

IMPROVING THE RESPONSE TO INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT

HOW IDPS IN IRAQ, SYRIA & YEMEN
EXPERIENCED ACCESS TO SERVICES &
AID ASSISTANCE DURING
DISPLACEMENT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the international aid community seeks to improve responses to internal displacement, the UN Secretary General's *Action Agenda* provides an opportunity for the industry to consider how it can better deliver for those seeking a solution to their displacement, including by looking at the role of states who are ultimately responsible for delivering services to their own displaced populations.

However, the *Action Agenda* is anchored with the offices of UN Resident Coordinator at a country level, resulting in a focus on development responses and less considering the actions of humanitarian responders throughout the displacement cycle. It has also meant that civil society and IDPs themselves have had limited involvement within this approach.

This paper seeks to explore how recent responses to internal displacement in the Middle East have sought to ensure equitable access to services and assistance for IDPs and the agency that IDPs perceive they have had in obtaining access to assistance. Focussing on the recommendations in the *Action Agenda* to enhance equitable access to public services and aid assistance and based on practitioners' insight into the most prevalent concerns for IDPs, this research has spoken with IDPs and those attempting a return in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen to understand some of their experiences. The results validate the call for improved responses, confirming an inconsistent approach in how IDPs have been able to access vital state services including water and education, and how challenging it can be to have lost documentation re-issued, providing a significant barrier to living a dignified life in displacement. There are also geographic differences, with some locations facing higher levels of active conflict, or having differing levels of access for international and national aid actors. Respondents also reported that they routinely find aid responses confusing to deal with, with multiple registrations to receive aid from different organisations and a concern that aid agencies do not effectively coordinate with each other to ensure equitable, timely and relevant aid provision.

From this sample, very few IDPs are asked their intentions for the future and where they are discussed most perceive the focus to be on an eventual return home, even if that is not the preference of the individual.

With these countries all being conflict settings it was notable how many IDPs, and especially males under 30, identified how they felt first treated as a security threat rather than a citizen of their country, which they felt further marginalised them in society.

Therefore, much can be done to consider how access to services and assistance can improve, including in the first phase of a response coordinated through humanitarian architectures. The Office of the Special Adviser on Internal Displacement and the Resident Coordinators in relevant countries should continue to bring in the expertise of civil society and IDPs themselves to inform their responses now and in the future if we are to ensure the aims of the Action Agenda are delivered upon.

INTRODUCTION

Following the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement set up in 2019, the UN Secretary General in June 2022 published an *Action Agenda* on internal displacement, noting that the number of internally displaced had doubled in over a decade and that “*more of the same is not enough*”, with displacement-affected communities stretched close to breaking point.¹

The *Action Agenda* has three overarching goals; to prevent new displacements, to support the achievement of durable solutions to internal displacement, and to increase protection and assistance to IDPs.

Protracted conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have resulted in significant levels of internal displacement in each country – currently 6.8million in Syria² and 4.5 million in Yemen,³ and over 1 million in Iraq, but with almost 5 million people recorded by IOM as returned, many still with needs linked to their displacement.⁴ Millions of people have been living in displacement for multiple years, often displaced on multiple occasions – for many, the prospect of the achievement of a durable solution is or appears inaccessible. The first principle of the IASC Guiding Principles states clearly that, “*Internally displaced persons shall enjoy, in full equality, the same rights and freedoms under international and domestic law as do other persons in their country*” during displacement;⁵ yet where states are involved in conflict their resources can become depleted and their involvement in the conflict itself often affects policies towards its own citizens.

This paper is based on focus group discussions that explored how the response to internal displacement in Iraq, Syria and Yemen sought to ensure equitable access to services and assistance for IDPs, as well as the agency that IDPs perceive they have had in obtaining access to assistance and in discussions

about their displacement with power holders. The paper is designed to highlight potential areas of discussion to continue the improvement of responses to internal displacement rather than to be representative of all IDP experiences in the three countries. It was informed by 13 focus group discussions (five in Iraq, four each in Syria and Yemen) consisting of 219 participants, including 102 females – four of the sessions were female only. The FGDs in Yemen took place only in areas under the control of the Internationally Recognised Government (IRG) and in Syria in areas under the control of the government. To this extent, the report is also not fully representative of each response.

The Action Agenda sets out clear recommendations, with recommendation 24 outlining the need for states to ensure IDPs have access to public systems and services, recommendation 29 calling for strengthened accountability to IDPs, recommendation 30 outlining the importance of locally led responses to displacement, and recommendation 31 outlining the need to lay the foundation for solutions earlier in responses. FGD participants were therefore asked about how they received support from authorities and aid agencies, how they were able to influence the aid received, and whether they felt they had the opportunity to discuss their future intentions.

The UN Secretary General set out that the Action Agenda would be delivered in countries principally through the function of the UN Resident Coordinator (RC), supported between 2022 and 2024 by a Special Adviser on Internal Displacement and their office. Situating the response with the office of the RC has the effect of prioritising the consideration of solutions within development responses, and in the case of the Middle East means that while Iraq and Yemen are ‘focus countries’ for the Special Adviser, Syria - with the highest IDP caseload in the world, is

¹ [Action-Agenda-on-Internal-Displacement_EN.pdf \(un.org\)](#).

² [Syrian Arab Republic HNO 2023 | Humanitarian Action](#)

³ [Yemen Humanitarian Needs Overview 2024 \(January 2024\) | OCHA \(unocha.org\)](#)

⁴ [Home Page - IRAQ DTM \(iom.int\) \(accessed when last update was Dec 31, 2023\)](#).

⁵ [Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement \(interagencystandingcommittee.org\)](#).

not. While senior UN leadership on this matter is highly appreciated, the process to deliver the Action Agenda did not clearly outline how civil society or IDPs themselves would be involved in improving responses. It is hoped that the experiences of IDPs will become a core part of delivering on the Action Agenda both now, and into the future. IDP experiences are personal and can vary even in the same locations, yet identifying certain core trends will be helpful in improving responses to internal displacement in the future.



ACCESS TO SERVICES

Access to public services is critical both to IDPs enjoying a dignified life, reducing protection risks, providing the opportunity to maintain self-reliance, and as part of a pathway to achieving a durable solution. Yet across all three countries IDPs identified significant challenges to accessing services that they and their families relied upon. Some participants, especially those under 30, said they first felt treated as a security concern, which limited access to services – and aid assistance – at the onset of displacement.

There were numerous concerns about freedom of movement and, therefore, access to services, livelihood opportunities, and markets. This differed between those in camps - where some faced difficulties to leave the camp - and others who faced challenges passing through checkpoints, regardless as to whether they were displaced to camps or to an urban area.

The ability to have lost documentation re-issued was mixed across the region. In Yemen, those displaced into camps often felt that camp management was responsive in supporting to access documents, however there was a difference identified for those who had been displaced across local government boundaries, including in Yemen , where both a female and male participants note that they had “*great difficulty in getting replacements for lost personal cards*” as they were displaced from other governorates. In Syria, the inability to obtain documentation was mentioned as a limitation to access aid assistance, “*since we were unable to prove [a lease contract] we were unable to receive any good assistance*” (female, 31-60, displaced to Latakia). This links with previous findings in Iraq, with IDPs highlighting the bureaucratic inaccessibility of the current system as a key barrier to replacing lost documentation or accessing new documents.⁶

Local authorities also have challenges in providing a response to internally displaced populations. Budgets were often constrained, but during active conflict a greater proportion of state resource is dedicated to military efforts, resulting in local authorities facing a decision on whether to fund service provision or the conflict efforts. Conversations with local authorities would be necessary to explore further, however there is an assumption made from experiences of national civil society organisations that no additional resource from the national government is made available to local government to extend services, and humanitarian aid funding in the first instance is more likely to support programming by aid agencies, rather than supporting local service delivery. Although welfare payments were not commonly raised – including food assistance – in both Iraq and Yemen crossing boundaries seemed to result in greater difficulty in receiving support that had been received before displacement – potentially highlighting challenges in cross-government coordination.

These considerations are relevant when considering our respondents across all three countries highlighted access to education as particularly difficult, raised more by female participants than by males. IDPs reported a range of access challenges to education, with common reports of children being denied school attendance in places of displacement simply as a result of them being IDPs, because displacement had caused a student to miss a school exam that they were then denied access to the next grade, or children being admitted to school but forced to pay for textbooks and other supplies which host community received for free.

In Yemen, one participant noted that the local government did seek to establish schools for primary grade children, but they could not provide the capacity for the number of displaced children. There were also some positive examples, including in Aden (Yemen) and Aleppo (Syria) where students were permitted to attend school by local education authorities – in the latter following conversations with IDP families.

However, despite being permitted to continue in education there were still barriers in the system, as students in some locations could not receive certificates until they could provide documentation, which not all families were able to resolve.

Challenges in accessing healthcare were also raised, with participants often mentioning the provision of a partial service – for example medicines not being included in the healthcare they could receive – or discrimination when using healthcare. There are gendered effects here, too, for example pregnant women reported receiving discriminatory comments from nurses because they were pregnant while displaced. Access to water and electricity was brought up more frequently by those displaced into camp settings, perhaps highlighting the difficulty in extending systems to areas where they did not exist before.

In camps in Yemen it was noted that *“the host*

community has access to water networks, those who are displaced must travel...in order to get water” (female, 16-30). For both those in and out of camps, an increase in costs – or a request to pay for what had been free provision at home – was noted *“electricity required a sum of money to collect it from the main cable”* (female 16-30) and participants displaced in Iraq, who had to *“pay a large amount of money for certain services, such as water and electricity, that [we] previously had been able to obtain for free”*. Quality of services was also mentioned, with electricity seen and evidenced as providing a health and safety risk, for example through fires in the camps perceived to be due to poor installation.

Women-only focus group discussions highlighted a more significant lack of access to services when displaced, compared to mixed or male-only discussions, with women also more likely to discuss the location of government services.

Several women displaced in Iraq said that some services were located in remote areas, that they were afraid of harassment and that they therefore often chose not to access these services, or limited their access.

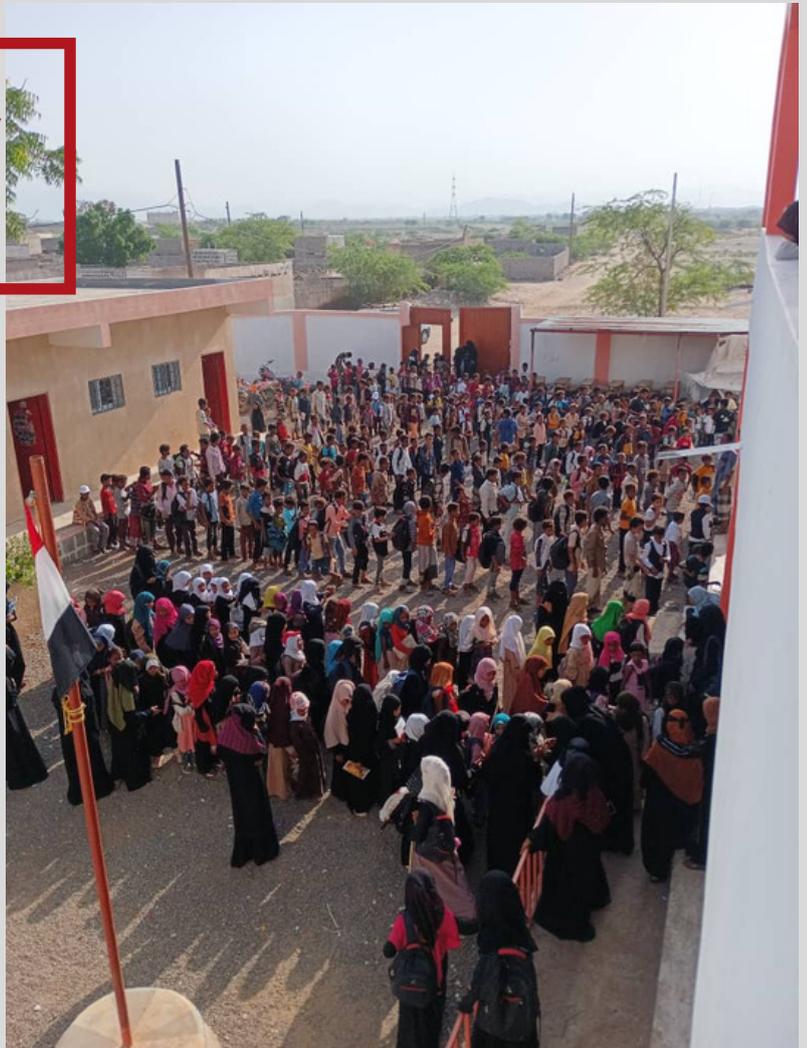
There was a mix of responses when it came to discuss with government the services required, and what the result of those discussions were. Across the discussions, IDPs felt that limited efforts had been made by local government to expand service provision to meet increases in population size. In Lahj, Yemen, one participant noted that *“there is a lack of teaching staff in certain classes, as well as a shortage of school supplies”* (female, 16-30) while in Dar’a, Syria, participants noted that the availability of core state provided items, *“such as bread and gas cylinders”* (female 16-30) had not been increased and participants in Iraq displaced to Salah-al-din and Tikrit noted that *“we were unable to access any of the government organisation’s services, the host community’s services were far superior”* (multiple males, 16-30).

SNAPSHOT: YEMEN

Al-Nahda School, led by 51-year-old principal Rashid Suleiman in Al-Hodaidah, Yemen faces unprecedented challenges. The school's student population has surged due to the arrival of 155 displaced families since the crisis began. As the only operational school in the area after the destruction of a nearby school, Al-Nahda grapples with severe overcrowding.

“When you enter the classrooms, you immediately notice the lack of oxygen due to the high number of students” - Mr. Rashid

The situation is critical in the first-grade classes, where 300 students are divided into three sections. According to Mr. Rashid, the school, lacking space, has had to hold classes in nearby houses and a mosque. Beyond the scarcity of classroom spaces, Mr. Rashid says that the school grapples with a severe shortage of textbooks, leading to situations where ten students share a single book. The cost of school notebooks, prohibitively expensive for many families, forces displaced families to resort to collecting and selling plastic bottles to afford them. This task, however, comes with grave risks, including exposure to explosive ordnance, which can



lead to life-threatening injuries or even death. This underscores the multifaceted challenges facing education in conflict zones, where resources are scarce, and survival often takes precedence over learning, said Mr. Rashid.



In Yemen, the Executive Unit (a department of the IRG responsible for the affairs of the internally displaced) was generally seen as accessible and responsive; although this did not necessarily translate to other areas of government. Across our FGDs in the country, this included *“Local officials only discussed the things we had already asked them to fulfil”* (two females, 16-30,) and some FGDs in which attendees said they had not held any discussions with government officials regarding services provided to them. Many participants said that there was no response to inquiries, although some noted the lack of government capacity *“there is no response, because the government needs donor contributions”* (female, 16-30).

However, in Abyan, two male participants over 60 noted that they had a meeting with a hospital director and achieved a reduction in costs for minor surgery for their children, as a result of them being displaced. In Syria, gender norms resulted in some

women being unwilling to engage authorities directly, *“it is the men’s businesses, we never participated in that”* (female 31-60, from Quinetra, displaced in Dar’a). Iraq had mixed reports, some participants note positive engagement with local authorities, while others raised the fact they that were perceived to be a part of ISIS and that authorities would not discuss service provision with them. These experiences highlight both the personal nature of displacement and that the response within a country can vary geographically.

For many IDPs, it was also noted that due to restrictions on movement, or the need to live in camps, they were not aware of services that host communities were receiving and therefore didn’t know how they were treated in comparison, although some IDPs believed that the host community would take some of the aid assistance sent to the camps.

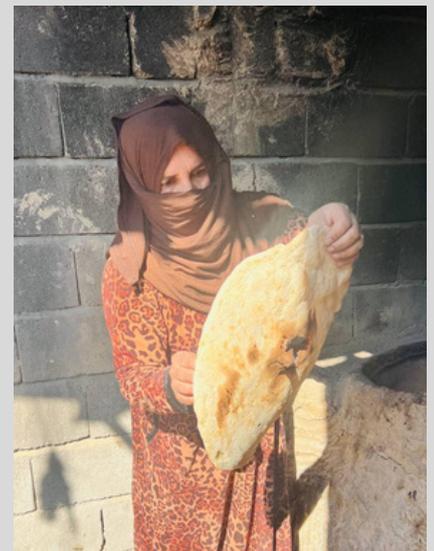
SNAPSHOT: IRAQ

Taliba, a 53-year-old from Diyala, Iraq, has navigated the turbulent waters of displacement multiple times, profoundly affecting her family's life.

The financial hardship from displacement forced her to make the heart-wrenching decision to end her children's education, sharing, "I forced my children to leave their studies because our financial situation was bad, and we couldn't afford to meet their needs."

Despite these challenges, Taliba found ways to support her family and her husband's medical needs through baking and crafting clay ovens. Yet, the emotional and psychological toll of losing her son to violence and coping with her husband's stroke and quadriplegia has been devastating: "All this destroyed my psyche and made me sick."

With resilience, they returned to their homeland, aiming to rebuild their lives, yet they were met with further obstacles. "After returning to our homes, we hoped for a better life, but all factors do not help with that for several reasons, including the loss of our homes and agricultural lands," she stated, highlighting the ongoing struggle against instability and the loss of their property. Taliba's story underscores the urgent need for targeted support to help displaced families like hers recover and rebuild, emphasizing not only financial and psychological aid but also assistance in restoring homes and livelihoods for a sustainable future.



ACCESS TO AID ASSISTANCE

When it came to receiving assistance as part of the aid response, research participants across the region were clear that there were multiple registration processes to receive aid (including from UN agencies, international NGOs, and local organisations) and that these processes didn't necessarily result in assistance being received. This aligns with feedback received by the organisations signing this paper, whose staff have regularly recorded frustrations with multiple similar assessments being conducted, without the same level of aid being received.

Participants noted that the information required to fill out the forms was difficult and that different organisations required different information, and because there was no shared data between relief organisations some people lost out assistance. For example, one individual stated he had received cash assistance from one aid agency, but when that aid was withdrawn and another organisation came to provide cash, he did not receive cash from this organisation, which he perceived was because the second organisation thought he was still in receipt of cash assistance from the first.

In Dar'a, Syria, two female IDPs (one 16-30, one 31-60) from different areas of origin said they, *"had to register more than once, and [were not] provided with the required assistance"* and in Aleppo one participant still displaced in the city said *"they collected our data and registered it...the guidelines were vague and subject to constant modification"*. In Iraq participants told us they had to register on multiple occasions because staff were always changing, and that different organisations offered different services, which forced them to register on multiple occasions. In Yemen numerous participants noted that the type of location they were displaced to made a difference, *"we did not receive assistance, because we were not living in the camp, but the displaced people in the camps received aid"* (female, 16-30) and *"because I was a renter at the beginning of my displacement [I did not receive aid], but when*

I entered the camp and registered my data...I received it" (female, 16-30). For camp residents, organisations visiting the camps and taking information directly was seen as linked to the timelier delivery of aid assistance. With some exceptions, across almost all focus group discussions aid was not seen to be received in a timely manner at the early onset of displacement, and often requested aid did not arrive. In Iraq, one group told us that tents arrived quickly, but further supplies were limited including a lack of bedding, latrines, and food. In Dar'a, one IDP told us *"we stayed several days without blankets, as the assistance was delayed"* (female, 31-60), and in Yemen two participants said organisations did not respond promptly to their requests, leaving them without access to assistance for four to six months following their displacement.

However, when it came to knowing what aid assistance could be requested from aid agencies, IDPs were largely unaware of the variety of assistance on offer. *"We are unaware of the assistance until aid or services are announced and delivered to the camp"* (female, 31-60, Khanaqin, Iraq); *"we didn't know what kind of services or assistance would be distributed"* (three females, 31-60, displaced to Dar'a); and in Abyan, Yemen the majority of focus group participants said they were unaware of the kind of assistance until the day of the distribution. Participants in Aden had greater awareness of the assistance available, *"the camp representative is notified about the assistance, then they provide us with guidance [on] how to use this assistance"* (female, 16-30). There was often a belief that the aid provided wasn't actually what was required by IDPs, in Abyan some of the participants highlighted how there were prevalent health supplies provided, while IDPs lacked shelter materials to help them shield from the sun.

SNAPSHOT: SYRIA

Zain, an elderly woman from Aleppo burdened with cancer and the care of her six daughters, has faced repeated displacements amid Syria's turmoil. Despite these trials, including the loss of her home and the challenge of soaring housing prices, she has found partial relief through available aid services.

Reflecting on the health assistance she received, Zain stated, "It was good at a certain level, especially health assistance, whether with psychiatric medication and psychological treatment". Despite the chaos, she found solace in the psychiatric support, awareness programmes, and access to free medications provided during her displacement. These services offered a semblance of stability and were crucial in managing her health. However, accessing this aid was fraught with difficulties.



“Lack of sufficient information about the organisations and associations that provide aid and their locations, and the lack of knowledge of the criteria they use in a clear way.” -Zain

A lack of information, coupled with bureaucratic hurdles in securing necessary documents for home rehabilitation, underscores the complexities displaced individuals face in navigating the aid system, delaying essential support. Despite these challenges, the assistance Zain did receive had a significant impact on her life. "Psychological assistance has had a great impact on my health and ability to live," she acknowledges, appreciating the psychological support and awareness programmes that helped manage her condition. Yet, she also points out a critical gap, "but the lack of health assistance for cancer patients and relief is what negatively affects my life." The delay in obtaining house rehabilitation services post-earthquake, despite community efforts, highlights the need for more efficient aid mechanisms and bolstered coordination between state and aid responses.

Accessing essential services not only brought relief but also hope. Zain's experience underscores the role of aid in mitigating the crisis's impact on displaced individuals, emphasizing the importance of sustained support to help those displaced rebuild their lives with dignity and stability, navigating through the uncertainties with the aid of essential services.

Across all focus group discussions there was an awareness about the type of aid changing over time, with participants able to identify that “urgent aid” was gradually phased out and different types of assistance, including vocational training programmes, being added to complement continued provision of water and food where it remained necessary – “we received food, medicine, and tents as emergency aid before receiving vocational training to increase our qualifications” (male, 31-60, displaced in Iraq), however, many people noted that far fewer people were able to receive programmes designed to move beyond urgent assistance, and in some cases there seemed to be minimal transition in the assistance offered, “during the period of stability, no attention was paid to rehabilitation and vocational training programmes, and we were not invited to livelihoods training” (female, 31-60, Syria);

“the length of the displacement has an impact on the quality of aid. It started out with good quantities and quality, but in the last few years, it has essentially disappeared” (male, 31-60 Syria).

Participants in FGDs in Yemen noted that some people received assets to support livelihoods activities, and others training, but often not both, thus limiting the effectiveness of the interventions; while also noting that IDPs had different opinions of what they wanted from aid organisations, for example some continuing to favour emergency aid items. There was also some concern on targeting strategies, for example in Iraq “the courses in sewing and pastry production were meant for us, but only two of the displaced attended and the others were from the host community” (two females, 31-60, displaced to Khanaqin).

SNAPSHOT: YEMEN



In Yemen's Hodaidah governorate, displaced individuals such as 40-year-old Abdo Salem confront the harsh realities of life as internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in informal settlements, where essential services remain out of reach. Abdo, who fled with his family in search of safety, faces the task of rebuilding his life without access to critical resources like clean water and education.

Compelled to ensure his family's survival, Abdo's daughters, aged 10 and 11, were tasked with fetching water - a journey fraught with risks

due to the treacherous terrain they had to navigate. This critical responsibility not only exposed them to physical dangers but also significantly impacted their health and hygiene, increasing their vulnerability to disease. The absence of services for IDPs starkly contrasts with the needs of Abdo's family, highlighting a systemic failure to

“Every night before I sleep, I worry about two things: providing food and water”
- Abdo Salem

support displaced populations. Despite the dire circumstances, Abdo is committed to his children's education, taking solace in the small mercy of a nearby school that remains accessible to them. However, the broader issue of inaccessible essential services for IDPs, like a much-needed water tower tank, paints a grim picture of neglect and oversight. Through Abdo's story, the critical gap in extending basic services to IDPs in Yemen becomes painfully apparent, emphasizing the urgent need for targeted interventions to support the health, safety, and education of displaced families like his.

There were some similar concerns about access to assistance in Aleppo, where one participant said *“when I signed up for a hairdressing course...reading and writing proficiency was one of the requirements, and since I didn’t meet them, I was unable to take advantage of this service”* (female, 31-60), and no alternative programme was offered to support the resumption of income generating activities.

Participants did note differences in the quality of aid provided by organisations, but it was not uniform per location, for example there was no consistency as to whether people preferred support from local organisations, international NGOs, or the United Nations. In Yemen, however, some exceptions could be found with focus group participants highlighting Arab and Gulf agencies as providing aid to excellent quality standards and multiple participants favouring support from international organisations, *“we can explain our problems to foreign visitors...and they will listen”* (female 31-60); *“in terms of the distinction between accountability to international and local organisations, the former is preferable since it is predicated on guaranteeing accuracy”* (female, 31-60, Aden).

In terms of accountability to affected populations, some organisations sought to inform IDPs of the type of assistance they could provide, but overall there was a low opinion of being able to influence the programmes of aid organisations. Some participants in Yemen said they had difficulty in reaching the UN response and wondered how if they could not hold local organisations accountable, they could be expected to hold international NGOs and the UN accountable for their programmes. This was mirrored by comments in Iraq, *“[we] do not know how to get in touch with the organisation, and there is no communication with them”* (male, 16-30) and *“there were not any evaluations or discussions related to our situationn during the displacement period”* (male, 31-60, Syria). Yet, there were also several positive examples across the region, which highlights the inconsistency in aid provision, *“They*

get in touch with us after I received the sewing machine to make sure...that it was working properly. They also gave me other tools to help me” (female, 31-60, Aleppo), *“an organisation in Khanaqin contacted us to inquire about our assessment of their services, and they subsequently made improvements to their services”* (two females, 31-60), and in one focus group in Iraq males expressed they had been able to reach organisations, with different experiences of engaging international and local organisations.



THE ACHIEVEMENT OF A SOLUTION TO DISPLACEMENT

The achievement of a solution to displacement comes when an IDP can fully avail themselves of their rights, no longer has needs linked to their displacement and has integrated into society either in their area of origin, in their area of displacement, or in a third location. It is critical that IDPs are informed of these options, and that authorities and aid agencies are able to provide assistance that enables these intentions to be realized, even if the external environment is not at the time conducive to a solution.. However, our participants revealed an inconsistent approach to how both authorities and aid agencies discussed intentions with IDPs – and this inconsistency varied by different locations in the same country, and has a gendered effect.

In Abyan, Yemen, participants noted that they were asked questions about the possibility of returning to

their area of origin, but none could recall a discussion about the right to choose to return or integrate into the area of displacement. Respondents in Shiqat, Iraq, displaced to multiple locations said nobody had discussed their future plans with them, and from Dar'a, Syria *“we have not been asked about our future goals or...to find solutions to our situation”* (two females displaced to Dar'a) and in Ma'arib, Yemen participants all agreed that no one had asked them about their future plans.

However, in some FGDs in Yemen participants said that INGOs had approached them to ask about their intentions and in one focus group discussion in Iraq multiple participants said that organisations had enquired about their future plans and what services would be required if they intended to return home – for example health and education facilities. However, whether the aid organisations could do anything with this information is unclear, because areas of potential return may not be areas where aid agencies either have programming, or could gain access.⁷ As mentioned, IDPs in Iraq also faced challenges linked to perceived affiliation to ISIS (having been displaced from areas that were under ISIS control), which resulted in many identifying authorities as the main barrier in the achievement of a solution to displacement. Reports in Iraq have also indicated that authorities in areas of origin can be unwilling to welcome returnees, for the same reasons.⁸

The ability to make a truly voluntary decision was also questioned in many of the focus groups, with some participants outlining that they felt marginalised by local authorities and therefore pressured to return to their area of origin, and even that the host community and the owners of land hosting displacement camps were harassing them to leave.⁹

A drop off in aid provision was often raised as a cause of feeling that attempting a return home was the only feasible option. This was raised in Aden, Yemen, where women highlighted their dependence on aid assistance to survive, and as this assistance declined and, in some cases, ended, they felt pressured to leave the area of displacement. In Iraq, two male participants displaced to different areas responded, *“absolutely, as support decreased over time”*.

Additionally, and perhaps not surprising in conflict settings but still concerning, numerous IDPs reported feeling treated first as a security threat, especially males under 30, rather than a displaced individual. This made it incredibly challenging for them to access aid assistance and/or markets, and led to them feeling “humiliated” by their treatment, which is far from conducive to achieving a solution to displacement.

⁷ Yearning for a home that no longer exists, DRC and DRC, November 2023 Yearning for a Home that No Longer Exists: The Dilemma Facing People Forced to Flee in Yemen | DRC Danish Refugee Council

⁸ DRC private papers on internal displacement in Iraq.

⁹ Also referenced in Yemen 2024 HNO, Ibid.

SNAPSHOT: IRAQ

Ahmad, a 48-year-old Iraqi farmer displaced from his home, reflects on the profound⁹ challenges faced in a displacement camp, where his farming skills were obsolete. "Loss of occupation and difficulty mastering a new one," he describes, marking the struggle to find a new livelihood amidst economic hardship and social isolation. Health issues for him and his son further complicated their situation and despite the desire to return home, Ahmad confronts significant obstacles.

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The devastation of his home and agricultural lands, turned to desert by conflict and drought, adds to the complexity of returning. Various factors, including employment opportunities, local hostility, and lack of infrastructure, along with a social stigma, pose barriers to a return.

**"I felt joy at the thought of returning... but also sadness because I knew I had lost my home."
-Ahmad**

For Ahmad, a true return means overcoming these challenges, "rebuilding life despite the difficulties we face and the tragedy and loss we have experienced." He calls for comprehensive support, including job opportunities, youth employment projects, infrastructure development, and community peace-building initiatives, as essential for facilitating a return that promises dignity and hope.



CONCLUSION

The personal experiences that were collected for this research indicate that the response to internal displacements across key recent crises in the Middle East has been inconsistent, and therefore validates the ambition of the *Action Agenda* to improve responses to internal displacement.

Protracted conflict weakens the capacities of national and local authorities, while the involvement of those same authorities in conflict can affect how those authorities aim to treat the internally displaced. This can be felt especially at the early stages of displacement when active conflict remains and where young males can be identified first as a security concern rather than a citizen of the country.

Linking these findings with the programme experiences of the organisations involved in this paper, further research on how local authorities are provided resource both by national government and by the international donor community at the onset of displacement would be welcome.

Over time, a reduction in aid assistance can both act as a push factor for involuntary return and lead to tensions arising between host communities and the displaced. Our focus group discussions showed, of course, that each displacement is a personal experience, and host community behaviour is also different in different contexts, with occasions where IDPs identified host communities as being more helpful in offering access to services than local authorities.

However, when it comes to aid assistance, while there were different opinions on the emergency response received, both related to timeliness and appropriateness, there were more consistent negative opinions when it came to the number of assessments and registrations that were needed to receive aid and the ability to influence the response of aid agencies and receive more suitable aid, especially over time.

The experience of IDPs also is different for males and females. Social and gender norms in the Middle East leave women less able to speak to government authorities or aid agencies determining assistance, making it less likely that their different concerns in accessing services – especially in remote locations or outside of daylight hours – are considered in service delivery.

Discussions about future intentions appear limited and focussed on return to area of origin, with almost no mention of discussions with regards to options on integration or resettlement to a third location. While aid agencies may point to challenging political environments to hold such discussions, unless there is a willingness to raise these issues with national and local authorities there is a clear risk that IDPs are left to believe their only options are to remain in displacement (and receiving less support) or attempting a return home, regardless of their willingness to do so.

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