

Iraq: Design, implementation and child-sensitivity of social protection responses to COVID-19¹

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This One Pager is part of a series based on the report 'Social protection responses to COVID-19 in MENA: Design, implementation and child-sensitivity', developed in partnership by the IPC-IG and UNICEF MENARO (Bilo, Dytz, and Sato 2022). The study reviewed the design and implementation features of the social assistance measures implemented in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region up to the end of March 2021, and the extent to which they took children's needs and vulnerabilities into account.

The decline and volatility of oil prices and the compounding effects of the COVID-19 pandemic deeply worsened existing socio-economic vulnerabilities in Iraq. The country's gross domestic product (GDP) was estimated to have contracted by 10.4 per cent in 2020, which constitutes the largest economic contraction in Iraq since 2003 (World Bank 2022). This had a direct effect on households' income: the average income from employment reported in the country decreased by 16 per cent from February to December 2020 (UNDP 2021). The country also continues to suffer from the direct effects of displacement and conflicts, and 1.2 million people remain internally displaced, with about 4.1 million people remaining in need of humanitarian assistance in 2021.

Up to the end of March 2021, the IPC-IG mapping of social protection responses to COVID-19 in the Global South² identified four responses provided by the government in Iraq: three social assistance initiatives and one labour market intervention. In light of the critical humanitarian and economic context affecting the State's capacity to respond to the pandemic, humanitarian organisations remain important actors. In addition to government responses, eight humanitarian measures³ were also mapped for the assessment, consisting mostly of one-off in-kind and cash transfers, and presenting short-term relief in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

The main government social assistance policy consisted of a vertical expansion of the existing Social Safety Net, the country's main monthly cash assistance programme. Daily wage workers who lost their jobs, large families with children, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) registered for the Social Safety Net received a one-off top-up of IQD75,000 (USD51.40).^{4,5} Moreover, a horizontal expansion to an additional 600,000 households was announced but had not yet been implemented as of early 2022.

In May 2020, the Iraqi government also provided emergency cash assistance of IQD150,000 (USD102.70) for 2 months to about 11,580,000 workers with no wages, and unemployed private-sector workers previously registered in the unemployment registry.

Humanitarian social protection responses consisted mainly of in-kind distributions and cash assistance, and included IDPs among the target beneficiaries. For example, the World Food Programme (WFP) delivered a combination of in-kind food distributions and cash-based transfers using

mobile money transfers and electronic vouchers. About 627,958 IDPs and refugees had benefited from this programme by January 2021.

Humanitarian measures often take child-sensitive features into account by design, due to the nature and goals of international organisations. For instance, UNICEF launched a programme dedicated to supporting children's education during the pandemic by providing learning materials to 107,159 home-based children. WFP also distributed one-off cash and food assistance to 255,000 school children in January 2021. Similarly, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) provided one-off cash assistance to displaced families and their children, covering about 565,000 individuals in December 2020.

Based on the analysis of the social assistance responses to COVID-19, some of the key lessons learned for Iraq in terms of shock-responsive and child-sensitive social protection are the following.

- Including new beneficiaries in the Social Safety Net will be a key step towards building an efficient social assistance system in the future.
- In a context of multifaced economic, political and humanitarian crises, humanitarian actors are key providers of support to vulnerable groups. Donors should cooperate to guarantee financial resources for humanitarian actors.
- Most humanitarian measures mapped were designed as one-off interventions. While emergency actions are necessary, it is also important to plan medium- and long-term responses to the socio-economic effects of the pandemic and future crises.
- The proportion of children covered by humanitarian measures also remains low, calling for a significant scale-up.

References:

Bilo, C., J.P. Dytz, and L. Sato. 2022. "Social protection responses to COVID-19 in MENA: Design, implementation and child-sensitivity". *Research Report*, No. 76. Brasília and Amman: International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth and United Nations Children's Fund Middle East and North Africa Regional Office.

UNDP. 2021. Sustainable Recovery from COVID-19 in Iraq: Key Findings. Baghdad: United Nations Development Programme. <<https://t.ly/nk7R>>. Accessed 13 July 2022.

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Notes:

1. For the full list of references and a description of all social assistance measures mapped, see the full study.
2. See: <<https://socialprotection.org/social-protection-responses-covid-19-global-south>>.
3. Only cash, in-kind and school feeding measures led by UNICEF, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, the International Organization for Migration, UNHCR or WFP were considered in the scope of the study.
4. All exchange rates are as of 7 April 2022.
5. The value of the initial benefit depended on family size and the gender of the head of the household. The maximum transfer for a male-headed household was IQD175,000 (USD122.50); for a female-headed household it was IQD225,000 (USD157.50).