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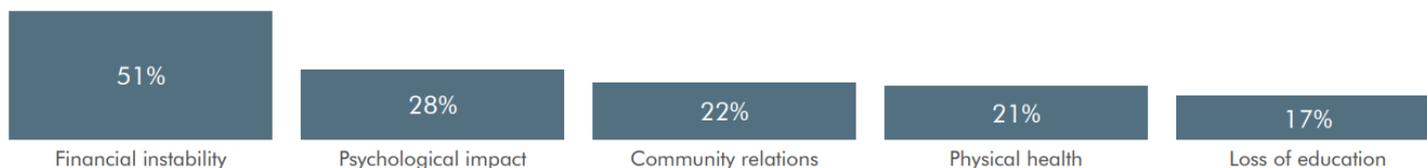
A health worker in Sinjar receives the COVID-19 vaccine  
[Photo Credit: Sinjar Directorate of Health]

## One Year On, COVID-19 Continues to Impact Iraq

The first case of COVID-19 in Iraq was detected in late February 2020, attributed to a student who recently returned from Iran. Despite the imposition of strict lockdowns, within a few months the country reached the “community transmission” stage. By the [end of February 2021](#), there were approximately 695,000 of COVID-19 in Iraq, resulting in just over 13,000 reported deaths.

While the transmission and fatality rate in Iraq is relatively low, especially in comparison with other countries in the region, COVID-19 has had significantly adverse socio-economic and cultural impacts in the country, including for vulnerable groups targeted by the Humanitarian Response Plan. Several assessments have been carried out to measure these impacts; one which focuses on IDPs and returnees is highlighted here.

### Adverse social impacts



[Ground Truth Solutions](#) partnered with the [Iraq Information Center](#) (supported in part by the Iraq Humanitarian Fund) to conduct a [third round of interviews](#)<sup>1</sup> with 545 returnees, refugees, and IDPs across Anbar, Duhok, Erbil, Salah al-Din and Ninewa. Respondents noted that the months of ongoing containment measures are taking their toll; people reported being most concerned about education, meeting daily needs, and health. Female respondents were more worried than their male counterparts regarding most categories thought to be based on the disproportionate burdens they have faced during the pandemic. Response actors have observed a sharp rise in incidents of gender-based violence (GBV), and particularly domestic violence, during COVID-19. Significant numbers of vulnerable women and girls have been left without recourse due to a reduction of gender-specific services, including support for GBV survivors.

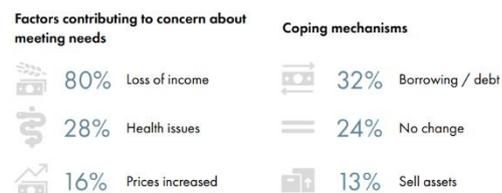
Parents expressed concern about children falling behind academically and socially, as schools remained closed for most of 2020. Aside from the absence of remote curricula in some areas of the country, respondents cited not having the right devices, an internet connection, or simply the financial means as reasons why facilitating lessons during restrictions is

<sup>1</sup> All infographics in this section taken from the report, available at [https://groundtruthsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/GTS-COVID\\_19-report-\\_Iraq\\_-R3.pdf](https://groundtruthsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/GTS-COVID_19-report-_Iraq_-R3.pdf)

challenging. The lack of educational opportunities is reportedly leading to increased incidents of child labour, notably in out-of-camp locations.

Respondents also reported that loss of income, price increases and health challenges were contributing to unmet needs, which they were coping with by taking on debt or selling assets.

One year on from the first incidence of COVID-19 in Iraq, the country has entered another period of lockdowns and movement restrictions aimed at containing the spread of the virus. Those who are already vulnerable—including IDPs, refugees, and returnees—are likely to continue to be negatively impacted. The [2021 Humanitarian Needs Overview \(HNO\)](#) for Iraq identified 4.1 million people in need (PiN), of which 2.4 million people have acute humanitarian needs. While the number of people in need remained similar to the previous year, the severity of those needs increased, largely due to the impact of COVID-19 on top of an existing humanitarian crisis, leading to a 35 per cent increase in the number of people in acute need. As outlined in the HNO, the main drivers of this increase were the impact of COVID-19 and the partially related economic crisis, leading to large-scale loss of livelihoods. Addressing the continuing humanitarian consequences of the 2014-2017 crisis and related displacement, as well as the compounding humanitarian impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, are the central priorities for humanitarian action in Iraq in 2021, as outlined in the [2021 Humanitarian Response Plan](#).



## Inter-agency Missions to Return Areas



Discussion with a representative for returnees in Debas  
[Photo Credit: OCHA]

During February 2021, OCHA field offices organized several inter-agency field missions to return areas throughout Iraq to better assess the current situation of out-of-camp IDPs and returnees and determine the prospects of sustainable returns. Where possible, stabilization and development actors were included in order to ensure that all relevant parties can implement their programming effectively.

In Kirkuk, mission participants<sup>2</sup> visited Debas district, one of the four districts of Kirkuk governorate. The mission sought to reinforce working relationships with the local authorities in Debas and to better learn about returns, protracted displacement, reintegration of IDPs, and continuing needs for humanitarian assistance. Municipal leaders noted the need for sanitation services and additional support to the agricultural sector; they also

called for rehabilitation of the local water plant, electricity grid and health infrastructure. The security situation in Debas is generally stable, and ethno-religious conflicts are reportedly rare. However, food assistance is needed, especially for female-headed households, as is housing reconstruction, with villagers noting during focus group discussions that they had not received compensation from the government for destroyed property.<sup>3</sup>

In Salah Al-Din, mission participants<sup>4</sup> visited Hugna village in Shirqat. The mission sought to understand the challenges for returns to the area, which was under occupation by the Islamic State for Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) for more than three years. According to the mukhtars, due to this long period of occupation, some of the households in the village aligned with ISIL and many families still have perceived affiliations to the group. During the military operation to retake the area, 70 per cent of the homes in the village were heavily damaged, and many of those who have returned live in tents. The area is heavily securitized, and some returns are allegedly blocked by community members who reportedly refuse to accept their

<sup>2</sup> Participants included OCHA, UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM, WFP, IRC, Oxfam, HAI, KRA, UNAMI Development Support Office, Returns Working Group.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on property compensation issues, see this guide prepared by the Housing, Land and Property sub-cluster: [Property Compensation Guidelines \(2020\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> Participants included OCHA, IOM and SSDF

former neighbours back into the village. Returnees require food, WASH, NFIs and other basic support, including civil documentation. Social cohesion is also a priority.



An informal settlement near Abu Ghraib  
[Photo Credit: OCHA]

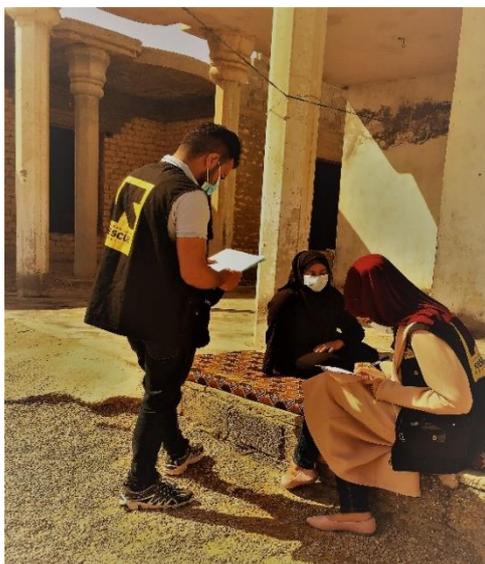
In Baghdad, mission participants<sup>5</sup> visited areas of Abu Ghraib to determine the impact of camp closures on those who were unable to return to areas of origin or had become secondarily displaced. After the closure of the Al-Shams settlement and Al-Ahl camps in October 2020, at least 42 households stayed in the district. The unofficial number is likely to be higher and some of the households allege harassment by armed groups.

The Mayor of Abu Ghraib stated that lack of job opportunities, essential services including roads, health care centres, schools and water purification stations are the main gaps. IDPs and returnees confirmed the lack of essential services and income opportunities as their main needs, while local authorities and key informants also highlighted protection concerns as a major gap and asked for the provision of mental health and psychosocial services.

Partners interested in supporting this population were advised to undertake an analysis of the security and conflict situation, to improve access to the area.

## Iraq Humanitarian Fund Supports Cash Programming in Iraq

The [Iraq Humanitarian Fund](#) (IHF) is a multi-donor Country Based Pooled Fund (CBPF) led by the Humanitarian Coordinator and managed by OCHA. It supports humanitarian partners responding to the complex and dynamic crisis in Iraq, including through direct funding to national frontline responders. The IHF facilitates timely resource mobilization for the most critical humanitarian needs as defined by the HRP, while retaining flexibility to allocate funds to unforeseen emergency needs and critical gaps as they emerge.



'Iilham speaks with IRC's team in Ramadi, Anbar  
[Photo Credit: IRC]

One such partner is the Cash Consortium for Iraq (CCI), a joint initiative of member agencies<sup>6</sup> established in 2015 to promote more effective multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA) in Iraq, through harmonization, operational coordination and an expanded geographic reach. The CCI seeks to have flexibility, inter-agency coordination and interoperable data management practices between partners; such an approach ensures that the needs of beneficiaries can be met by whichever partner is best suited to address them. A case study<sup>7</sup> presented by the CCI illustrates the operational model in context:

*'Iilham Dawid was 19 years-old when she lost her husband and her home in Ramadi, Anbar when ISIL attacked in 2014. Now six years on, the widowed mother of two young daughters and her whole extended family continue to struggle to meet their basic needs. Eleven family members live in an unfinished shelter. The sole income source for the family is 'Iilham's brother, who finds occasional work as a casual laborer.*

*Already struggling to meet their basic needs, 'Iilham and her family were hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic when her brother was forced to stop working due to lockdown measures. She and her family were contacted by CCI member Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) during a blanket vulnerability assessment,*

*through which she was found eligible for multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA). Unfortunately, soon after the context deteriorated further, and NRC was unable to proceed with the distribution due to challenges with access and operational concerns.*

*Leveraging the advantages of the consortium approach, NRC was able to refer 'Iilham's case—and others affected by NRC's challenges in Ramadi—to the International Rescue Committee (IRC), who was better positioned to provide assistance with IHF's support. Since CCI partners use harmonized tools and approaches, the IRC was able to accept*

<sup>5</sup> OCHA, UNHCR, TDH Lausanne, ZOA, International Medical Corps (IMC), CORDAID, International Rescue Committee (IRC), Legal Clinic Network (LCN), Iraq Health Access Organization (IHAO), Khiamiat NGO, Mercy Hands, Iraqi Red Crescent Society

<sup>6</sup> The members of the CCI are NRC, DRC, Mercy Corps, IRC and Oxfam

<sup>7</sup> Text has been edited for length and clarity

*'Iilham's case and ensure she received the MPCA for which she was eligible. 'Iilham reported that she used the cash to buy food, pay medical bills, and pay some debt.*

This case study is one example of how establishing a streamlined and harmonized approach to referrals can be a significant benefit to efficiently implementing MPCA programming in Iraq. The IHF always seeks to help improve the effectiveness of the humanitarian response in Iraq, and continually promotes NGO-led consortia to reinforce and further cultivate the role of reliable national actors in the humanitarian coordination architecture to deliver more cost-effective, culturally appropriate and sustainable humanitarian assistance.

## The Education Cluster Adapts to COVID-19 and Increased Caseloads

One year since the initial closure of schools across Iraq due to COVID-19, and with schools still intermittently closed in response to rising case numbers, students and teachers continue adapting to teaching remotely in a variety of new ways. Despite the challenges, Education Cluster partners have introduced several initiatives to meet the ongoing developmental and learning needs of 572,000 acutely vulnerable young students in 2021.

COVID-19 and subsequent school closures challenged the provision of education, particularly for children living in poverty without internet connectivity, those with disabilities requiring specialized assistance, and those in families experiencing increased domestic violence. As has occurred globally, many Iraqi children have experienced additional anxiety over the last year with disrupted education, isolation and stress affecting children's overall development and mental health.

While more than 10 million Iraqi students have lost access to education because of school closures, the situation is more acute for displaced and vulnerable returnee children. One quarter of all households in IDP camps had at least one child not attending formal or informal education regularly prior to COVID-19 restrictions. Education gaps and needs have increased for IDPs in camps and out-of-camp locations, who frequently face difficulties accessing internet and electronic devices to follow online classes.

Education Cluster partners are addressing these challenges and concerns through blended learning approaches. The NGO People in Need has created an educational comic book story, "The Adventures of Khalil and Zahara", which delivers important lessons about social cohesion, mental health and handwashing for children living in vulnerable post-conflict conditions. In February, People in Need also trained 68 teachers at 6 schools in Al-Mosul, equipping them with tools and techniques to successfully deliver a distance learning curriculum benefiting nearly 1,800 children.

Early childhood development is also a priority area for education providers. Focusing on the importance of building foundational skills of children, War Child UK has conducted small group activities and distributed home activity kits to caregivers. Through a play-based approach, children have developed competencies in social and emotional learning, motor skills, and literacy and numeracy skills.

UNICEF has adapted learning materials based on the school curriculum for displaced students in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Self-learning materials cover four subjects: Arabic, maths, English and science, for children from grades 1 to 6. The materials include worksheets and exercises that children can complete on their own or with support from caregivers. UNICEF has also supported the KRI Ministry of Education to broadcast lessons on an educational television channel and online learning portals. The channel broadcasts live 12 hours per day and is able to reach displaced children in IDP and refugee camps, as well as host communities.

In the 2021 Humanitarian Response Plan, the Education Cluster will seek \$41.9 million to cover the activities of 16 partners targeting the needs of 572,000 school-aged children.

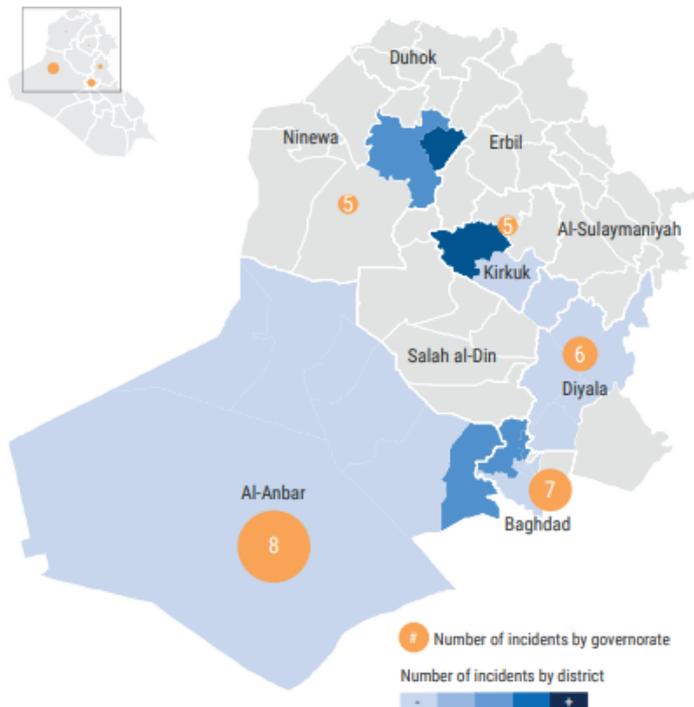


Training for parents and caregivers on supporting children's development and learning at home.  
[Photo Credit: War Child UK]

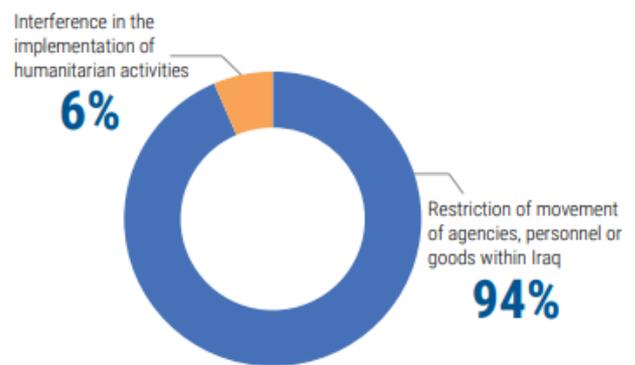
## Administrative Impediments on Access Continue

Per the [most recent Access Snapshot](#), humanitarian partners reported 31 access incidents across 23 districts in February 2021. Almost half of the incidents were in Al-Anbar and Baghdad Governorates. Approximately 94 per cent of reported access incidents constituted administrative restrictions on humanitarian activities and movements in the Governorates of Anbar, Baghdad, Diyala, Kirkuk and Ninewa. The incident list is comprised primarily of delays at checkpoints or mission postponements because of security concerns or COVID-19 related movement restrictions. In Ninewa governorate, there were several incidents where the Popular Mobilization Forces demanded information details of staff working for non-government organizations (NGOs). Throughout February, the Kirkuk Operations Command (KOC) continued to request that NGOs with valid National Operations Centre movement letters also obtain additional authorizations to operate in the districts of Hawiga and Daquq.

**31** incidents reported    **26%** of incidents were in Al-Anbar governorate    **10%** reported as COVID-19 related



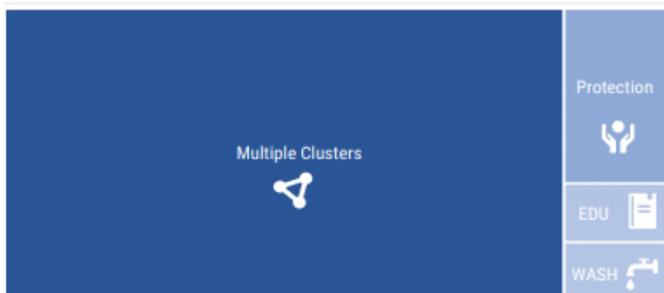
### OVERVIEW OF REPORTED INCIDENTS



### ACCESS CONSTRAINTS BY PARTNER TYPES



### CLUSTERS AFFECTED



### METHODOLOGY

This snapshot is based on humanitarian partners' reports of access-related incidents and issues during a one-month period. Although the access snapshot indicates wider access dynamics encountered in central and northern governorates of Iraq, the snapshot does not present a comprehensive view of all access challenges, as access incidents are under-reported, and the snapshot only covers areas where organisations have been able to maintain a sustained humanitarian presence.