



Participation of Internally Displaced Persons is Essential for Durable Solutions: Iraq

Iraq is a country with an evolving humanitarian landscape that some say is being pulled in two different directions; on one hand looking at the future with hope, on the other hand, there are still millions of IDPs who are vulnerable to poverty.

This paper explores the role of participation in durable solutions for the internally displaced persons in Iraq whilst reflecting on specific vulnerabilities and how they impact the access to participation and the outcome.

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Heather Macey

How did we get here? Iraq is a country with an evolving humanitarian landscape that some say is being pulled in two different directions; on one hand, looking at the future with hope, the economy that has been struggling for many years and was further impacted by COVID-19 and the sharp decline in oil prices, is showing nascent signs of recovery. In addition, following the end of the military operations against Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), there are signs that communities are starting to rebuild relationships and coexist. On the other hand, there are still millions of IDPs, both currently displaced and recently returned who are vulnerable to poverty, impacted by the effects of climate change, food insecurity and the economic crisis.

The path that has led Iraq to where it is today is a tragic and complicated one. IRC suggests the cause as, “after the invasion by the coalition forces in 2003, Iraq began fracturing along sectarian lines, ushering in a period of violence and displacement. After war broke out in neighbouring [Syria](#) in 2011, ISIS took advantage of societal tensions and

grievances in the region”. There has been little change in the situation in the last 10 years with many facing a worsening situation with, at the end of 2021, the [IDP severity score](#) (which is a measurement to assess the severity of internal displacement) of 1.5, pushing Iraq from a high to a very high severity rating with IDPs and returnees disproportionately vulnerable to new shocks and stresses. [UNOCHA](#) predicted that 2.5 million Iraqis will remain highly vulnerable and in need in 2022. This translates to about half of all IDPs (180,000 in-camp IDPs plus 550,000 out-of-camp IDPs) and one third of all returnees (1.7 million) being highly vulnerable and in need.

Specific vulnerabilities

Each IDP is different – and has different needs. This can get overlooked as durable solutions are discussed. Whilst there are some key actions that need to happen, we should also remember that each person has unique vulnerabilities and needs, and a one stop fix for all will not work. While we need to invest collectively in supporting communities for sustainable answers that result in returns and/or integration where people have access to human and protection rights, we also need to address the immediate needs of the most vulnerable. As the camps are closing and very few IDPs are able to return home – due to a complex mix of often interconnected reasons, which can include they have no livelihood opportunities, it is unsafe, or their homes were destroyed. Where will these people go? The [trend being seen](#) is that these people are further displaced but without the safety net of the camps that they had before, and in the new locations, they face even greater challenges accessing basic services and greater hostility in these communities they are further displaced too, as they are in direct competition for resources.

There are some characteristics of IDP movements – that if we understand it can support in designing interventions that can address the drivers or highlight specific vulnerabilities that need protection

interventions. Whilst recognizing that the unique characteristics, vulnerabilities, capacities and needs are different for each IDP - there are also some vulnerabilities that can be specific to certain groups. To take two examples from the Iraq context, religious minorities and perceived ISIS affiliation – and there are many more. The more the specific vulnerabilities are understood the better the chance of designing effective IDP response strategies.

Religious minorities

Miguel Mendelek in the June 2022 article, [“The Demographic Landscape of Northern Iraq Post-ISIS: Stranded Minorities”](#), gives a clear history of the events and consequences that have led religious minorities to be IDPs either long term displaced, and often multiple times displaced. Miguel paints a sad picture of a State that has lost its pluralistic nature and highlights the current context as not conducive to durable return and peaceful co-existence at this time. The resulting environment poses significant protection concerns.

International Rescue Committee works in Iraq providing humanitarian relief and ongoing support to Iraqi displaced and returnees as well as Syrian refugees. In their [context analysis in 2022, IRC](#) stated that any religious or ethnic group representing a significant minority in a specific geographic area experiences marginalization, discrimination, and challenges around reintegration. Fear of discrimination in areas of origin is a cause for continued displacement for around 10% of IDP families, affecting those from Diyala and Ninewa the most. If we go back to before 2003, when the Baathist regime ensured religious minorities’ protection through legal instruments, can we collectively pursue an agenda to enshrine protection for religious groups again?

Perceived affiliation with militant groups

People perceived to have a connection to ISIS whether real or not face hostility and isolation, often resulting in them being pressured to move on many times. These are mainly women and children; children who are growing up and becoming youth, and this makes the process of reintegration complicated and requires special care to ensure they are not at risk and ensure their protection from harm. Re-establishing relationships and building trust in communities that still feel the impact of the ISIS regime is not an easy task. The safety of returnees is heavily dependent on the traditional family system, and the successful reintegration is more likely when these links can be established in the communities. Often women and children are returned to areas where these ties are weak or not there. The assumption is that they will be integrated and protected by the extended family – but when these ties are weak the family does not take on accountability for them, it results in them [facing ongoing hostilities and isolation](#). They are then faced with a choice to either put up with the persecution or move again – and when there are frequent IDP movements again and again, successful integration becomes less likely.

Impact of Gender

Cross cutting both the religious minority and the perceived ISIS connection is the role of gender. According to a recent [IOM Iraq report](#), based on information from over 1000 site assessments across the country's camps and camp-like settings, female IDPs face disproportionate restrictions to live their lives in safety, dignity and privacy, compared to males.

Durable Solutions

With such diverse needs and each IDP having a unique profile, experience, needs and priorities - it seems a herculean task to be able to design a response that will cater for the needs of the vulnerable people. Especially when we see the context in many of the countries where there are high numbers of IDPs; an ongoing crisis that has been escalating and evolving for many years with no end in sight. Durable solutions that will empower IDPs to regain control of their lives and independence, access to their rights and live with dignity are the goal, but how do we actualize this?

If we look at the definition of durable solution from - [IASC Framework for Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons](#):

A durable solution is achieved when internally displaced persons no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement. It can be achieved through:

- Sustainable reintegration in their place of origin (return);
- Sustainable local integration in the places where IDPs take refuge (local integration); or
- Sustainable integration in another part of the country (settlement elsewhere).

Options and choice are key elements that underpin the principle of durable solutions – and the one size does not fit all approach. A factor that is linked to successful – sustainable outcomes is participation of IDPs, and by participation we mean real effective participation and involvement in designing solutions with a conscious effort to ensure power in decisions that affect themselves and communities. This is well articulated in the following quote from [GP20 lessons and good practice in IDP displacement](#), ‘Participatory spaces – like those organized as part

of the GP2.0 initiative in Colombia – must be maintained and expanded so that IDPs can work directly with local and national decision makers in order to identify and take up opportunities to achieve durable solutions.’

The IASC framework goes on to detail more of the process needed and states, ‘it is a process requiring the coordinated and timely engagement of different actors.’ In the mapping of stakeholders and the power dynamics it is important to put at the centre the IDPs, and the IDPs’ community. Often the IDPs are completely missing from the coordination/decision making structures that are established, and if included it can be tokenism where IDPs are consulted but have no real power to influence or affect the decisions.

In addition to participation in the design of the response actions, we need to go further and ensure IDP voices are included and listened to by policy makers - if we want lasting change. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, recalled during an [intersessional seminar in 2020](#) the importance of the active and meaningful participation of IDPs in the design and implementation of national policies, and stressed that meaningful participation ensures better and more durable solutions. She highlighted that, in order to establish durable solutions, it is crucial to recognize the agency of IDPs themselves, and to involve local communities and civil society in these decisions.

Conclusion

The camps in Iraq are closing with no durable solution for reintegration for the majority of the IDPs in Iraq yet realized. There is a need to have a workable plan that involves the IDPs playing a key role in design the solutions. The increased hostility seen in some communities towards reintegration of some IDPs demonstrates the need for greater dialogue with concerned parties to understand the perceptions and start a

process of building trust. A greater understanding of the why and how of IDP movements can support and inform designing interventions. When we look deeper at specific vulnerabilities, we can explore risks of potential interventions and use this in designing durable solutions that consider 'do no harm' and keep protection and safety at the centre. If we truly want to achieve durable solutions, we need to promote real participation that understands and shifts power and inclusion to internally displaced persons and ensure that it reaches the politicians and policymakers, in order that they may fully participate and guide decision making in the complex environment of displacement, and identify new solutions for lasting change.

Heather Macey has a strong background in emergency response and preparedness. Over the past two decades, she has built her expertise working for the UN and other international NGOs. Currently, she works as the Regional Emergency Director Middle East and North Africa with International Rescue Committee, providing strategic and operational leadership to building emergency response capacity and implementing high quality responses in the region.

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