

# IRC in Iraq: Overview of the Child Protection Program

## Children in Iraq

The United Nations studies in the country have found that killing and maiming of children is the most widespread grave violation of child rights. Since 2014, they are at least 271 verified cases of child recruitment and use of children by parties to the conflict.

The lack of educational infrastructure and damage caused by the political instability to the same greatly affects children in the country. This includes lack of school buildings, lack of teachers and education staffs (i.e. Ministry of Education Staff, M&E staff, etc.), lack of experience and knowledge on child protection topics. The issue is worsened by the huge number of children per classroom, which increases the risks of children dropping out. The lack of sustainable psychosocial and informal education further contributes to increased risk and violence against children.

A significant upward trend of incidents of unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) have been witnessed over the course of the conflict. Among the UASC in the country, 10% are of foreign nationality. Absence of caregivers, makes the children more vulnerable to violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect.

### IRC in Iraq<sup>1</sup>

The vision and ambition of the IRC's Child Protection program is to serve and provide conflict affected children access to **sustainable, specialized, holistic and nurturing protective services** through several pathways, including direct services and partnership with relevant stakeholders like the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, as well as local civil society organizations.

#### Individualized Case Management Services:

IRC provides Child Protection services to extremely vulnerable children and caregivers directly in Ninewa Governorate and through its implementing partner in Anbar and SAD provinces. In addition to individualized case management, psychosocial support, enrolment to formal and informal education and referrals to positive parenting programs is also offered.

Children at risk for child marriage or gender-based violence are also jointly supported with the IRC's women protection and empowerment sector receiving GBV specialized services. Referrals are also made to the IRC's different sectors, such economic recovery and development, women protection and empowerment and protection sectors aimed to integrate and holistically support low-income households to access livelihood and cash-based support to enroll back children to education and minimize the risks for further harm and child labour.

IRC further supports Children Formerly Associated with Armed Forces/Groups (CAAFAG) to cope with the experiences and re-integrate them into their communities, supporting them in their daily routine and activities and minimize the risks to engage in harmful activities. It prioritizes out of school children and CAAFAG for case management and PSS services given the additional risks they encounter as they are not in a protective school environment.

## Iraq Context

Iraq has struggled with political and economic instability for decades. The government's lack of institutional capacity, political legitimacy and over dependency on oil have resulted in slow economic recovery. The conflict with ISIS has also resulted in the damage of billion dollars' worth of economic infrastructure.

The COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the lack of social security coupled with an increase living costs resulting in significant loss of livelihoods for many families and rise in poverty levels in the country. This has further jeopardizing children wellbeing and development.

A UNICEF study released in May 2020, cited the commonly reported issues in the country affecting children to include lack of access to education (83%); stress, fear and anxiety (51%); child labour (26%); and violence, abuse or neglect within the household (24%). Rates of violence against children are high, especially in areas with no access to nurturing and healing child and caregiving services. It is further estimated that one in ten children is engaged in child labour at the average age of 5 years old.

### Child & Family- level Services:

The IRC directly supports children, youth and adolescent boys and girls to re-establish a sense of safety and provides parents and caregivers with the necessary skills, tools and support to better support themselves and their children. This is done through specialized **child protection and psychosocial support (PSS) services** for the most vulnerable, conflict-affected children in Mosul through its two stand-alone centers in Mosul being in Arbajia and Al-Intisar.

IRC offers targeted parenting interventions for caregivers through its teams in Ninawa and indirectly through its partner in Saladin and Anbar as part of the Families Make a Difference program. This program promotes the wellbeing of children and adolescents and reduces violence in the home by providing parents and caregivers with stress management techniques, positive parenting practices, and strategies for supporting the psychosocial needs of children and adolescents.

The *Growing Stronger Together* program to support Children Formerly Associated with Armed Forces/Groups (CAAFAG) is also underway in the country. It supports Children Formerly Associated with Armed Forces/Groups (CAAFAG) and their families to cope with what they experienced and re-integrate into their communities, return to their daily routines and activities, to further minimize the risks to engage in harmful activities. Psychosocial support is provided to the children. The "Now I am Stronger curriculum" is being adopted in Iraq, consisting of 12 structured PSS sessions (4 non-focused PSS sessions and 8 focused PSS sessions).

Adapted PSS aims to guide caregivers, during home visit, on how to facilitate basic PSS for children at family level. Caregivers are provided with booklets and kits for reference in providing PSS to children at home. Children booklets are

<sup>1</sup> As at March 2022

divided into two groups, one targeting children under the age of 6- and the other children from age 7-13-years.

### **Adolescent & Youth Services:**

Life skills is key in strengthening adolescents' and youth resilience in managing life dynamics, specifically in the transition period from childhood to adolescence and youth, enabling them to make informed decisions about their life. The life skills program can also enable and enhance youth coping skills when they experience harm in humanitarian/emergency context.

Currently, the IRC is providing Save the Children's youth resilience program through its implementing partner covering both camp and out of camp youth, and directly in its two standalone centers in Mosul. The curriculum aims at increasing active participation of youth and children and focuses on life skills as well as PSS sessions emphasizing collaboration and team building, building positive relationships, conflict resolution, nonviolent communication methods, coping and problem-solving skills.

### **Community-Based Child Protection:**

Strong community-based child protection mechanisms are key for sustainable child protection interventions. The IRC's Child protection teams and implementing partner support existing Youth Committees in Ninewa, ANB and SAD. They benefit from curriculum-based activities focusing on life skills, as well as PSS sessions which focus on collaboration and team building, positive relationship building, conflict resolution, nonviolent communication, coping, and problem-solving.

The IRC's child protection teams are working toward enhancing community led child protection initiatives by establishing Community Representative Groups (CRGs) that support community based social cohesion issues, including gaining access and acceptance for IDPs and acknowledge and increase community's attention on child concerns and children rights.

The IRC is also building the capacity of Child Protection Committees (CPCs) to support on identification of child protection cases and making referral to service providers, leading social dialogs within the community on social cohesion and Peace building. The child protection committees coordinate closely with the IRC's child protection teams throughout scheduled and structured weekly meetings aiming to discuss and identify CP concerns and trends within the community and accordingly prevent accelerations of the specific concerns by initiating awareness raising initiatives. The data and finding of the committee meetings are analyzed and adapted to the IRC's child protection response program and for advocacy at the community, directory and ministry level.

### **Partner Engagement and Capacity Strengthening:**

IRC's Child protection sector strategically aims to build on existing capacities and resources by partnering with local civil society organizations to access different areas, such as Sinjar in Ninawa, Tikrit, Samarah and Shirqat in Sallahadin, Faluja and Ramadi in Anbar. The current two partners respond to the child protection needs by providing the same services as the IRC, such as Case management and referrals, Positive parenting, etc.

To enhance the technical expertise of civil society organizations skill set on child protection, the IRC offers training to civil society organizations and to its Implementing partners. These include parenting skills, case management, focused PSS, child safeguarding, child protection core

concepts, early marriage, and psychosocial first aid. The training and follow-on coaching support aims to ensure service providers can provide child-focused services in line with best interest principles.

### **Where We Work**

The IRC is implementing its direct child protection interventions in Ninewa governorate in both Al Arbachiya and Al Intisar neighborhoods. It offers a series of trainings to civil society organizations operating in the Kurdistan region (Erbil, Sulaimaniyah and Duhok). The IRC's implementing partners also provide child protection services in Duhok, Ninawa, Anbar and Salahadin.

### **Advocacy Targets**

The IRC is prioritizing advocacy through awareness sessions, dialogues and discussions with the community in identifying risks that children face and working together on proposing solutions to ensure children are protected. The advocacy work is targeting children themselves, to be able to protect and claim their rights, as well as seek support when at risk/experience abuse. The IRC is also working with the government through key ministries responsible for children's rights such as the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and local government authorities, law enforcement institutions and the community. Community leaders and religious leaders are also involved on advocacy work.

### **Success Stories**

"Samir (not their real name) aged 7 years was born in Al Salamiya camp and lived with his mother and father happily until the camp was closed. Samir's parents are from Iraq and Syria. After the camp closure, the family had nowhere to live and no means to provide for basic needs, including food, shelter, and clothing.

The family had no option but send Samir to work to be able to support the family with food. The case was identified in the community and referred to IRC Child protection team. An assessment was conducted which revealed Samir's father died sometimes ago and that the family was in severe psychological stress with no hope on means to survive and a place to live.

The IRC provided the family with basic needs and linked them to a temporary shelter and materials for the children to be in schools. IRC is working toward a permanent solution on housing for the family. The family was also linked with a local NGO which was providing economic support to affected families in the area. Aiming to holistically and sustainably support the family's economic wellbeing, coordination with existing organizations having livelihood services were made. The household was supported with livelihood services of a small business grant to open a cosmetic shop. The family is now stable economically and able to provide for the basic needs of the children and Samir no longer needs to work to support his family.

*IRC's global child protection programs aim to ensure that children are safe, able to exercise their rights, and cared for, in a family or family-like environment that promotes their physical, social, emotional, cognitive and economic well-being. For more information on IRC's global child protection work, visit <https://childprotectionpractitioners.org>*