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Iraq: identifying opportunities to transition the chronically poor and vulnerable from humanitarian assistance to national schemes

OVERVIEW OF STUDY

An ECHO-funded technical assistance facility, managed by the World Food Programme (WFP), aimed to explore how social protection systems can be strengthened in fragile and forced displacement contexts, with a view to contributing to the global learning agenda on when and how these can be used to address humanitarian needs in a more cost-effective, efficient and predictable way.

Short-term technical assistance was provided to improve programme design or implementation in nine countries facing protracted crises¹. Each assignment tackled a priority theme identified collectively by humanitarian and development partners, complementing and catalysing efforts by national governments and their partners to enhance the well-being of chronically poor or vulnerable populations, those affected by crises, those living in conflict situations and/or refugees. The assignments focused on linkages between humanitarian

action and social protection: this included the identification of good practices and recommendations for improved institutional coordination, knowledge transfer, and delivery systems such as information systems or payment mechanisms. Projects were designed and managed in-country by a partnership of WFP, FAO, ECHO, UNICEF, DFID and World Bank representatives, in consultation with the government and other agencies according to the country context. One partner served as the lead in each country.

This briefing note summarises the technical assistance in Iraq. We mapped the major government safety net schemes and humanitarian transfer programmes operating in Iraq, comparing design and implementation features including coverage, capacities, targeting criteria, and complementarity between schemes. Analysis identified opportunities to consolidate schemes and improve coordination between the Iraqi social protection system and humanitarian programmes, taking into account constraints

¹ The nine countries are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Somalia and Uganda.

identified. The aim is to ensure that over time needs of the chronically poor and vulnerable are more sustainably and predictably met by government and humanitarian needs are addressed in a more efficient and predictable way.

COUNTRY CONTEXT

Establishing an effective safety net has been a strategic priority of the Government of Iraq (GoI) and development partners since 2012. Achievements include adopting the Social Protection Law and reform of the Social Protection Network (SPN). Since 2014, macroeconomic shocks and escalation of conflict have curtailed social protection expenditure and hampered programme implementation and efforts to reform public services. Meanwhile, displacement has increased poverty and food insecurity among internally displaced people (IDPs), who lost access to income, livelihoods and government safety nets². In the absence of a well developed social protection system, the humanitarian response in Iraq has been addressing needs of households affected by the displacement, with multi-purpose grants (MPG) progressively becoming the core transfer instrument to meet multiple needs³, complemented by additional transfers for specific needs. The GoI's Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MOMD) also provides periodic cash and food transfers to IDPs and returnees.

Responsibility for delivery of assistance to households should transition from humanitarian actors to government, with humanitarian action continuing to support short term needs. Since 2015 the GoI, humanitarian and development partners committed to addressing these issues. The National Development Plan and Poverty Reduction Strategy 2018-2022 prioritises safety net development including improving coverage of the poor and vulnerable, reforming inefficient programmes, developing common systems for data sharing, identifying chronic and temporary needs, scaling up support for those affected by disasters, and engaging with non-governmental actors on implementation. This and the Social Protection Roadmap 2015-19 are guiding reform efforts⁴. A workshop between the Ministry of Labour and Social affairs (MoLSA) and humanitarian partners has also created a roadmap to build linkages between humanitarian programming and the SPN.

RESEARCH METHOD

This technical assistance was led by WFP Iraq. A review of evidence from humanitarian programming and social protection in Iraq identified how short-term technical assistance could contribute to the efforts of humanitarian and development partners to strengthen Iraq's social protection system. Objectives were jointly agreed with ECHO, World Bank, UNICEF and UNHCR. Government endorsement was ensured through WFP's bilateral collaborations on social protection.

The work was led by an independent consultant. The method comprised a review of relevant literature (policies, programme documents and associated reports, evaluations and assessments), and interviews with stakeholders at country and regional level⁵. Three government schemes⁶ and 15 humanitarian programmes were considered. A roadmap of recommended actions aligns with, and builds upon, roadmaps for social protection reform already endorsed by government and development partners. Developing common objectives and actions between actors, including donors, offers potential to move this agenda forward and to influence government.

FINDINGS



There are opportunities to improve social protection for the chronically vulnerable, IDPs/returnees and households affected by shocks, by integrating and coordinating safety nets provided by government and humanitarian actors and gradually transitioning towards a multi-layered, government-led system.

There is already a 'core safety net' upon which to build an integrated system of transfers: Effective safety net systems 'layer' programmes to address poverty and

- 2 It is estimated that the national poverty rate increased from 19% to 23% in 2014, whilst the poverty rate among displaced persons rose to 38% and in governorates under ISIS occupation to 41%. In 2017 three million people were displaced in the country. By October 2018 there were still 1.9 million IDPs.
- 3 MPGs were incorporated into the Humanitarian Resource Plan in 2015 with a USD5 million allocation (1%), increasing significantly to USD39 million (4.5%) by 2016.
- 4 Progress includes strengthening the social worker programme to support programme rollout, initial development of the Iraq National Unified Registry, and launch of a pilot conditional cash transfer programme.
- 5 Including WFP, UNHCR, UNICEF, FAO, World Bank, DFID, USAID, ECHO, CCI (Mercy Corps), Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA), Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MOMD) and Ministry of Trade (MoT).
- 6 The Social Protection Network (SPN) programme run by MoLSA, which includes a pilot conditional cash transfer in Sadr City layered onto the core SPN unconditional transfer; the periodic cash and food transfers made by MoMD to internally displaced and returning people; and the Public Distribution System (PDS) of food transfers delivered by MoT.

vulnerability throughout the lifecycle. Many include a core cash transfer programme for basic needs, complemented by additional programmes providing supplementary benefits to different groups. Reform of the SPN has established this as the core transfer programme in the Iraqi safety net system, to which poor and vulnerable households within the humanitarian caseload can progressively transition. The SPN registration process can also provide the foundations for a future 'social register':

- Eligibility for the SPN could lead to automatic qualification for additional transfers for lifecycle needs (e.g. child nutrition) or humanitarian needs at times of shock.
- Those ineligible for the SPN would still be included in the growing 'social register' and assessment results could inform targeting of other programmes that aim to meet particular basic, lifecycle, or emergency needs, based on proxy means test (PMT) thresholds and indicator weightings relevant to programme objectives⁷.
- Those eligible for the SPN but not yet benefiting due to fiscal constraints could be targeted for temporary assistance by humanitarian agencies.

Achieving this requires collective action to address blockages at strategic and programmatic levels:

Reforms to SPN processes to develop a social register:

Access to the SPN is limited by short application windows, due to concerns about fiscal capacity⁸. This limits availability of household data for targeting other programmes. A rolling application is needed to support population of a social registry for this purpose.

Establishing system interoperability: Programme coordination requires systems to communicate in real time. In government there are no linkages between safety net programme databases, each underpinned by different and quite rudimentary management information systems (MIS). There is little data sharing between humanitarian actors and no protocols for data sharing between government and humanitarian actors, leading to inefficiencies, duplication and gaps. A central digital hub is required, to allow interoperability without relinquishing agencies' own MIS or compromising data protection.

Harmonising data collection, qualification and verification systems: Programmes operate their own targeting and verification systems based on different (though overlapping) criteria. Harmonisation is needed as follows:

- Eligibility for government and humanitarian safety nets should be defined with reference to a household's SPN status, according to whether the programme intends to supplement or substitute this.
- Variables needed to assess SPN eligibility could

be collected during registration for humanitarian programmes, to facilitate household's transfer to the SPN as capacity develops.

Increasing government capacity: A rolling registration on the SPN requires investment in the social worker network. The SPN is not operational in newly liberated areas, excluding households affected by displacement who need assistance to recover. Expanding coverage of the SPN requires more financial resources.

Reforming another programme, the Public Distribution System (PDS), to make it accessible and relevant to needs of the vulnerable and displaced: The PDS reaches 98% of the population, including many non-poor households. This and inefficiencies and leakages in its supply and delivery mechanisms make the programme costly to implement (over 60% of the safety net budget). Reforming the targeting strategy and transitioning to private sector-led digital services for benefit transfer will improve efficiency and free up resources. Facilities helping IDPs to replace lost ration cards and re-register for PDS rations in their new locations are needed to support recovery. The food basket should be revised to support access to a healthy nutritious diet for children and pregnant women.

Humanitarian actors can support this transition:

agencies can implement programmes that accurately reflect the current reality of Iraq's social protection system, aligning with it and filling gaps. Actors implementing MPGs aim to complement the national system. Transfers to IDPs and returnees are intended to provide a bridge while households await access to government benefits. However, constraints in PDS and SPN delivery mean households' income gap lasts longer than expected. Humanitarian actors can provide longer term 'transitional assistance' for those who cannot yet be included in the SPN due to budget constraints, who cannot yet apply for it, or who cannot access their PDS ration.

In a departure from their 'traditional' role as 'implementers', humanitarian actors can also be 'enablers' to develop capacity of national systems and programmes. For example:

- Improving MISs used on national schemes and systems development.
- Capacity building for social workers.
- Supporting the application process for a scaled up SPN (outreach to vulnerable populations, data collection and verification).
- Supporting population of a social registry, through validation and deduplication of records held in programme databases.
- Supporting piloting and evaluation of new approaches.

⁷ Alignment with the SPN and the PMT doesn't mean that all assistance would be given based on poverty score alone, other programmes could still retain their own targeting approaches.

⁸ 1.1 million people are in receipt of transfers (12.5% of the poor assuming perfect targeting).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends actions to transition to an integrated national safety net system, to more efficiently and predictably address needs of vulnerable populations and enable humanitarian assistance to top up or to fill gaps:

- Change to an open application process on the SPN, to increase its coverage and support development of a complete social registry.
- Transform the PDS to an electronic smart card to improve efficiency and allow access to nutritious food.
- Initiate a system for IDPs to re-register for PDS rations and replace PDS cards.
- Align targeting approaches with the SPN proxy means test⁹, to generate efficiencies in identification of caseloads and eventual transfer of vulnerable caseloads to MoLSA.
- Adapt PDS benefit levels to complement the SPN and build a 'layered' system to fill gaps.
- Increase the number of qualified social workers.
- Engage in discussions on building a digital hub for data sharing between government programmes and between government and the humanitarian sector.
- Develop a common identification system for use across programmes.
- Humanitarian actors support collection and verification of household data for the SPN registry.
- Address data privacy issues to enable data sharing.

9 For example, on the PDS, those in receipt of the SPN, and those with an income above the threshold for SPN qualification but below the threshold that ensures economic access to a nutritious diet could be supported.

NEXT STEPS

The focus of this technical assistance is highly relevant to the Iraqi context as the response transitions to recovery. It completes the 'scoping' that is a pre-requisite for action, concretising opportunities for linking humanitarian action and social protection through specific instruments and strategic and operational coordination. The recommendations are aligned with wider plans for social protection reform. Following the elections and changes to government in mid-2018, a planned workshop for stakeholders will discuss and validate the recommendations. This is expected to result in commitment to take forward at least some of the actions, based on strengthening partnerships between international actors, and between these actors and government.

LESSONS LEARNED

Experiences have generated lessons for actors seeking linkages between social protection and humanitarian action:

- Vested interests of operational agencies can reduce incentives to collaborate, create competing agendas for the direction of change, and constrain efforts to improve coordination of humanitarian action and social protection. There is a role for donors in incentivising collaboration and in funding actors in roles where they have a comparative advantage.
- Initial short-term technical assistance can be useful, but to effect real change such collaboration between actors must be invested in over the medium to long term. It requires that country teams buy into the 'global vision' of their HQs, that agencies' humanitarian teams can draw on expertise from their development and social protection counterparts, that relationships with government are nurtured, and that changes are complemented by capacity development.

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