

The Great Disconnect

How remote learning in Iraq is leaving the most vulnerable further behind

Seven months after schools shut down due to Covid-19, re-opening dates in Iraq remain unclear and classes limited to certain grades. Millions of children are expected to start the new academic year exclusively through distance-learning programs, at least for the upcoming semester and with a few exceptions¹. Just as last year, many displacement-affected children and their families may find themselves struggling with self-learning and unable to access online platforms while also having to cope with the practical burden and psychosocial toll of homeschooling within the precarious context of displacement in and out of camps. An assessment conducted by Mercy Hands over the Spring found that 83% of the 6,305 children surveyed in camps for internally displaced Iraqis did not receive any type of schooling in April. When asked what sources children were learning from, most respondents said “nothing.”²

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“The pandemic has massively disrupted formal education structures globally, but in Iraq, it weighs down heavily on the future of millions of children who have already lost years of schooling during the conflict with the Islamic State group. If we do not find safe, innovative and inclusive ways to put their education back on track, the glaring learning gaps will grow wider and leave an entire generation under-schooled and under-taught.”

Rishana Haniffa, Iraq Country Director for the Norwegian Refugee Council

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While efforts were made last Spring to continue education through remote learning, children in marginalized or hard-to-reach communities faced serious challenges in accessing online programs, mainly because of the lack of reliable connectivity and the inability to afford proper equipment for remote engagement. In an assessment conducted in May, NRC found out that a third of the households surveyed across Iraq did not have smartphones and/or an internet subscription³.

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“I didn’t attend school myself. Sometimes I feel handicapped when I cannot help them in their homework. Homework assignments are good but they cannot replace schools.”

Amal Mohamed, a mother of six in HAA camp

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“We know that some parents are asking their neighbours to share videos of classes with them because they can’t afford an internet connection so their children are not able to participate directly in online lessons.”

Yasmin Ameen, a teacher at the Bardarash camp for Syrian refugees in Dohuk

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Schools, meanwhile, are critical to children’s development not just as a place to learn but also socialize and build a sense of self and others. The disruption of structured education systems is likely to have a far greater impact on vulnerable populations, including displacement-affected children, for whom school offers a protective environment against negative coping mechanisms such as child labour and early marriages, but also, more generally, provides a much-needed sense of normalcy and community.

At the NRC-run camp for internally displaced persons in Hamam al Alil (HAA), teachers echo similar concerns and explain they have favoured weekly tent-to-tent distribution of school materials with follow-up paper-based assignments over online platforms as a more optimal engagement of the camp’s students.

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“I lost my friends when we relocated again in October 2019 and that affected me a lot. At the beginning of the last school year, I started making new friends. My school was good and I liked my teachers and the headteacher because they supported me a lot when they heard about my situation. Unfortunately, with the lockdown, I lost them all again.”

Malak, 11, an IDP child whose family was secondarily displaced last year in Al-Qa’im, Anbar

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Besides the specific remote learning methods, homeschooling itself presents unique challenges for impoverished segments of the population. Home-based learning is likely to be a more successful endeavor if parents/caregivers are able to provide some support and guidance, something harder to achieve for those who had limited schooling themselves⁴.

One out of two IDP, returnee and refugee children surveyed by NRC in June⁵ said they are “very stressed” or “extremely stressed” because of the pandemic. Iraq came second in terms of rise in stress levels amongst displacement-affected children according to research carried out by NRC across the Middle East. Missing out on education ranked in Iraq as their third biggest fear after getting infected themselves and seeing a loved one get the virus.

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I am most worried about my parents: I'm scared that they might get Covid from me and something happens to them. And I'm also worried that we can't go back to school this year. We would need to do everything online, which is hard because all of us are at home all the time. Often we argue and get mad at each other. Sometimes I get so stressed I just stay silent and numb.”

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Salam, 15, lives in an IDP camp in Dohuk and shares a small caravan with his parents, 4 siblings and 2 cousins

Both the well-being of children and youth, and that of parents, teachers and education personnel is at risk, coming from a period of uncertainty and stress aggravated by demands to comply with new, frequently changing guidelines in an already stretched education system. Considering the continuous rise in cases in Iraq and the unpredictable course of the pandemic, it is crucial to work to mitigate the risk of an increased divide between those who have access to, and knowledge of, digital alternatives and new learning platforms, and those who cannot afford the technology. Meanwhile, a blended approach where remote learning is paired with safe and socially distanced in-person instruction on a rotational basis should be considered for all grades in order to restore children's sense of community, allow teachers to safely connect with their students for tangible support, and for parents to catch their breath with a joint sense of responsibility, shared once again with schools.

Endnotes

1 - The Kurdistan Regional Government's Ministry of Education has decided that only students in Grad 1, G-2 and G-12 will physically attend school this semester.

2 - <https://www.mercyhands.org/post/survey-health-and-educational-status-of-idp-children-in-iraq-amidst-covid-19-pandemic>

3 - The survey was conducted among IDP, returnee, refugee and host communities in Ninewa, Anbar, Dohuk, Kirkuk and Salahaddin.

4 - <https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence-for-action/can-we-count-on-parents-to-help-their-children-learn-at-home/>

5 - 49% of those surveyed in Iraq. <https://www.nrc.no/shorthand/stories/stressed/index.html>

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

to ensure that displacement-affected and other vulnerable children have continued, effective access to quality education services:

The Ministries and Directorates of Education within Iraq, including the KRG administered governorates, should:

- Offer a wider range of offline materials so that access to education is less dependent on internet access and mobile devices;
- Ensure that content on the online platforms and TV channels comprehensively covers the curriculum for all ages, and is available in the languages suited to children's needs and best interest;
- Strengthen assessment methods to identify and better address learning gaps during remote learning periods;
- Support remedial and catch-up classes and programs for students to recover the missed learning;
- Give special attention and additional tutoring support to early-grade students and their families as they grapple with the frustrations of missing out on foundational learning;
- Instruct schools to be flexible with registration for children without civil documentation to access online platforms or physically attend schools when they re-open;
- Monitor implementation of preparedness plans for the safe reopening of schools and learning facilities, and set up guidelines for a blended approach rather than full school closures;
- Ensure schools are equipped with suitable facilities (including water, sanitation and hygiene) to allow good practices, hygienic standards, and safe and socially distanced learning that minimise chances of disease transmission. Support hygiene awareness with teaching staff and empower them to pass on this learning to students; and
- Support the admittance of out of school children who may have missed several years of education and risk facing further delays due to school closures.

International partners, including donors and humanitarian agencies, should:

- Continue to support the Ministry of Education in bolstering its online platforms;
- Prioritise efforts to target and reach marginalized and hard-to-reach populations with paper-based alternatives;
- Support internet access for families who lack connectivity, develop guidance on who qualifies for support and advocate for long-term solutions, for example negotiating with telecommunication companies for free access;
- Mobilise sufficient resources for psychosocial support and social emotional learning to be incorporated in remote and in-person teaching both for learners as well as teachers;

- Resource large-scale teacher training programs to support headmasters and teachers adapt to the new education environment;
- Support infrastructure rehabilitation of schools, with a focus on WASH facilities, in underserved regions and hard-to-reach areas; and
- Ensure that access constraints and limitations do not reduce the representation of children's education requirements in the Humanitarian Needs Overview for 2021 and that the Humanitarian Response Plans for both 2020 and 2021, as well as the Covid-19 Addendum, are comprehensively funded.

KEY FACTS & FIGURES

- Over **10 million** children have been affected by school closures in Iraq since February (Source: Iraq Education Cluster)
- Out of **6,305** children surveyed in 13 IDP camps, **83%** did not receive any type of schooling in April (Source: Mercy Hands, May 2020)
- **24%** of households surveyed do not have smartphones, an additional **10%** have smartphones but no internet access (Source: NRC Iraq, May 2020)
- Displacement-affected children in Iraq reported the second-highest increase (**+47%**) in stress levels in the Middle East (Source: NRC, August 2020)
- Fear of getting the virus (**71%**) and fear that a loved one would get the virus (**50%**) are the main factors of stress among displacement-affected children in Iraq. Missing out on education and school ranks third (**37%**) (Source: same as above)
- An estimated **1.2 million** IDP and returnee children aged 6-17 are in need of emergency and specialized education services in 2020 (Source: Humanitarian Needs Overview 2020)
- By the end of 2019, over half of all IDP children in Iraq (**355,000 children out of 658,000**) were out of school (Source: UNAMI/OHCHR, February 2020)
- Some **815,500** returnee children are particularly vulnerable and in need of assistance to access education (Source: Humanitarian Needs Overview 2020)
- **114,433** Syrian refugee children are also in need of education services in 2020 (Source: Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan 2020-2021)