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Participatory Assessment Report

Kurdistan Region of Iraq

2017

Executive Summary

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

UNHCR is grateful for the successful participation, support and contribution of UNHCR's partners, local authorities, and international organizations. In addition, UNHCR would like to acknowledge the involvement of refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced persons, whose participation demonstrates a commitment to improving their well-being and finding solutions to their protection needs, despite the challenges and difficulties they face in their current situation.



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Introduction

The objective of the Participatory Assessment is to provide information on specific thematic areas and guidance for planning and programming by gathering views, feedback and experiences shared directly by UNHCR's population of concern; namely refugees and internally displaced Iraqis.

The 2017 Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I) Participatory Assessment (PA) involved 120 focus group discussions (FGDs) and five semi-structured interviews across 41 locations in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Dohuk governorates. The locations covered included camp and non-camp areas. UNHCR and its partners utilized the Age, Gender and Diversity approach in consulting 1,322 persons of concern (including 742 females) of different age and backgrounds. The exercise was conducted in September 2017. Participants' feedback was compiled using a systematic and solution-oriented approach.

The overarching concerns of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) consulted for the 2017 PA include administrative and bureaucratic hindrances in issuing documentation; lack of employment opportunities due to the on-going economic crisis; issues related to child protection with regard to child labour and child marriage; limited access to, and low quality of, education; poor housing and living conditions; and reduction of assistance and services from humanitarian actors and local authorities. Most groups also mentioned limitations for social cohesion and some reports of tensions with host community. Many also highlighted opportunities and concrete solutions to address some of these challenges.

NUMBER OF
SYRIAN REFUGEES
2017 (Oct 17)



246,592



3,173,088

NUMBER OF IDPS
2017 (Oct 17)

NUMBER OF NON-
SYRIANS REFUGEES
2017 (Oct 17)



44,750

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Introduction

Refugees registered with UNHCR in the KR-I are issued either asylum-seeker or refugee certificates valid for one year. Using this certificate, asylum-seekers and refugees can then obtain a KR-I residency permit, which is also valid for one year.¹ The Permanent Committee of the Ministry of Interior (PCMol) in Baghdad is responsible for the registration and documentation of refugees in Iraq¹. Iranians who have been in Iraq since the 1970s and 1980s have not been naturalized, with many, including those born in Iraq, lacking access to civil documentation, including civil IDs and nationality certificates.

Syrian refugees and asylum seekers. As of 31 August 2017, there were 246,131 Syrian persons of concern registered with UNHCR in the KR-I, representing 96 per cent of total Syrians registered with UNHCR in Iraq. Some 63.5 per cent of Syrians in the KR-I live in urban and peri-urban locations. A majority of Syrians arrived in the KR-I following conflict and violence in 2012 and 2013. The vast majority of Syrians are of Kurdish ethnicity.

Despite budget constraints and the effects of the economic crisis, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the host community remain solid partners. The majority of Syrian refugees in the KR-I continue to enjoy a fairly favourable protection environment and are granted, by the regional authorities, residency permits, freedom of movement, and the right to work. The economic crisis, however, continues to have a direct impact on the living standards of Syrian refugees; 67 per cent of all households of those consulted for the PA are currently in debt.

Non-Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers.

Before the large influx of Syrian refugees into the KR-I in 2012, Turks and Iranians, most of Kurdish descent, made up the majority of refugee communities in camps, settlements and urban areas in Erbil, Dohuk, and Sulaymaniyah governorates. A small number of Palestinian refugees also reside in the KR-I¹.

While all persons of concern have been affected by the economic crisis in the KR-I, non-Syrians reported that lack of durable solutions, support networks, and opportunities, including lack of international attention on their plight, have worsened their already difficult situation.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Introduction

At the end of August 2017, some 3.2 million Iraqis are internally displaced, of which an estimated 1.2 million reside in the KR-I or areas managed by the KRG. The high number of IDPs has severely stretched the capacity of local structures and infrastructure as well as communities at large in the

Limited access to civil documentation and difficulties in renewing or obtaining new documents were highlighted by IDPs as major concerns generating challenges and impacting freedom of movement.

IDPs have also raised various concerns around specific legal issues, including Housing, Land and Property (HLP); access to government entitlements including retirement payments; and unequal and uneven access to courts, mainly for female claimants on civil affairs, such as divorce and custody procedures.

As a remedy to these protection gaps, IDPs suggested that humanitarian partners conduct mobile registration missions to specific locations and increase support to the Government of Iraq (GoI) in harmonizing procedures on how to report and replace missing documents. Consulted groups were willing to support humanitarian actors with information collection, outreach, and targeting of families with specific needs in their neighbourhoods. They indicated having the capacity to support NGOs and authorities to organize the community or to create committees to improve the delivery of protection services, access to basic services, and general perception of safety and security.

Participatory Assessment Findings

Limited legal awareness and lack of livelihood opportunities due to the ongoing economic crisis in KR-I are among the cross-cutting factors which increase the vulnerability of refugees and IDPs.

Safety and security

- Compared to 2016, participants feel less safe. The main reasons stated the financial crisis having resulted in a limited security apparatus; the participants' limited awareness of their own rights; a perceived difference in treatment from the local population; and some forms of corruption.
- Refugees and IDPs reported they would approach authorities as a last resort in resolving their disputes or concerns.

Law, administration and justice

- Access to residency permits and birth certificates remains a critical problem.
- In general, refugees and IDPs said they prefer to solve their matters privately, without having to approach local authorities.
- Limited knowledge of legal procedures and legal assistance hampers access to justice.

Living standards

- Refugees and IDPs expressed concern about the lack of sufficient employment opportunities and the inability to support themselves financially.
- Many work on an irregular basis but do not earn enough to cover basic needs. As a result, some students drop out of school to provide economic support to their families.
- Refugees and IDPs continue to face difficulties in finding affordable housing.

Child protection and education

- Child marriage and child labour were identified as the prevailing child protection issues. The underlying causes are the poor economic situation, subsequent lack of employment opportunities, and cultural beliefs.
- Economic vulnerability, far geographic distances from nearby schools, and lack of understanding of the language of instruction have led to a significant number of children out of school, which increases their vulnerability with the potential to dramatically impact their future.
- A shortage of qualified teachers, language barriers and inadequate supplies of educational materials continue to compromise the quality of education for refugees.

Community life

- Female refugee and IDPs said they are not adequately represented in decision-making processes in their communities. They noted current community leaders are comprised of only men who do not engage with women.
- Cultural beliefs, discrimination and stigma prevent girls and women from speaking out and reporting incidents of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV).

IN FOCUS



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“In Focus” interviews

- Refugees and IDPs with professional skills said that the *equalization process* of foreign diplomas within the Ministry of Higher Education is a lengthy process and that an exam conducted in English is mandatory, excluding qualified professionals from the process if they do not master this language. As a result, the majority of professionals who used to work as engineers, social workers, lawyers and entrepreneurs, among other jobs, report they are now finding work as daily labourers.
- Persons with disabilities receive limited support and services through the government and humanitarian actors. In addition, a majority of physical infrastructure in communities, including schools, do not have disability-friendly spaces.
- Gay and lesbian persons reported feeling isolated from refugee and IDP communities and rated physical safety and mental health as immediate concerns resulting from verbal abuse and harassment. Fear of harassment from local authorities and fear of stigma were identified as substantial barriers in reporting incidents to local authorities. Findings showed that gay and lesbian IDPs were more likely to suffer more severe forms of discrimination than Syrian or non-Syrian refugees.
- Syrians, non-Syrian refugees, and IDPs called for additional assistance from government agencies, international organizations, civil society, and local communities to enable their integration.



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Recommendations suggested by the community

To the Authority of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

- Guarantee admission to territory for persons in need of international protection.
- Ensure access to protection, addressing factors that may contribute to further displacement and prioritize both prevention and solutions.
- Remove legal barriers and delays in renewing documentation; Introduce administrative procedures to expedite access to civil documentation and travel documents.
- Provide refugees and asylum seekers with documentation enabling them to properly register their children born in Iraq.
- Promote community engagement on enhancing safety and security in both camps and non-camps settings. Safety and security committees can create community watch teams to support police, Asayish and law enforcement institutions.
- Facilitate access to Kurdish language learning for IDPs and refugees to promote social cohesion and local integration.
- Improve dissemination of information for refugees and IDPs on legal assistance and existing legislation affecting their displacement.
- Ensure common approaches in supporting refugees and IDPs benefiting from different types of social assistance, including legal aid.
- Continue supporting IDPs, refugee and host communities in consolidating a favourable protection environment; strengthening self-reliance while ensuring access to rights.
- Revise the equalization process to enable the recognition of refugee's qualifications obtained outside Iraq.

To UNHCR and Partners

- Continue supporting the KRG and the Government of Iraq in addressing protection challenges, by offering practical technical support and problem solving approaches in adherence to protection standards.
- Enhance advocacy efforts for improved access to civil documentation, and regularising of housing, land and property documentation for IDPs and refugees, while also emphasizing the plight of the non-Syrian refugees as a consequence of their protracted displacement.
- Increasing advocacy and coordination with the authorities and relevant stakeholders to address safety, security and inequality of treatment as root causes of many of the protection concerns faced by the consulted population.
- Scale-up community engagement to better represent the persons of concern; and engage the authorities, police, and humanitarian actors to promote displaced populations' access to rights.
- Design an evidence-based outreach strategy aimed to mobilize support for the rights and dignity of forcibly displaced people, through constructive engagement with those who may feel disenfranchised and marginalized, to build their confidence and to promote tolerance.
- Strengthen protection monitoring activities to ensure timely identification and response to protection risks, including persons with specific needs and their referral to specialized services.
- Promote capacity building on legal aid through training and technical assistance to community volunteers and leaders.
- Pursue awareness-raising efforts on SGBV and its consequences on women, men, and their communities, and the need to address psychological support of those who continuously experience violence. A specific emphasis should be placed on school and college students, teenage girls and boys,
- Launch innovative initiatives of vocational courses, combined Arabic, Kurdish, and English language classes, and other learning platforms or open spaces available for both refugees and host communities, prioritizing children and youth.
- Advocate for improved access to medical services, including support for mobile medical teams with specialized doctors in remote areas.
- Together with other international stakeholders, to advocate for inclusion of peace education in methodological and educational materials in schools.
- Continue promoting tolerance and diversity by creating conditions conducive for social cohesion, including opening/rehabilitating community centres and fostering social events engaging both local population, refugees and IDPs.

The findings and recommendation of the PA will inform the design of UNHCR's programmatic response in the KR-I.

Conclusion

More than ever, enhanced coordination with the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government, UN agencies, humanitarian and development actors, neighbouring countries, donors, civil society, and, most importantly, the affected communities themselves, is needed to create a sustainable, meaningful way forward.



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Conclusion

The combination of mass internal displacement and protracted refugee situations has put enormous pressure on Iraq within the last decade.

Continued violence, political instability and sectarian tensions continue to hamper national reconciliation and political reform, impacting the protection environment. Despite efforts meant to engage communities, to encourage more substantive self-reliance, and to support identified community entities, solutions and strategies to resolve protracted displacement are becoming increasingly limited with the emergence of new conflicts linked with the complex political dynamics of Iraq.

Based on persons of concern's feedback during the 2017 KR-I Participatory Assessment, issues such as discrimination, child marriage, child labour, limited access to education, labour exploitation, obstacles to the exercise of rights, limitations in assistance are crosscutting issues raised by both refugees and IDPs in and out of camps. Provision of legal, support, engaging communities and authorities in prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and mainstreaming a community-based and areas-based approach were identified as priorities for humanitarian partners' engagement.

Refugees and IDPs noted throughout the exercise that access to documentation would allow them to enjoy their rights and engage in local integration. Provision of legal support and promotion of social cohesion activities were identified as critical aspects of these processes.

UNHCR should continue to advocate for less burdensome procedures for persons of concern in accessing documentation.

In addition, UNHCR and its partners should strongly and systematically engage with communities and authorities in prevention of and response to SEA and SGBV.

UNHCR should continue working with the KRG Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women (DCVAW) and make a substantial effort in advocacy and community engagement through training of peer educators and informing communities on definitions of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) and the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA), including reporting mechanisms, benefits of reporting and awareness raising on complaints and feedback mechanisms. UNHCR should offer further support to its partners to build their capacity in SGBV and PSEA, by ensuring that complaints and feedback mechanisms have correct referral pathways in place and that partner staff are adequately trained to respond.

UNHCR should also engage in conflict-resolution and psychosocial support activities.

To facilitate the wider response to concerns raised in the 2017 Participatory Assessment exercise, Community-Based Protection (CBP) should be mainstreamed throughout all activities. As noted in UNHCR's 2017 CBP approach for Iraq, CBP activities should be implemented with the goal of promoting engagement and empowerment. Identification of existing community entities and community-led initiatives must be prioritized, especially given lack of access to outside opportunities to self-reliance. Community Outreach Volunteer (COV) programmes should be expanded and strengthened across Iraq based on specifically expressed concerns of persons of concern and protection actors in these areas. In addition, UNHCR should mainstream the area-based approach in all programming to ensure delivering of services and assistance in the non-camp setting to all persons of concern regardless of differences in budgets assigned to different population groups.