



CVA CASE STUDY



Transitioning out of Humanitarian Cash Assistance: Iraq

Critical actions to ensure Gender-based Violence risks are mitigated and prevented throughout the transition

SUMMARY

In light of ongoing efforts to transition away from humanitarian Cash assistance in Iraq, a two-day workshop took place in Erbil on June 22 which gathered more than 32 gender-based violence (GBV) and cash and voucher assistance (CVA) actors with the goal of identifying priorities for the transition period related to GBV mainstreaming in humanitarian Cash and Social Protection assistance. This brief presents the recommendations that were formulated as a result of the workshop, highlighting critical actions to work toward mitigating GBV risks during the transition to greater Government assistance in place of current humanitarian Cash assistance.



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BACKGROUND

In recent years, the humanitarian context has continued to evolve with a focus on recovery. Despite the still-high numbers of people in need,¹ humanitarian funding has decreased, stabilization is in progress, and sustainable solutions are needed beyond humanitarian support. In line with this, at the beginning of 2022 the humanitarian coordination initiated discussions to start phasing out humanitarian Cash assistance in Iraq in line with the transitional recovery context. The Clusters and the Cash Working Group (CWG) have begun the process of designing the exit strategy to be concluded

¹ 2.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance according to the [IRAO_HRP 2022](#). This includes 1.7 million returnees, 180,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in camps and 550,000 IDPs outside of camps. (Background message to the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government on the drawdown of humanitarian assistance in Iraq - HCT, March 2022)

by the end of 2022, with some activities and programmes planned to be handed over to development and governmental actors.

The CWG has been coordinating humanitarian cash assistance, delivering assistance to those who exhibit high vulnerability criteria (including marginalized and displaced individuals), with a 2022 target of 135,000 individuals. Funding for humanitarian cash assistance for 2023 is still unclear, but the overall number of beneficiaries assisted should be significantly lower. In parallel, the Social Protection scheme set up by the Government – despite its seeming “mass targeting” – has limited reach and several pitfalls when it comes to providing cash assistance for the ones most in need.² As such, Cash assistance provided by humanitarian stakeholders continues to fill a critical gap and provide lifesaving support to the ones left behind or left out of governmental reach.

In light of the proposed transition plan, the CWG is currently working on a strategy that aims to link the existing humanitarian Cash assistance that is to be phased out with the relevant existing cash-based Social Protection scheme. Ultimately, this could lay the ground for humanitarian Cash assistance to be an entry point to more durable solutions for recovery in Iraq.³

Gender-based violence (GBV) risks are significantly high in Iraq. Some of the most prevalent forms of GBV include but are not limited to forced/child marriage,⁴ domestic violence⁵ and sexual violence, and harassment and exploitation.⁶ Women from marginalized or displaced groups are at greater risk of facing GBV in their lifetimes and may have more difficulties accessing lifesaving GBV or protection services. It is important to note that while the GBV sub-cluster is planning to partially hand over its activities to local organizations and the Iraqi Government, overall funding allocated to GBV reached only 7% under HRP 2022, which is significantly lower than the approximately 70% allocated to GBV programming in 2021.

As with any other modality, Cash assistance requires risk analyses to avoid exacerbating risks for women and girls. In this transition period, GBV mainstreaming is thus even more important than ever, and having a pragmatic and tangible approach to “do no harm” is paramount.

2 Around 44 million Iraqis currently receive some kind of assistance from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) (CWG draft transition strategy)

3 This includes also aligning humanitarian Cash assistance with Government assistance in terms of transfer value, targeting model, etc.

4 5.5% of girls under the age of 15 were married despite the fact that the legal age to marry is 18 (GBV Sub-Cluster data)

5 46% of married women have been exposed to at least one form of spousal abuse (UNDAF 2014 - GBV Sub-Cluster data)

6 19.5% of women 15-54 years old were exposed to violence in the street, 18.9% were exposed to violence in the market, and 10.5% on transport (GBV Sub-Cluster data)

APPROACH AND RATIONALE

In Iraq, GBV and cash and voucher assistance (CVA) actors have had limited interaction in the past years⁷ and CVA actors have seemingly not received any kind of targeted awareness-raising from the coordination groups with regards to GBV (including risk mitigation and prevention in cash assistance). Building on previous similar engagements and with the goal of leveraging best practices,⁸ a two-day workshop took place in Erbil on June 22 which gathered more than 32 GBV and CVA actors. In addition to enabling participants to bridge silos and to learn from their respective areas of expertise, time was also dedicated to brainstorming and sketching out priorities for the transition period with regards to GBV mainstreaming in Humanitarian Cash/Social Protection assistance. Indeed, this “nexus” collaboration offered a great opportunity to identify anticipatory actions with regards to GBV risk mitigation in cash assistance, be it humanitarian or incorporated into the development and Social Protection schemes led by the Government.



7 In an attempt to increase the limited interactions between GBV and CVA actors in Iraq, the CWG and the GBV Sub-Cluster created a joint task force and drafted a national work plan in 2021. This workshop was part of the activities outlined in that national work plan.

8 For more information on best practices for mitigating GBV risks in CVA, see the [GBV-CVA Coordination Toolkit](#).

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

As it is yet unclear when a new Iraqi Government will be formed and various transition plans are currently in drafting stage, it was decided that the key output of this workshop would be a list of priority actions to integrate into the transition plan to be endorsed by the key stakeholders - UNCT, the Government, and Humanitarian and Development actors including the World Bank.

GBV risks in Cash assistance: priority recommendations to mitigate and prevent GBV risks in light of the drawdown of humanitarian assistance in Iraq

Targeting and registration to CVA schemes

It is estimated that at least a million affected persons in Iraq lack civil and legal documentation⁹ or have difficulties updating their IDs (such as returnees). This largely affects displaced persons, those residing in camps, minorities, and widows. While humanitarian organizations continue to find ways to attend to those in need, the transition may mean that a majority of those currently receiving assistance will not be part of the lists that are established by the Government. This is especially worrisome for some women who are already at higher risk of stigmatization and violence, such as GBV survivors, minority groups, and female heads of households with perceived affiliation to former ISIS soldiers. It is therefore critical to ensure that women – especially those with intersectional vulnerabilities – are able to register for the government-led cash assistance scheme.

Actions

- ➔ Start conversations as soon as possible with the Government and other relevant actors in order to allow identification of more individuals for cash assistance. Also use these conversations to advocate for cash assistance for women at risk with no IDs and/or female heads of households. Clear vulnerability criteria must be developed to prioritize vulnerable groups.
- ➔ Humanitarian actors should be able to add beneficiaries to the list of the Social Assistance program, bearing in mind the importance of data protection in the process, as discussed later in this document.

9 Background message to the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government on the drawdown of humanitarian assistance in Iraq. HCT, March 2022

Transfer to Government management

In the scenario wherein the Government will take over cash assistance, there are questions around staff capacity, data confidentiality, and transparency and accountability. While in principle the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) has enumerators who run interviews, it is paramount to ensure that community leaders do not influence the identification of beneficiaries or ask to have access to those lists (which has already happened in the past). While humanitarian organizations are seen as neutral and accountable, it is estimated that **30% of beneficiaries may not be willing to be referred to the Government's social scheme when the Government takes over due to fear, grievance, or other socio-political reasons**,¹⁰ adding to potential growing community mistrust. In addition, because GBV services will also be handed over to local organizations and to the Government, there is concern that existing Complaint and Feedback Mechanisms (CFM) and referral mechanisms may not be kept and maintained in a high-functioning way.

Actions

- ➔ Hold discussions with the Government to determine their needs/gaps and identify entry points where advocacy can be conducted, staff can be trained, accountability can be fostered, humanitarian principles can be promoted, etc.
- ➔ Based on the above, relevant Government staff should receive full-fledged capacity building training, including on protection principles, GBV basic principles, PSEA, and safe identification and referral of cases.
- ➔ Extensive community outreach should be done with Mukhtars, IDP representatives, and local authorities. IEC (Information, Education and Communication) material should be drafted (making sure languages and formats are adapted). Related to this, the CWG has already worked on an AAP/Communication strategy¹¹ that could be used.
- ➔ Ensure communication channels and CFM are still available and functioning. Advocate for the UNOPS hotline to remain active. In case of funding shortages, alternatives should be put in place.

10 The World Bank recently released a [research paper](#) (June 2022) which highlights that almost a third of eligible Iraqi households may not be willing to be referred to the Government support program due to fear, grievance, or other socio-political reasons. [How Can Vulnerable Internally Displaced Persons Be Transitioned from Humanitarian Assistance to Social Protection? Evidence from Iraq](#) World Bank Research Paper June 2022

11 The MPCA Communication Package can be found at: <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/iraq/document/mpca-communication-package>

Access to cash and markets

Despite the fact that most of Iraqi territory is accessible to humanitarian organizations, distance and transportation remain an issue for women at risk. Because GBV survivors are heavily stigmatized, they are often reluctant to go to cash delivery points due to the risks that they may face. There was also mention of high risk of theft for women at risk. Stakeholders fear that with the transition those risks will increase, as frontliners' diversity (in gender and ethnicity) will decrease, possibly leading to more discrimination and exclusion at delivery points. It is paramount to ensure that access to cash assistance is safe for all, especially for women at heightened risks of violence.

Actions

- ➔ Staff (especially Financial Service Providers, or FSPs, who will remain *de facto* frontliners) need to receive basic GBV/PSEA training. With this, teams need to be balanced in terms of both gender and diversity. GBV focal points should be assigned and all should sign Codes of Conduct.
- ➔ E-money should be offered as an option given that the use of e-money enables beneficiaries to withdraw only the amount they need (in comparison to when using *Hawala*, through which all assistance is given at once), which decreases risks of theft and decreases visibility.
- ➔ Involvement and consultation with communities and local authorities should take place, including with minorities and groups at risk. Focus group discussions (FGDs) should also investigate the best ways to communicate (channel, format, languages, etc.) and discussions should take place on how to ensure that cash delivery is safe for all.

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Confidentiality and data

The upcoming transition brings many questions with regard to data management. Indeed, it is still very unclear what data protocols will be put in place to ensure confidentiality and the prevention of fraud and corruption in storing and sharing the data. Stakeholders have identified the risk of misuse of data by employees and exploitation and abuse by FSPs as a key concern. In addition, this transition may create a loss of institutional knowledge and a lack of accountability, which may disproportionately affect women at risk. Strong data management should be set up during and after the transition in order to ensure the confidentiality of most vulnerable beneficiaries.

Actions

- ➔ Assess the current capacity of the Government staff in charge and potential gaps in regards to data management. Accordingly, a capacity-building plan should be put in place, and the sharing of data management tools (protocols, information management systems, etc.) should take place.
- ➔ In parallel, a data sharing protocol between Humanitarian Cash actors and the Government should be drafted and endorsed before truly beginning the transition and advocating to the Government and frontliners for better confidentiality and data protocols.
- ➔ If possible, neutral stakeholders - such as humanitarian actors - should monitor and do data spot checks during and after the transition.



Impact of cash assistance on violence at home or in the community

As aforementioned, Iraq has high rates of violence towards girls and women – particularly through early marriage and domestic violence – as well as economic violence. Indeed, there is anecdotal evidence that women sometimes have difficulties controlling the cash assistance that they receive, often needing to get the head of household’s “permission” to access the cash assistance and markets. With this, too often boys are privileged over girls when spending. It is also worth mentioning that a large majority of affected families rely on debt¹² and that the existing governmental social protection scheme’s transfer value is lower than the cash assistance currently provided by humanitarian organizations. It is therefore expected that the transition may cause more individuals to rely on negative coping mechanisms to survive. Assistance should be designed in a way that takes into account gender dynamics and GBV risks within the household.¹³

Actions

- ➔ Beneficiaries should be able to freely nominate someone else to pick up the cash assistance (in case picking up the cash assistance personally puts them at risk), and home delivery should be considered for some specific cases.
- ➔ Explore the possibility of nominating the man or the woman in the household for assistance to decrease risks of violence at home.
- ➔ Involve community leaders and IDP representatives, sensitizing them on GBV and cash assistance. Include GBV focal points at district governmental level (DoLSA).
- ➔ Ensure that urgent and lifesaving GBV referrals are possible even with limited resources and that there is an updated mapping of services conducted in each region, both during and after the transition.

12 Around 80% of the population have debts. With this, based on recent PDMs, debts are the second highest expenditure of MPCA beneficiaries (CWG Data).

13 For more information on Cash Assistance (Social Protection programmes) and Intimate Partner Violence please check <https://ebrary.ifpri.org/digital/collection/p15738coll2/id/135938>

OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS



Distribute this document and other key resources in Kurdish and Arabic to ensure local uptake.



Continuously engage actors that are working on durable solutions, such as through the coordination of the humanitarian-development nexus and the well-established UN Joint Program, whose overall objective is to ensure that all vulnerable individuals have access to the Social Protection scheme by 2025. Also make sure that national and international NGOs are not left out of transition discussions.



Get the buy-in from the Government early on: increase accountability and ownership in the process, and be sure to invest enough time and means in proper discussion and handover between Cash actors and Social Protection actors from the Government. If possible, get allies to monitor the transition process.

CONCLUSION

At time of writing this paper and recommending the ambitious actions presented above, the Government of Iraq had still not yet formed and the defining lines of the transition out of humanitarian Cash assistance remained blurry. Continue to bear in mind that cash assistance, no matter the shape it may ultimately take, should be shock responsive in light of future challenges the country will face such as climate change and related population movements. With rising fuel costs and inflation, the Government and development stakeholders should work together to find the means to expand the Social Protection scheme to all those in need and in a safe and dignified way. It is vital that women and vulnerable populations are not left out of any planning discussions.



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