebellion was supported by the USA through the Shah regime in Iran. Probably their aim was to weaken Iraq because of its alliance with the former Soviet Union. This support strengthened the Kurds so that they could withstand the Iraqi forces. The situation changed when Iran signed an agreement with Iraq in Algiers in 1975. The agreement stipulated that Iran stops its support for the Kurds and, in return, was given half of the Shatt-el-Arab, an important premise for its oil exports. After losing the support of Iran, the Kurdish rebellion was defeated and Iraq regained control over the Kurdish regions, especially in the border area to Turkey and Iran.

### **The political force and destruction of the rural settlements in the Kurdish region: impacts on the socio-economic life of the rural population**

Iraq began in 1975 to reshape its politics towards the Kurds. The core of this policy was to obtain full control over Kurdish regions and to obstruct assumed support of the Kurdish villages in the mountainous areas of the North and Northeast to the Kurdish rebellion. As Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett point out, “(...) the entire populations of villages situated close to the frontiers with Iran and Turkey, where the regime set up a *cordon sanitaire* between itself and its neighbours in order to ‘prevent infiltration’” (Sluglett 2001, 188) were removed and the inhabitants deported. The deportation policy began in autumn 1975 in the Barzan area. It was continuously implemented until the end of the war against Iran. The peak of the repressions was the so called *al-Anfal campaign* against Kurds, during which up to 200.000 of Kurdish people were killed also by chemical weapons (Meiselas 2008: p 308; Sluglett 2001, pp. 269-270). At the end of 1988 most of the Kurdish villages had been destroyed (Table 1).

There are no statistics about how many inhabitants have been deported. The author estimated that the deported rural population must be about 720 thousand inhabitants (Sinemillioglu 2011, 25). The deportees have later been resettled in so called collected towns comprising the population of up to 20 villages strongly controlled by the security forces. The deportees were dispossessed and not able to continue their former agricultural life. In the words of Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett “(...), those who were made to live in them [collected towns] could no longer continue with their traditional

agricultural or pastoral way of life” (Sluglett 2001, 188). The collected towns were strongly controlled settlements, which did not allow for any economic activity. The destruction of the rural regions and accompanying deportations was nothing else than the destruction of the social and economic structure of this society.

*Table 1: Settlements in Northern Iraq, March 1996*

Governorate	Cities / towns	Collective towns	Total Villages	Destroyed villages	Resettled villages
Dohuk	14	35	1,200	867 (72%)	600 (69%)
Erbil	22	28	1,238	1,025 (83%)	868 (85%)
Suleimaniyah	41	15	2,021	1,994 (99%)	1,004 (50%)
Total	77	78	4,459	3,886 (87%)	2,472 (64%)

Source: UN–Department of Humanitarian Affairs, IRCU – NI (from: Sinemillioglu, 2011, pp. 267-268)

### **The crisis of 1990 and the war of 1991: reversal of deportations, returnees in the destroyed rural regions**

The invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 by the Iraqi army caused a heavy crisis in the Middle East. The UN Security Council responded immediately with the Resolution No. 660 (SR660) of August 2, 1990. With the SR661 of August 6, 1990, Iraq was put under international sanctions. After negotiations remained without any results, the UN mandated international force troops intervened in January 1991 and the Iraqi troops were forced out of Kuwait. The aftermath of the War, known as Gulf War I, was dramatic. By the end of March 1991 almost one and half million Kurds and approximately one million Shiites from the southern Iraq fled to Turkey and Iran. The UN reacted by deciding to form a “safe haven” in Northern Iraq so that refugees could return to their homes (RS688 of April 5 1991). From now on it was possible for the international community, for the UN Organisations and for humanitarian NGOs, to enter into the crisis region.

Some of the returnees who had been deported from their villages went directly to their former villages, especially those who had been living in Turkish or Iranian exile for many years, i.e. those who fled in 1975 and in 1988 from Iraq. They returned to Iraq as homeless people – roughly about 600,000 returnees (Sinemillioglu 2011). These former refugees started to rebuild their destroyed villages under extremely difficult conditions

and without any assistance; the only capital they had was their enthusiasm and their will to reconstruct their former homes (Sinemillioglu 2011).

Picture 1: Returnees coming from Iranian exile in November 1991 in the village of Bile, which was destroyed in 1975.



Source: Sinemillioglu 1991

### **The vacuum of political power in parts of Iraq and international response: the policy of *do nothing***

The UN resolution SR688 had created a completely new state of affairs: In Northern Iraq central government had completely lost power. The loss of their *sphere of power* (the expression is from Weber 1998) allowed the opposition to take over power immediately after the UN resolution. This was not fully recognised by the international community, but not fully denied either. The newly emerged Kurdish opposition proclaimed to install a democratic administration. The democratic orientation in one part of the state of Iraq was contradicting central power, possible through the policy of *do*

*nothing* at the side of the allies and the United Nations (Sinemillioglu, 2011, pp. 125-128).

The main actor during the aftermath of the crisis surely was the UN managing the humanitarian disaster and organising humanitarian help. Doing this the UN was bound by obligatory agreements with the Iraqi central government because the UN can be active in a member state only if the concerned country accepts this. According to the Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) between the central government of Iraq and the UN the main goal of UN interventions was defined as humanitarian intervention, and for its actions the UN had to take into account the “sovereignty of Iraq and the national unity of its population.” (MOU, 20 May 1996, from: Sinemillioglu, 2011, p. 101).

Interestingly, the UN Organisations continued their humanitarian work as though nothing new had happened in ‘the three northern Governorates’, as the Kurdish region used to be addressed in UN jargon. The UN agencies even negotiated officially with the new Kurdish administration, but the political orientation of the Kurds was fully neglected.

The obvious result of this policy was that also the allies accepted the situation in the North of the country but did not have any policy to control, to prevent or to influence the developments in these three Governorates. The following statement of the American Colonel R.M. Naab shows that the allies did not recognise and/or were not interested in the political processes in Iraq regarding the political development in the Kurdish region:

“In May 1992, Iraq was having an election. I said, „What is this going to solve?“ And in fact, while Kurds participated in it very actively, the U.S. gave very little help officially. It didn’t make the problem of the rivalry between two major parties go away. I mean Jalal and Massoud are still at it. It still goes hot and then cold for a while. It gives people in the West the opportunity to say, “Well, there they go again. They’re all tribal. They can’t manage their own affairs. They’re killing each other.” That’s too bad for the Kurdish people” (Meiselas, 2008, p. 342).

The result of this policy was that the UN was allowed to bring back the returnees without organising any assistance beyond humanitarian help. The returnees were free to do what they wanted: Return to their destroyed villages and try to create a new *life world*.

### **Crises accelerate social change**

Social change in general is a part of the transformation of societies (Zapf, 1996). In traditional societies this transformation occurs under the conditions of political and cultural pressure, i.e. inputs from ‘outside’ (Parsons, 1961). Political pressure can also

be identified in the process of state and nation building (Rokkan, 1969, p. 233-234). In the case of Iraq the process of state and nation building indeed created continuous political pressure accompanied by crises almost through the whole history of the country (Sluglett, 1991). The continuous struggle between Kurds and central government in this process caused the almost complete destruction of the rural space in Kurdish regions. This was done 'in the name of modernization' (Sluglett, 1991; Rohde, 2010).

In the literature there is a vast amount of publications about crises, nevertheless post-conflict situations are not deeply considered, as Herrero points out:

“Despite common elements, postconflict situations differ significantly from one another. Most of the existing literature does not address the immediate aftermath of the conflict – the emergency phase. (...) The security, political, and administrative vacuum resulting from conflict, as important as it is, is often neglected.” (Herrero 2005, 43).

The “shattered society” (HRW, 1993) of the Kurds in Iraq in the aftermath of the GW I is a good proof for this observation. The very unique situation in Iraq shows that the unexpected change in the social and political environment, especially the change in state affairs, challenges the international community because the affected people obviously are not able to manage their own affairs.

### **Development after crises and the model of reality versus the model for reality**

The will of returnees to reconstruct their former villages was not an easy task. In the aftermath of the crisis of 1991 the situation of the returnees was almost the same as it has been after the deportations, this time in the opposite direction. Arriving in their former and now devastated villages the returnees were confronted and challenged with a new environment fully different from their newly created life world under the conditions of collected villages or exile. They still carried elements of their rural life world in their minds, and as they started reconstruction of the villages the driving force was this cultural background. In the words of the renowned anthropologist Clifford Geertz *cultural patterns* or *models* out of their former life.

Geertz distinguishes two main concepts: models of reality versus models for reality (Geertz, 1973, pp. 93-94). Models of reality describe the forms, behaviours and traditions of the existing life world. For future orientation and plans models for reality are of importance. Most development can be in general described as a pendulum between these two models with a latent or open competition existing between the two.

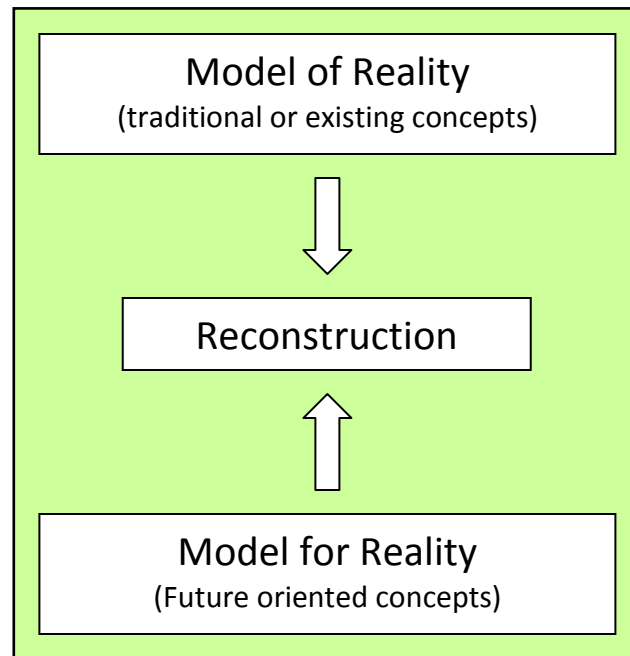


Figure 1. Concepts influencing future action: the field of reconstruction  
 Source: Sinemillioglu, 2011, p. 65. Translation by the author

Applying this approach to the reconstruction activities of the returnees, it is obvious that returnees were driven mostly by the existing models of reality. These were derived from their former village life, but to some extent mixed with new elements of their recent life world, i.e. life in collected villages including modern social amenities like schools and health services, technical infrastructure like flowing water and electricity in the houses, modern communication and transportation systems etc. Sinemillioglu describes five groups, especially the group of youngsters who want modern services in the villages, and the group of elderly people who strongly adhere to former rural life (Sinemillioglu, 2011, pp. 143-144). Traded values in the minds of elderly people like resistance to change and glorification of the past are strong hindrances especially if there is no future oriented assistance such as concepts and institutions and the missing “material, i.e. the social and financial, resources” (Max Weber).

Reconstruction? Is it possible to reverse the destruction and have a beginning at the point of destruction? The rapid change in social life of rural groups caused by the full destruction of their life world is a complex issue and it is nearly unmanageable. This is a potential risk in the development process.

## **Rapid social change and the demand for future policies: The role of external actors**

The developments in Kosovo (Herrero, 2005; Sinemillioglu, 2011), and in Timor-Leste (Sinemillioglu, 2011) after the crisis describes the international aid for institution building, without which overcoming the critical phase would not be possible.

The same should have been done in Kurdistan. The reasons, why this was not the case are manifold. The most important reason is the ambiguity of the approach “keeping Iraq together, otherwise all the Kurds in the region will want to have the same” (Sinemillioglu 2011). Out of many other reasons the international assistance was delimited with the humanitarian aid.

The main issues raised after the crisis of 1991 in Kurdish Iraq especially until the second Gulf war in 2003 were concentrated on two main fields: the reconstruction of the rural villages and the establishment of a new Kurdish Administration. The reconstruction of the villages could not be approached appropriately due to the lack of administration capacities since there were no governmental policies for reconstruction policies. The re-establishment of the rural regions, therefore, was merely understood as the construction of houses, better shelters, for homeless people. The reconstruction of the villages was not included as such in the programmes of the UN agencies or other international humanitarian agencies. And the policies of the Kurdish politics were not going far beyond the wish of *the reconstruction* of villages. Especially the ownership of land was not clarified. The confiscation of land by the Iraqi central government was de facto no more accepted, but there were no new regulations in that regard.

Under these preconditions the reconstruction of the villages was a chaotic process, which was not allowing a future oriented sustainable re-establishment of the rural regions. Especially the economic activities of the newly emerging settlements and the provision of the main public services were fully neglected.

In the sphere of the economic activities two main hindrances were determining the developments. One was the lack of material resources. Especially the lack of financial resources didn't allow establishing the farming activities. The savaged agricultural land, the lack of equipment and live stock, destroyed irrigation systems needed to be rearranged. Also the necessary social resources like skills for agricultural work were missing, not to mention the non-existent marketing structures.

The other hindrance was the international sanctions and the related food distribution. The sanctions were fully applied also to the Kurdish regions, which hindered the import of necessary machines, equipments and spare parts. The food distribution did additional difficulties, because the farming products could not be sold in the market – the wheat flour for example was imported from Australia.

In the field of social services the demand was tremendous. Every settlement was in need of schools, health services, and technical infrastructure like streets, communication means and electrification. The water supply and sanitation were non-existent, posing a considerable danger to people's health, especially to that of the children and elderly. Missing financial means were not the only reason for this situation. Especially the small scaled construction of the villages constituted a major problem since an effective support and sufficient organisation of the services was very difficult. Some villages were inhabited by just a few families, which simply couldn't be supplied. Many villages without far beyond road access emerged near main roads far away from their original locations. However, families in these locations had difficulties reaching their farming lands and couldn't start farming activities.

Furthermore not all of the returnees were able to start their life in their old villages. Many hundreds of thousands returnees had to resettle in different locations; in the former collected towns or in the cities, especially in Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaimaniya. As an example the population of the former collected town Shela Dize, 40 km east of the historical town and district centre of Amadiya, has been grown from 6,000 in 1991 to 22,000 in 2009 (Sinemillioglu, 2011, pp. 137-139). Repatriates from Turkish or Iranian exile had caused this rapid growth. These returnees were not able to reconstruct their former villages because of many different reasons. One of them was the missing transportation infrastructure; the other one was the ongoing conflict between Kurdish rebellion and Turkish army at the Iraqi borders with Turkey, scaring off the returnees to resettle in their former villages located in these areas.

### **The example of the region of Welati Jeri**

DhK (Dortmunder helfen in Kooperation e.V. / Citizens of Dortmund help in Cooperation, registered association), a humanitarian organisation from Dortmund, Germany, supported the returnees in their villages in many different ways. The focus of the work of DhK was establishing the farming activities and supplying the returnees with social services, especially with schools and health care. Doing this DhK paid attention to participatory planning in the region. For the reconstruction activities the villages were not handled as separate units but groups of villages were bundled and considered as a small region. The work in the region of Welati Jeri (WJ) is a relevant example for the integrated and participatory bottom up approach of DhK.

The work of DhK in WJ started in spring 1992 and ended in 1995. The region is located in the North of the mountains Ciyaye Shirin and is cut off from access to the road by the river Reshin, a side arm of the Greater Zap. Facing this obstacle the nine villages in the region were obliged to act concertedly. This was the basis for DhK to negotiate with the

representatives of the nine villages. Very soon after the first contacts the negotiations ended with an organised *communicative action* between DhK and the representatives of the villages, which very soon turned into a *regional development committee (RDC)*. After clarifying the responsibilities between both sides, the communication was smoothly functioning. It was no more necessary to talk to single families; instead, it was now possible to consider the whole region as an entity. The needs of the separate villages were adapted to the needs of the region. The RDC and DhK organised regular meetings in each village with the men and women – even if these meetings were held separately. It was seen as normal that the decisions were made only by the men, especially by the elderly. Nevertheless, DhK was able to organise meetings with the women as well and discuss the needs from their perspectives.

Together the RDC and DhK defined the most important measures for the region. Access from the road to the villages, i.e. the construction of a foot bridge over the Reshin River, was defined as the most important measure since the missing access roads in the region made it impossible to transport the necessary goods for construction activities. Therefore, as a second measure, mules were bought for the transportation of goods. After these two measures were taken the reconstruction activities increased rapidly. More and more families from the Iranian exile and from the collected town of Qotchtepe returned to the region. In the following months and years the joint activities of the RDC and DhK included one health centre, five schools, two water mills, agricultural tools, seeds and seedlings and the distribution of oxen and sheep. The region began to grow; the agricultural work had been extended and the RDC became an important institution for the development of the region.

RDC was consisting out of the Muxtars, the mayors, of the nine villages. The muxtars traditionally are the elder authority in the village. Getting them together in a committee responsible for the whole region was an important milestone for the self-organisation and community development in WJ. This new organisational element combined the traditional function of the muxtar with the new institutional set up. In that way it was possible to combine and adapt the interests of the villages with the development of the whole region.

### **The example of Shela Dize**

Despite this encouraging example of WJ the whole process shows strong deficits of policies especially in the sphere of spatial structure. Missing policies and financial resources didn't allow the sustainable reconstruction of the villages. The question of the settlement structure combined with the role of regional centres, which could have been market places for the agricultural activities in the catchment area, was not answered. The former collected town of Shela Dize is a typical example for this unbalanced

development. Shela Dize is a former collected town including the deportees from about 20 villages of the Rekan tribe. The town rapidly grew after the GW I. Before the war in 1991 the town had a population of about 6,000 inhabitants. After the war Shela Dize grew continuously; in 2009 its population reached 22,000 inhabitants. As map 1 shows the town has reached more than four times of its original size (Sinemillioglu, 2011).



Map 1: the former collected village of Shela Dize, 2009

Source: The municipality of Shela Dize, 2009, in Sinemillioglu, 2011, p. 138

Shela Dize is a residential neighbourhood; apart from small retail shops and school services there are no major economic activities. There are different reasons for this development. Besides the lack of financial resources many returnees couldn't return to their villages because of the crisis at the border to Turkey. The insecurity across the border hindered the reconstruction of many villages in the region. Another reason simply was the missing public services in the newly reconstructed villages. Especially the lack of schools and health services forced many families to partly leave the villages. These families had been divided into two parts; one part established a new household in the towns or cities while the other remained in the village.

## Conclusion

The policy of “do nothing” left the state affairs in Iraq to its own dynamics. The politics in the north of Iraq were not able to define the necessary policies for a sustainable reestablishment of the rural regions; the political power in that region, on the other hand, had no necessary means and capacity. The political uncertainty determined the development until the war in 2003.

The policies of the UN agencies like food distribution and constructing only the shelters without support for the necessary economic development, the missing infrastructure for the agricultural activities and the failure of marketing mechanisms didn't support the agricultural activities of the returnees in the villages. The cities and towns and the former collected villages were covering the housing for the returnees and internally displaced persons without disposing of economic activities. Nevertheless, these locations had been the target of emigration from the reconstructed villages for years.

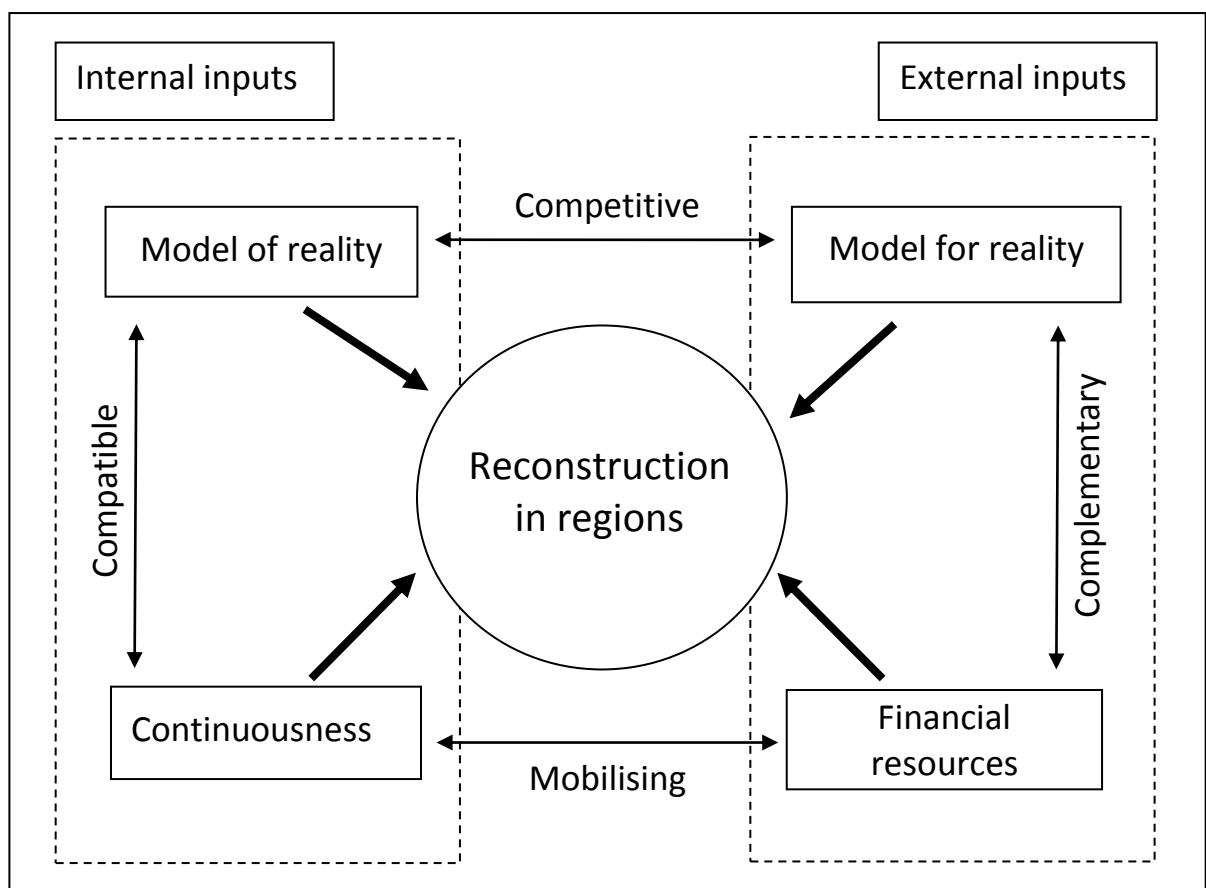


Figure 2: External and internal factors influencing the field of reconstruction  
 Source: Authors own construction

The development in the Kurdish regions of Iraq shows that the state failure challenges the future orientation in different ways. The spatial development after the crisis needs clear policies in different fields. Especially the missing institutional set up doesn't allow

developing future oriented policies; if there is no state and no functioning administration there are two options only. The first one could be observed in the Kurdish regions between 1991 and 2003. In that case all the chaotic developments do not allow people to create a sustainable future oriented environment.

The second one can be seen as an organised assistance by external actors as it was the case in Kosovo or in Timor-Leste. Figure 2 demonstrates this assistance for the reconstruction activities. Especially the relations between the models of reality and the model for reality are crucial to the external assistance. Obviously after the crisis the lack of financial resources is an important hindrance for the reconstruction process. The necessary inputs and a good management can mobilise the persons affected. This would support the communicative dialog between the external actors and the affected target groups, which is of great importance for the participatory planning activities.

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