

COVID-19: The immediate and potential long-term risks to vulnerable populations in Iraq

Briefing note, 24 March 2020

Background

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the Coronavirus (COVID-19) a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. The first case of COVID-19 in Iraq was recorded in Najaf on 24 February 2020. Since then, WHO has reported a total of 233 positive cases and 20 fatalities in the country.¹ The Government of Iraq (GoI) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) have imposed extensive measures to prevent a large outbreak of the virus in Iraq, including closing airports and land borders, mandatory quarantine upon arrival, significant movement restrictions and nationwide curfews.

While recognising the right and the need of the GoI and the KRG to implement mitigating measures to curb the spread of COVID-19, the NGO community is deeply concerned about the needs of thousands of vulnerable in- and out-of-camp populations. With over **1.4 million people displaced** and more than **336,000 people residing in crowded camps**, many without access to proper healthcare or income-generating activities, there is an immediate risk of a full-blown emergency. NGOs are also concerned about the impact on the economy including short-term market disruptions, price volatility, oil price shocks, as well as the likelihood of a longer-term recession - all of which will hit the most vulnerable the hardest.

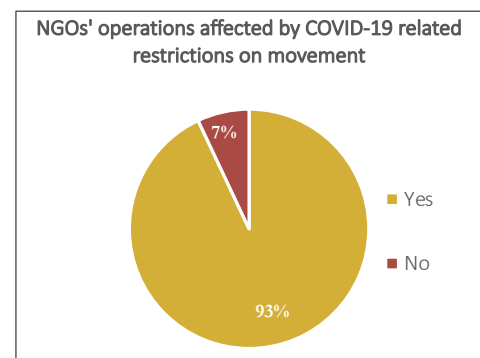
The NGO community is ready and willing to support the government by scaling up life-saving activities, including but not limited to, distribution of hygiene kits, water quality testing, provision of cash to families, training of health workers and protection monitoring. However, for us to be able to continue and/or expand, **there needs to be immediate clarity on NGO exemptions to movement restrictions at the governorate level.** NGOs are cognisant of the risk of spreading the virus and are committed to implementing proper prevention and hygiene measures to protect the health of aid workers and the communities we serve.

Impact on humanitarian response

In response to the rapidly evolving situation, the humanitarian response is prioritising life-saving activities and COVID-19 preparedness and response based on the prioritisation made by the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG). Yet, the lack of clarity on governorate level NGO exemptions for movement is preventing NGOs from delivering urgent, vital assistance. On 16 March 2020, the NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq (NCCI) circulated a survey among its members to assess the impact of COVID-19 and subsequent movement restrictions on NGO operations.

Main findings from NCCI survey

- **93% of respondents² said that their operations were affected by COVID-related restrictions on movement.**
- **39% said they had suspended activities.**
- **70% cited the inability to reach out-of-camp beneficiaries as an obstacle to implementing activities.**
- **63% indicated that their activities have been impacted by a reduction in the ability of national staff to move.**
- **35% said that the availability of international staff has been adversely impacted by local and global travel restrictions.**



¹ WHO COVID-19 Situation Report 63, 23 March 2020.

² Fifty-seven (57) international and national NGOs responded to the survey.

Exacerbating factors

In addition to the risk of COVID-19, specific governorates face challenges that are exacerbating the current humanitarian situation.

Recent intensive **flooding** in Duhok, Ninewa and to a lesser extent Salah Al-Din have caused damage to infrastructure in camps, families to be displaced in Mosul and a number of bridges and roads washed away making routes unpassable. With existing camps at substandard conditions, it is critical that WASH actors are able to move quickly to implement basic activities such as desludging, hygiene kit distributions and water quality testing to ensure families have safe drinking water.

Closure of banks has led to sudden interruption of cash assistance, resulting in increased difficulties for vulnerable households to meet their basic needs, including the ability to buy hygiene items, medical supplies and food. Cash assistance is needed to meet people's needs and directly support the functioning of local markets and traders' capacity to restock items which are now disrupted.

NGO exemptions

A number of governorates have implemented or are in current communication with field teams about NGO exemptions to enable the provision of life-saving assistance under a COVID-19 response. However, **the main issue is the lack of formal streamlined communication with NGOs about what is needed to obtain these exemptions resulting in different processes per governorate.** For example, there have been exemption letters issued for actors responding to the flood in Ninewa; a call for humanitarian actors to contact the Governor in Salah Al-Din; and in Kirkuk, there is ongoing commitment to ensure humanitarian activities continue. NGO exemptions issued by the KRG Ministry of Interior allow NGOs to operate across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). **However, NGOs are currently not able to transport life-saving and COVID-19 response supplies from the KRI into federal Iraq.** Further, NGOs are, on a regular basis, made aware of new demands that would be impossible to fulfil, such as the need for organisations to provide daily medical certificates for their staff. **While welcoming the exemptions made to date, NGOs continue to call for increased clarity and a streamlined process across governorates.**

Urgent requirements

NCCI, on behalf of its 196 NGO members and observers, highlights the following urgent requirements to ensure the delivery of life-saving assistance to the most vulnerable communities:

1. **NGOs and contracted service providers that are implementing life-saving and COVID-19 related activities should be exempted from movement restrictions.** NGOs request WHO as the response leader to engage with the GoI, and in particular Committee 55, on NGO exemptions. This includes the provision of information to NGOs on what is needed at checkpoints and clear dissemination of exemptions to all security actors at governorate level.
2. **Banks and financial service providers that are essential to support cash assistance efforts should be granted exemption to enable the continuation of life-saving cash assistance.** This includes the ability for organisations to transfer money and access cash resources in order to allow the distribution of cash to targeted households.
3. **Joint scenario plans should be urgently developed under the Humanitarian Coordinator's leadership to ensure coherent preparedness in case the COVID-19 outbreak significantly exacerbates the humanitarian situation.** This includes preparedness and operational planning for an extended period of movement restrictions, and the identification of triggers for the revision of the HRP.
4. **Continued flexibility from donors.** While welcoming the ongoing flexibility from the donors, NGOs call for the need to be able to adapt programming to the changing context including realignment to scale up for a COVID-19 response, willingness to fund and uphold operational presence and ensure cash flows.