

Urgent measures needed to stop Iraq's displaced children being left behind

BRIEFING NOTE



This briefing note was written by Alexandra Saieh and Pat Rubio, with assistance from Jesse Atkins. Thanks goes to the education and field colleagues who supported in collecting case studies and information for this briefing note. We sincerely thank the many participants who shared their stories and experience. Any errors in this document are the authors' own.

Cover photo: In the Aljaleel school near Mosul, there are only 10 teachers for more than 1,500 girl students. There are on average 100 - 150 students per classroom. Girls are 4 to 5 per school bench, unable to write nor concentrate.
Photo: Tom Peyre-Costa/NRC

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the Norwegian Refugee Council

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Background

Nearly two years since the defeat of the Islamic State group (IS) in Iraq, children in areas formerly controlled by the group are facing an education crisis. More than 2.5 million children in Iraq today need assistance to access education.¹ Schools, particularly in displacement camps, are chronically understaffed and in many instances teachers are still not being paid. Classes are extremely overcrowded, there is often a shortage of teachers, and children missing civil documentation are denied the opportunity to receive an education altogether. To make matters worse, humanitarian appeals for education are far from adequately funded, with support from the Iraqi authorities and international donors falling short. These factors have resulted in more than 240,000 children being unable to access education in Iraq in the last year.²

Eman has been working as a volunteer teacher with NRC Education Department for four years in Hamam al Alil camp near Mosul. The volunteer teachers are filling the gap in schools. They work for free just to help students because there is a big number of students and very few teachers.

Photo: Tom Peyre-Costa/NRC



This is against a backdrop where millions of children lost three or more years of school during the period of (IS) rule. While some children were forced to study under an IS-imposed curriculum, other families refused to send their children to school due to the group's ideology. In the military operations to retake areas controlled by IS, many schools were damaged or destroyed by airstrikes. While there has been some progress rebuilding these structures, but this has been gradual and not enough to meet the needs of the current school year.

Today, about 1.6 million Iraqis remain displaced, nearly a quarter of whom live in camps and about 90% of them say they have no intention to return home in the next year.³ In the absence of durable solutions for Iraq's remaining IDPs, the Iraqi government and the humanitarian community have a responsibility to continue providing adequate services to this population, including education. Despite plans to close IDP camps in the near future, adequate education opportunities for students must be made available in these spaces as long as they remain. Likewise, inadequate service provision should not be used to push IDPs to leave areas of displacement before they are able to rebuild their lives. Nearly halfway through the 2019-2020 academic year, significant challenges remain to ensure that Iraqi children – displaced and returnee alike -- are able to access quality education.

The Government of Iraq, together with its humanitarian and development partners, must put in place sustainable practices to ensure that all children across Iraq, no matter their displacement status, can access quality education in a safe environment. This briefing note recommends six immediate measures that must be taken by the Iraqi Government and international partners to ensure Iraq's school-aged children affected by displacement have better access to quality education.

The Iraqi Government, including the Ministry of Education, should:

1. Scale up the number of trained teachers in formal schools, particularly in areas with high numbers of IDPs.

As it stands, the number of trained, government-paid teachers in schools in areas formerly controlled by IS, including areas of return and areas of displacement, is far from adequate. A recent study showed that schools in conflict-affected areas are missing a third of the total number of teachers required for the current school year.⁴ Insufficient teachers is one of the key reasons progress towards this year's education objectives in the 2019 Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan was slowed, impeding children from accessing an education.⁵ Many schools across war torn areas in Iraq have extremely high student to teacher ratios. This problem is often even worse in camps accommodating Iraq's IDPs. For example, in one IDP camp in Kirkuk there are only two teachers on the Ministry

of Education's (MoE) payroll for more than 1,700 students enrolled in two primary schools. In a nearby camp in the same area, there are eight teachers for more than 700 primary school students.

Until now, the impact of the gap between the number of children enrolled and official teachers has been mitigated by the presence of 'volunteer lecturers' subsidized through stipends paid by humanitarian agencies. While not a permanent solution, these 'volunteer lecturers' are university graduates often with teaching degrees and have played a critical role in filling gaps over the last years. Payments to support these 'volunteers' have not always been consistent and, in some cases, displaced families have had to pull together funds to support these volunteers where the government has not provided teachers and NGOs have not had the funds to pay them.⁶ In Dohuk area, for example, Iraqi 'volunteer teachers' in camps have been supporting formal education for over four years without receiving any compensation. In many governorates affected by displacement, 'volunteer teachers' make up most of the staff.⁷

Case study:

Fathi, the headmaster at the only primary school in Hamam Al-Alil 1 camp says that the school is currently run on four different two-hour shifts, with over 650 students per shift and only has two government-paid teachers. The school relies largely on 'volunteer teachers' from the camp, but says this is not enough. He says payment of these teachers has been unreliable and some days they come for an hour and leave. He says, "We used to have more teachers, but they returned to their areas of origin. The government transfers them to other schools in their areas of origin. Even if they are aware that this would mean lacking teachers, they haven't done anything to compensate the schools." Fathi says, "If all children in Iraq receive quality education, the rebuilding process of the country would be far better."



The Iraqi government has in fact recently announced plans to hire new teachers, however the timeline is unclear. This is a welcomed development that requires immediate implementation. For the 2019-2020 academic year, humanitarian agencies will no longer be paying salaries of ‘volunteer teachers’, and the absence of a concrete plan to recruit and pay new teachers in formal schools puts millions of children at risk of being excluded from Iraq’s education system. As the emergency response in Iraq is largely coming to a close, Iraq’s National Education Cluster and UNICEF have coordinated a new position that seeks to encourage the government to fulfill its responsibility to allocate sufficient number trained, government paid and monitored teachers in all schools, including in camps, to ensure quality and sustainable formal education for all. This comes at a time where exam results of IDP children in camps in the last year have been extremely poor. As such, NRC still observes the immediate need of formal schools in camps to have these trained educators support the needs of displaced children seeking to access education. Training is available for educators with a teaching background to respond to the needs of displaced children, including in camps.

Now nearly midway into the school year, the lack of proper compensation and staffing in schools has an immediate negative impact on the quality of education. Iraqi teachers and headmasters have warned that the overcrowding in schools and the dramatic student per teacher ratio contributes to high dropout rates and low performance in basic skills.⁸ By the end of the 2018-2019 school year, at least 345 teachers were needed to fill the teaching gap in Ninewa IDP camp schools alone.⁹ Many schools both in and out of camps are operating on double or even triple shifts.¹⁰ Making sure that children have access to an education that meets the standards set out by the Government of Iraq and the Kurdish Regional Government, including the Iraq Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies,¹¹ should be a key priority in a context where children already lost several years of school because of conflict.

2. School facilities for both primary and secondary education must be made available, supported and staffed by the government.

Insufficient support to rebuild education facilities, both primary and secondary schools, over the last years has contributed to overcrowding in schools.¹² There has been some progress in rebuilding infrastructure with actors such as UNDP building hundreds of schools. However, by the start of the 2019 calendar year, more than half of the schools in all areas formerly controlled by IS still required rehabilitation.¹³

Some governorates have announced that they will stop supporting school facilities for the displaced, even if adequate education services are not available in their places of origin.¹⁴ For example, in June 2019, Suleimaniya’s Directorate of Education had initially announced that buildings that had been handed over as schools for IDP children in the region would be claimed back for the upcoming school year.¹⁵ In Duhok, the Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoDM) also announced

that they would no longer pay the rent for buildings used as schools for IDP children¹⁶, translating into almost 60,000 children in 12 official IDP camps being at risk of losing access to education. ¹⁷ In at least 12 out-of-camp schools in Suleimaniya, IDP parents had been paying the rent of school building because it is not a government-owned facility.¹⁸

Case study:

Esra, a 35-year-old teacher from Mosul has been working for the government for 13 years. Currently teaching in a school in East Mosul, Esra says better facilities are needed in order to encourage students to come to school. She also explains how schools are suffering from overcrowding and classrooms are too small to fit the over 70 children they fit. In her school, four students are forced share one desk. Esra explains how there is no enough space for them to sit comfortably and concentrate, no place to write and practice or even have group activities, "Schools are overcrowded. Four students have to share one desk, so there is no enough space for them to sit comfortably and concentrate, no place to write and practice or even have group activities. Students get sick quickly because they easily catch virus from each other."



3. Allow children without the required set of civil documentation to attend schools, sit exams and obtain certificates.

In 2018, the MoE agreed to allow undocumented children attend schools in Iraq.¹⁹ Yet a joint study found that this agreement was not being consistently applied. Nearly one in every five Iraqi households who reported having children who lacked civil documentation said their children were denied access to education.²⁰ This was more prevalent in Anbar, where nearly a third of respondents whose children were missing documentation were unable to register their children in school, compared to 20% in Salah Al-Din and 14% in Ninewa.²¹ Human Rights Watch has also documented several instances where even in camps, children who are undocumented were barred from attending school.²²

A combination of the civil identification and other state-issued documents are typically required to register for school in Iraq. However, NRC's joint study found that a combination of the children's parents' documentation was also required. Nearly half of the 1,400 households surveyed in the joint study reported that the mother was unable to register her children in school using her civil ID alone, and that the father's civil ID was also required to do so.²³ Only 1% of all respondents believed that children could attend school without documentation.

Even when children without civil IDs were found to be able to attend school, many families said that their children were at risk of being expelled if the correct documentation was not submitted to the school directorate before the end of the year. In addition, they are unable to take examinations or access their transcripts/certificates, preventing them from graduating to the next level or transferring to a different school. As a result, even if they manage to attend school, children without documentation are at higher risk of being forced to drop out, not being able to graduate or being forced to repeat school years upon return. Several parents also report they could not obtain transcripts from schools in areas of origin, which also prevented them from going to school where they were displaced.

The combined impact of the MoE's policy, lack of enforcement of the 2018 directive and parents' and headmasters' understanding of the government's requirements to register has meant that many children in areas formerly controlled by IS continue to miss out on an education.

Case study:

Zahra, a mother of five originally from a village in Sinjar, now lives near Zakho with her family, after fleeing attacks by IS group against the Yezidi community. Zahra and her husband live together with their five children, two born in Sinjar and three born in displacement. Zahra and her husband got married in a village near Sinjar city, where issuing marriage certificates was not customary. When Zahra's family fled, in 2014, the authorities issued a marriage

certificate for them with a new date, while they already had two children. Zahra's children, of seven and eight years old, do not have a birth certificate because their parents had no proof of marriage prior to that date. Their children born in Sinjar are now not allowed to attend school because of the lack of documentation and have already lost five years of school. Zahra says that her family cannot afford to start the process of getting the civil ID required to attend school, since it requires returning to Sinjar and paying transportation and administrative fees.



4. End occupation of schools by armed actors, in line with Safe Schools Declaration.

The use of schools by military and other armed groups in Iraq in the last few years has been well documented.²⁴ More recently however, formal schools- some of which are supported by humanitarian agencies- have been used as a place to conduct security screenings by the military and other armed group. On July 2019, the Iraqi Military Intelligence, the National Security Service (NSS), SWAT forces of the Ministry of Interior, local police and militia members of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) occupied a school in Hammam Al-Alil 1 camp for a few days, to conduct screenings of people suspected of IS-affiliation, including children.²⁵ The arrival of the armed men caused panic among camp residents. This is not the only time such incidents have occurred. In September, a similar incident occurred in Qayyarah Air Strip Camp as the military conducted security screenings of IDPs this summer, armed

actors occupied at least one school in the camp - in this particular case, while students were taking exams nearby. Following sustained local advocacy, the security forces eventually agreed to conduct the security screenings in another location.

Schools should be a place for children to be safe, play and explore with their peers. With this action, Iraq violated international humanitarian principles and went against the Safe Schools Declaration, which was signed by Iraq in 2018, and is a pledge to protect schools and children in conflict by forbidding the presence of armed actors in schools. The presence of armed forces inside a school interferes with education and puts children at risk of reliving trauma created from the conflict. The Government of Iraq should prevent schools from being occupied by armed actors, regardless of the circumstances or amount of time.

International partners, including donors and humanitarian agencies:

5. Provide support to non-formal education programs in camps and support Accelerated Learning programs, including those run by the Government of Iraq, focusing on out of school children.

Children who have often been out of school for four or five years need bridging support before they are caught up and ready to be reintegrated back into official public schools. In order to help cope with the situation, as part of the humanitarian response, NGOs and agencies offer non-formal education in camps and outside.²⁶

In many instances, non-formal education is the only option for children from six to 18 years old to help them catch up on school years lost during conflict and ensure a smooth transition into formal education. Even though formal schools are currently unable to cope with children's needs, non-formal education is currently being overlooked in Iraq. Donors and humanitarian actors should recognize the role that non-formal education plays in supporting displaced children and fund initiatives when they are required, both in and outside of camps. Supporting government-run Accelerated Learning programs are a concrete way to support formal programs that help children and youth who have been out of school for years reintegrate into the education system. Support should also be scaled up to alternative pathways for youth, including technical and vocational training programs.

Case study:

Tara, 12 years old and her aunt Jawhar, originally from Mosul, currently live in Hamam Al Alil 1. Tara goes to NRC's informal education centre as she doesn't have a civil ID to register in school. Still, she wishes she could go to school and learn, as her friends do. Her mother has not been able to issue IDs for any of her children because she cannot afford the cost of transportation or fees. However, Tara really likes NRC's centre and is happy to attend. Her aunt says, "The NRC informal school is playing a good role in educating the children who are unable to attend formal schools, at least they will learn how to write and read in the meantime."

Case study:

Fatima works as a 'volunteer teacher' in one of NRC's non-formal education programs in Hammam Al-Alil 1 camp. Fatima explains that many of the children in NRC's programs are still exhibiting poor coping mechanisms as a result of trauma from years of conflict. Amongst children, this typically includes reclusiveness, inability to interact with peers, and aggressive behaviour. He says that through the activities carried out in informal education he sees changes in the children. Fatima says that the children enjoy because programmes are more than education, they also offer entertainment and fun activities.

6. Fully fund Iraq's Humanitarian Response Plan's (HRP) Education response and ensure adequate government budget is allocated for education

About half of the required education funds under the HRP have been pledged for 2019, affecting school-aged children both in and outside of camps. Currently, 2.5 million children are in direct need of education support.²⁷ By September 2019, the humanitarian sector's requested funding for education that was only covered at 42.2%. This is 15,056,977 USD out of the 35,540,043 USD²⁸ required to provide critical education services to nearly 500,000 conflict-affected children in need in 2019. The Syrian refugee response's education sector is even worse off, with less than 30% funded more than mid-way through 2019.²⁹

Political will from the federal government to adequately staff schools in both camps and outside of camps is still needed. During the 2015-2016 school year, Iraq spent just 5.7% of its national budget on education putting, a drop from previous years, putting the country towards the bottom, when compared to other countries in the Middle East, in terms of

investing in education.³⁰ The National Education Cluster has advocated for the national budget allocation for education be increased to 15% to support a much-needed revamp the country's education system and improve access to quality education.³¹

Ensuring that the education sector is fully funded is key to protect children and ensure they are able to transition to normal life. Donors, the Government of Iraq and humanitarian agencies need to ensure that no child is being left out of educational opportunities and focus on funding education for the most vulnerable, including children who have no immediate prospects of returning home or are not able to for a variety of reasons.

Case study:

Jad, from Syria, lives in Dohuk area with his family. Jad works as a tailor and the income of his family depends on him. He explains "the school near their house is only until 9th grade. My elder daughter is in 12th grade, her last year of high school. In order for her to finish school and go to university she has to go to the school inside Domiz refugee camp. The closest school to our house. Yet it's not walking distance, she needs transportation." Due to the lack of funding for the education sector in Iraq, Jad explains how that has affected his life. "Some NGOs used to provide transportation for our children past few years, but last year they stopped providing transportation, as a result my daughter could not attend school. If the case will be same for this year, my daughter will have no choice but sit home". He added "my daughter is smart, she used to get the highest marks in school, however last year she didn't pass the exams, because she could not attend all the classes, and she could not go to school on daily basis. Transportation is expensive and I cannot afford it". Jad's oldest son will soon reach the 11th grade and will face the same year. He also did not go to school this year because of the lack of transportation. Jad told NRC "I will take him to work with me, it better than sitting home doing nothing. At least he will help me with income."



Conclusion

The Government of Iraq, the Ministry of Education, donors and humanitarian actors must work together to ensure that opportunities in education will continue to be available for children in areas of displacement. The Right to Education is a fundamental human right enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Iraq ratified in 1994. The Iraqi government, with support from the international community, has an obligation to ensure the right to education for all children, free from discrimination. It is more critical now than ever, during Iraq's recovery and reconstruction period, that the Iraqi government and its international partners ensure children are able to access quality education. In not doing so, a generation of Iraqi children will be further disadvantaged and undermine prospects of an inclusive and stable Iraqi society in the future.

Notes

- 1 Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan 2019. This excludes the more than 100,000 school aged refugee children who are also in need of education support (Iraq Refugee Resilience and Recovery Plan, 3RP 2019).
- 2 Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan Monitoring Report: January-May 2019.
- 3 Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan Monitoring Report: January-May 2019. The second half of 2019 has seen an accelerated push by the Iraqi government to consolidate and close existing IDP camps, particularly in Ninewa. The closure of these camps has often led to its residents becoming secondarily displaced, and continue to face challenges accessing services, including education.
- 4 Education cluster strategy Iraq 2019
- 5 Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan Monitoring Report: January-May 2019, 29.
- 6 Iraq: “Internally displaced persons must be presented with options beyond life in a camp”, OCHA, March 4 2019 <https://www.unocha.org/story/iraq-“internally-displaced-persons-must-be-presented-options-beyond-life-camp”—humanitarian>.
- 7 Iraq Education Cluster, Position Paper: Teacher Incentives.
- 8 Interviews with headmasters and teachers across Iraq by NRC during August 2019.
- 9 Iraq UNICEF Humanitarian Situation Report, May 2019. Note: This number likely has now changed due to rapid camp closures in late 2019.
- 10 In Hammam Al-Alil 1 camp, the formal school runs in four different shifts. In Zakho province, a formal school runs three different shifts to accommodate refugee and Iraqi children, including Yezidis.
- 11 For more information see: Iraq Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies: Contextualized from the INEE Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, Response, and Recovery, Iraq Education Cluster, Save the Children, INEE, 2018.
- 12 Shortage of buildings, truancy plague Iraqi schools, Alaa Hussain/ AFP, 4 December 2018, http://diyaruna.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_di/features/2018/12/04/feature-01
- 13 2019 Iraq Humanitarian Needs Overview, 48.
- 14 UN identifies ‘several gaps’ in schools for displaced children in Iraq, Kurdistan 24, July 20, 2019 <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/df2ddf0d-2ded-4d43-a8e1-9c8852bf1faf>. Since this was reported, they have since announced that some schools will be taken back for host communities and a limited number will be allocated for IDPs.
- 15 They have since UN identifies ‘several gaps’ in schools for displaced children in Iraq, Kurdistan 24, July 20, 2019 <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/df2ddf0d-2ded-4d43-a8e1-9c8852bf1faf>.
- 16 UN identifies ‘several gaps’ in schools for displaced children in Iraq, Kurdistan 24, July 20, 2019 <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/df2ddf0d-2ded-4d43-a8e1-9c8852bf1faf>.
- 17 E-mail correspondence with the Dohuk Sub-National Education Cluster.

- 18 Iraq: “Internally displaced persons must be presented with options beyond life in a camp”, OCHA, March 4, 2019 <https://www.unocha.org/story/iraq-“internally-displaced-persons-must-be-presented-options-beyond-life-camp”—humanitarian>.
- 19 Iraq UNICEF Humanitarian Situation Report, December 2018, <https://www.unicef.org/iraq/reports/iraq-humanitarian-situation-report-december-2018>.
- 20 Paperless People of Post-Conflict Iraq: Denied rights, barred from basic services, and excluded from reconstruction efforts, Norwegian Refugee Council, Danish Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, September 2019, <https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/paperless-people-of-post-conflict-iraq/>.
- 21 Barriers from birth: Undocumented children in Iraq sentenced to a life on the margins, NRC, April 30, 2019 <https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/barriers-from-birth/>.
- 22 Iraq: School Doors Barred to Many Children, Human Rights Watch, 28 August 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/08/28/iraq-school-doors-barred-many-children>.
- 23 The father’s death certificate would be required, if he is deceased.
- 24 For examples see, Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, Education Under Attack 2018 - Iraq, 11 May 2018, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5be9430d4.html> [accessed 26 September 2019].
- 25 Iraq: Military Enter Camp, Occupy School for Screening, Human Rights Watch, 18 July 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/18/iraq-military-enter-camp-occupy-school-screening>.
- 26 According to UNESCO, non-formal education is defined as “an addition, alternative and/or a complement to formal education within the process of the lifelong learning of individuals. It is often provided to guarantee the right of access to education for all. Non-formal education mostly leads to qualifications that are not recognized as formal qualifications by the relevant national educational authorities or to no qualifications at all. Non-formal education can cover programmes contributing to adult and youth literacy and education for out-of-school children, as well as programmes on life skills, work skills, and social or cultural development.” For more information: <http://uis.unesco.org/node/334726>.
- 27 Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan 2019, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/iraq/document/2019-iraq-humanitarian-response-plan-glance>
- 28 Financial Tracking Services, <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/671/clusters>. We acknowledge that some funding to Education in Emergencies is being received outside of the Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan.
- 29 Situation of Syrian refugees, UNICEF, June 2019 <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2019-HAC-Syrian-refugees-revised-June.pdf>
- 30 The Cost and Benefits of Education in Iraq: An Analysis of the Education Sector and Strategies to Maximize the Benefits of Education, UNICEF, 21 May 2017, p. 52, <https://www.unicef.org/iraq/media/251/file/Cost%20of%20Education%20.pdf>.
- 31 Iraq: Education Cluster Strategy 2019 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/1_Education-Cluster-Strategy-Iraq-2019-2019_02_10.pdf



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