



**CHILD RETURNS
IN IRAQ:
PROSPECTS FOR
DURABLE SOLUTIONS**



Save the Children

Annex 2 – ‘Achieving Durable Solutions for Returnee Children: What Do We Know?’

1

Returns contextualized

Iraq today counts 6.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance as of January 2019, close to half of whom are children.¹ After years of conflict (the invasion of 2003, and civil war since 2014), resulting in 5.8 million displaced people, the Iraqi Government declared victory over the “Islamic State” (ISIS). As territories were retaken, Iraqis who had been displaced internally or further afield began to return. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) notes that “by the end of 2017, the number of people returning to the areas from which they had fled surpassed the number of those displaced by the conflict for the first time since it began”.² In parallel, the ten-year reconstruction plan for Iraq includes a goal “to return all displaced persons to their places of origin.”³ OCHA’s 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview likewise notes that, although “major efforts are underway to rebuild the country and jumpstart local economies”, significant impediments to return persist – including “security concerns, fear and trauma; lack of social cohesion; issues related to documentation; lack of livelihoods; and destroyed or damaged housing”.⁴

As of December 2018, according to IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), some 4.1 million Iraqis had returned, mainly to the governorates of Anbar, Ninewa and Salah ah-Din. In 2018 alone, 944,958 individuals returned to their places of origin, all of whom had been displaced since 2014. Today 1.8 million remain displaced after 2014 and are keen to return to their places of origin.⁵ There are serious concerns, however, about how, when, and where these returns can or should take place. As DTM notes

*There has been much less regard for the ongoing humanitarian needs in places that were destroyed by conflict and are not in any way ready to have people return.*⁶

The legal framework pertaining to children in Iraq is constantly advancing, for instance through finalization and validation of the National Child Protection Policy. The country is also a signatory of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, and other international instruments.⁷ The key actors for supporting returnees include the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Ministry of Displacement and Migration (MoDM) and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA). Are these agencies and organization ensuring that returns are taking place in a manner respectful of child rights?

Using Save the Children’s child-sensitive durable solutions indicator framework, this paper relies on information available on conditions faced by returnees⁸ in Iraq. The indicators shed light on data available, and data gaps, for the returnee population as a whole and child returnees in particular. It summarizes what is known of the condition of children generally, and then analyses conditions of returnee children in Iraq in the prescribed dimensions, and presents recommendations in terms of support needed, and information required to better monitor the adherence to international obligations with respect to child rights. It should be used alongside information regarding associated key drivers of solutions, namely public attitudes, the policy environment, solutions programming in place, as well as the input of the displaced themselves in shaping the policies and programmes designed to benefit them.

2

Return conditions: available information and data gaps

The 4 dimensions of the child-specific durable solutions indicator framework are material, physical and legal safety as well as psychosocial well-being. Each of these dimensions is in turn composed of a number of individual indicators. The following section sheds light on the relevant indicators and dimensions. Where reliable data is available, attention is paid to data disaggregated by migration status and age. In order to ascertain to which degree returnees in general and child returnees specifically, face particular hardship, their status is compared to that of the population as a whole whenever possible. Offering a comprehensive view of the various domains that support the welfare of a child, this indicator framework is designed to help the user understand the extent to which the general environment is conducive to the achievement of durable solutions for children.

This framework was not developed with the objective of assessing protection thresholds, but rather provides a general baseline which can enable prioritized reintegration support, and assist stakeholders in their quest to minimize migration-specific vulnerabilities of young returnees.

Caveat: No primary data was collected for this brief. The data presented is based on a thorough review of the available literature, but does not claim to be exhaustive of all information in the public domain. It was aggregated from different sources which on occasion adopt their own definitions of indicators, and sometimes figures do not cover the entire country but are rather reflective of a particular local context within Iraq. This is pointed out in the text where applicable. Sources are provided for all figures cited.

Physical Safety



States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation.

CDC

Article 19

Civilians in Iraq have been at risk for over a decade, first due to the protracted armed conflict that began in 2003, then over the course of the insurgency and most recently with the emergence of ISIS and the ensuing civil war. UNHCR notes in 2016 that “while some attacks reportedly target security personnel, others appear deliberately aimed at civilians, including in mosques, markets, restaurants.”⁹

Since then, the security situation has improved, but political tension and daily attacks remain the norm.

Protection against violence and abuse

Today, the threats to people’s lives from ongoing ISIS attacks and sporadic clashes continue. The research group Iraqi Body Count (IBC) recorded close to 16,400 violent deaths in 2016, and among those civilian victims who could be identified, 12% were children.¹⁰ NRC reports that returnees’ safety is particularly threatened by violence and retributive acts perpetrated for their perceived links with ISIS. Incidents of vandalizing property and attacks on returnees are common¹¹, and “returnees are sometimes unwelcome by security forces and local authorities who are unwilling to protect people they consider their opponents, or sympathizers with their opponents.”¹²

The rate of domestic violence committed against children is high. According to UNICEF’s *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)* for Iraq in 2011, 79% of children between the ages of 2–14 years were reported to be exposed to at least one form of physical or psychological punishment carried out by their caretakers or other household members. The MICS reported that 28% of children had been subjected to severe physical punishment. The survey further stated that children aged 5–9, from rural areas and those living in poor households were more likely to be exposed to at least one physical and psychological punishment compared to their urban/less poor peers.¹³ UNOCHA reports in 2017 that half of the displaced households lived in communities where domestic violence was a top protection concern.¹⁴

Gender-based violence remains prevalent, with women and girls bearing the brunt of targeted violence. Further, women and children continue to face abuse, violence and exclusion due to perceived links that they may have with ISIS. The UN Secretary General’s *Report on Children and Armed Conflict*, released in 2018, shows that “at least 463 children remained in detention on national security-related charges, including association with armed groups”¹⁶ With the increase of trafficking of refugees and IDPs, 314 potential trafficking cases were investigated by the Government in 2017.¹⁷ The 2017 ‘Trafficking in Persons’ report showed that trafficking networks target refugees and IDPs, operating with assistance from local officials, including judges and border agents.¹⁸

Protection of child rights

Another brutal attack shocked the world in 2016 on the 25th of March, when an IS child recruit detonated his suicide belt in the midst of a trophy award ceremony in Alexandria district, north of Hilla, killing 17 children, some as young as ten years old.

Iraq Body Count

2016 analysis of civilian deaths

Over time children have been used by armed groups in Iraq. Between 2014 and 2017, ISIS alone is thought to have recruited over 2,000 child soldiers (“cubs of the caliphate”) in Iraq and Syria.¹⁹

High rates of household unemployment have forced children to become part of the labor force. UNOCHA reports that 68–75% of children under the age of 15 are working.²⁰ UNICEF notes that the majority of child labor takes place in rural areas. In addition, some 83% of Iraqi children work for their families on a permanent basis as free labor.²¹ IOM in the most recent iteration of its displacement-tracking matrix notes that 40% of returnee families face the risk of child labor.²²

The legal age of marriage in Iraq is 18 for both sexes, but younger children can marry with their parents’ approval. A forced marriage is considered valid once it has been consummated.²³ According to a 2016 UNICEF report, 5% of Iraqi children are married by the age of 15, and 24% by 18.²⁴ For many years, attempts have been made to introduce amendments to the Iraqi personal status law, which would reduce the marriage age from 18, allowing for girls as young as nine to be married with parental approval. Fortunately parliament rejected the proposed amendment in late 2017.

Protection from other incidents

Other factors which might make a context unsafe for minors (as well as adults) to return are natural hazards, and human-made hazards such as landmines. The Global Facility for Disaster Risk Reduction notes that Iraq faces a variety of natural risks, including drought, desertification, floods, sandstorms and earthquakes. Droughts affect 2.4% of the population.²⁵ Located close to a tectonic plate, the country is prone to earthquakes – the latest major earthquake in 2017 on the Iran-Iraq border (magnitude 7.3) claiming over 600 lives, and leaving over 8,000 injured.

Furthermore, explosive remnants of war are a major risk in a number of areas of return that were previously held by ISIS forces. Refugees International notes that “while some clearance has taken place and more is underway, the government – even in partnership with other actors – will be hard-pressed to keep up with the desire of IDPs to simply be at home, regardless of the conditions. Plenty of injuries and fatalities have already occurred in areas of return, and there are almost certainly more that never get reported.”²⁶ Precise figures are lacking, and the 2017 Landmine Monitor stating that significant underreporting of casualties for Iraq appears to be apparent.

Material Safety



Asymmetric attacks by armed groups continue to be carried out along with small scale military operations, resulting in new displacement and impacting the IDP return rate. New sources of instability are also emerging linked to rising poverty rates, delays in community reconciliation, lack of livelihood opportunities, and political and social tensions which cause small-scale new displacement.

Iraq Humanitarian Needs Overview
OCHA, 2019

For the population to enjoy material safety, basic needs in terms of water/sanitation, nutrition, healthcare and shelter need to be covered in line with the minimum SPHERE standards. Particularly for children, access to education must be ensured. For material safety to be long-term, livelihoods must be sustainable.

Now that the combat operations against ISIS in Iraq have ended and hundreds of thousands of people are returning to their communities of origin. Far from over, the humanitarian crisis in Iraq is today entering a new phase. Major efforts are underway to restore electricity, water, sewage, health and educational services, and the economy as a whole.

WASH

A functioning water system is one of the basic services crucial to supporting the return to a normal life.²⁷ IOM reports that drinking water was a critical need for 43% of returnees in Iraq. The primary source of drinking water for households profiled in the 2017 Needs Assessment is an internal private network, as indicated by 79% of host community, 60% of returnees (but less than 60% of in-camp and out-of-camp IDP households).²⁸ Returnee households are more than twice as likely to drink bought bottled water compared to host community households (33% vs 15%), reflecting a lack of access to potable water inside the homes of returnees.^{29,30} With respect to sanitation, although the majority of both host and returnee households assessed by REACH have access to private latrines, there is a gap: 99% vs. 92% respectively.³¹ Save the Children found that in certain towns in both Baiji and Shirqat, up to half of the interviewed returnee households did not have access to a functioning toilet.³²

Nutrition

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) stated in early 2018 that Iraq had lost 40% of its agricultural produce as a result of its war against ISIS. Explosive remnants of conflict affect crop production in many areas of high return. Overall, nutrition has consistently been identified as a priority by all population groups covered by needs assessments in Iraq in recent years. Children affected by conflict suffer disproportionately more from food insecurity and households with a larger number of children tend to be more food insecure than smaller households. Furthermore, the displaced are more likely to be food insecure (7% vs 2%) or vulnerable to food insecurity (66% vs 53%) than the non-displaced.³³ The phenomenon of insufficient nutrition is not universal. REACH found in late 2017 that the majority of host and returnee households overall had an acceptable food consumption score. However, it was also determined that in some newly retaken and conflict areas in Kirkuk, more than half of the non-displaced population and three quarters of returnees did not have sufficient access to food in the seven days preceding data collection.³⁴

Housing

Iraq's population has been increasing dramatically, contributing to rapid urbanization, crowded dwellings and stretched basic services. After years of severe armed conflict, many houses remain destroyed, in poor condition, or, for those who were displaced, occupied. Return to one's area of origin thus does not always mean return to one's original home. However, IOM's October 2017 *Integrated Location Assessment* notes an increase in the number of people returning even if they could not reclaim their original residence (14%).³⁵

Today, the housing situation differs greatly depending on the displacement status of the population in question: 95% of the non-displaced host community live in residential housing compared to only three quarters of the returnee population. The remainder of returnees live in collective centers, indicating a greater vulnerability in terms of settlement conditions.³⁶ The lack of documentation is a contributing factor to tenure insecurity faced by the Iraqi displaced. *"Homes previously destroyed, looted, and burnt stand abandoned during years of absence. Property rights and ownership need to be addressed, particularly because many property owners lost their documentation when IS took over their areas of residence."*³⁷ IOM's latest round of displacement tracking found that 29% of returnees identify housing as an important outstanding need.³⁸ In July 2017, the UK Home Office reported that 16% of displaced Iraqis (or close to 500,000 individuals) currently live in critical shelters such as unfurnished buildings, informal slums or schools and mosques.³⁹

Healthcare

Iraq's once-prestigious healthcare system has suffered dramatic decline over the past decades. Numbers across various surveys reflect this. According to UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), administered by UNICEF and the Iraqi government, the number of immunized children dropped from 60.7% in 2000 to 38.5% in 2006. It bounced back to 46.5% in 2011, but this number was still considerably lower than the rates before the rise of ISIS. Although more recent assessments are somewhat biased by lack of accessibility, REACH reports that vaccination rates are high in accessible areas, with almost all of the interviewed returnee and host households having at least one child in their household with measles and polio vaccinations, while the recently liberated areas remain under-served due to damaged health infrastructure and a shortage of medical professionals.⁴⁰ The latest figure cited by UNICEF regarding the proportion of one-year olds fully immunized against DPT and measles stands at 57–58%.⁴¹ Today, the under-five mortality rate (deaths per 1,000 live births) stands at 32.⁴²

Education

Iraq was one of the most literate nations in the MENA region four decades ago, with free education, and a compulsory education law dating back to the 1970s. However, in 2011, UNICEF reported that 20% of the population was illiterate, with illiteracy among women twice that of men. 40% of children were reportedly dropping out of school before completing their primary school education.⁴³ Today, the impact of the conflict can be clearly felt in the education sector, as evidenced by the poor physical condition of schools.⁴⁴ Returnee and host community households report similar levels of access to formal education (89% and 87% respectively) in areas that were accessible during the last REACH needs assessment. In regards to less accessible areas, a report by Save the Children found that school attendance of returnees was a challenge in both Bajiki and Shirqat: that 22% to 28% of households had children who were not currently attending school, mainly for financial reasons. For those whose children were not in school, returnees were more likely than host communities to state that their children had dropped out of school (55% vs. 21%) as displacement is likely to disrupt the educational trajectory of the displaced. In a report dated December 2016, OCHA stated that *'more than 600,000 displaced children have missed an entire year of education.'*⁴⁵ IOM DTM reports that 38% of returnees consider education to be a critical need.⁴⁶

Livelihoods

The World Bank finds in its April 2018 Economic Outlook for Iraq that although growth is expected to improve thanks to a more favorable security environment, labor market statistics (such as the labor force participation rate of youth aged 15–24 which dropped from 33% in 2014 to 27% in 2018) have suffered dramatic decline and risked deteriorating further. The report finds that the unemployment rate is twice as high in the governorates affected by violence and displacement compared to the rest of the country (21% vs 11%), particularly among the young and uneducated. Other sources estimate the unemployment rate at 20% to 25%. According to the 2016 *Human Development Index*, the labor force participation rate stands at 15% for women and 70% for men. An estimated 40% of the Iraqi workforce is employed by the Government.⁴⁷

The displaced suffer disproportionately from a lack of livelihoods. IOM reports that 80% of returnees in Anbar, for instance, reported access to employment as their most important need. 55% of returnee households reported that they rely on informal commerce or day labor for income, and in 43% of assessed locations across Anbar, most returnees were unemployed.⁴⁸ The poverty rate in Iraq stood at 23% in 2010, dropped to 19% in 2013 and resurged to 23% in 2014.⁴⁹ UNICEF has warned that one in four Iraqi children live in poverty.⁵⁰

Access to electricity

Energy is a cornerstone of Iraq's economy, with oil exports accounting for a significant share of Government revenues and GDP. The World Bank SE4ALL tracking framework deems that in 2015, all of Iraq had access to electricity. Nonetheless, important protests in the summer of 2018 were fueled by rampant electricity cuts, mainly due to Iran (an important provider of electricity to Iraq) cutting supply. OECD / IEA found in 2012 that around 90% of Iraqi households supplement the public network with private generators.⁵¹

Legal Safety



Within the dimension of legal safety, child-appropriate durable solutions imply that the population of concern has some kind of legal identity/civil documentation. Society does everything in its power to keep children and parents from being separated, and to reunite them should such need arise. People feel that they have access to fair justice mechanisms, and their movement is not restricted.

Civil documentation

Without documentation in Iraq populations cannot access services from the government and relief organisations, register for food distribution, get permission to travel, or register births and marriages (thus perpetuating the phenomenon across generations). Many of the displaced either left their personal documentation behind when they fled, lost it *en route*, or saw it destroyed. The process to have their papers replaced is slow and often has to be initiated in Baghdad, which is out of reach for many (particularly as lack of documents hampers freedom of movement). According to UNHCR, close to half of all displaced Iraqis need assistance in getting new civil documents. The 2017 *Protection Monitoring Report* notes that children in Anbar who were born during the recent civil war sometimes have no legal documents of any kind.

This is a common phenomenon in Mosul, Anbar, Salah al Din and Kirkuk, as both Government of Iraq and Kurdish Regional Government authorities do not accept documentation issued by ISIS. Furthermore, “in several governorates, the Child Protection team has identified families hosting separated children without having custody papers, thus preventing the family from issuing IDs and medical cards for the children.”⁵⁴

Family (re)unification

In a complex emergency like Iraq's, there are many instances in which families are separated, both involuntarily and voluntarily, for instance with members of returnee families being left behind at locations of displacement. In its latest displacement tracking assessment, IOM notes that children, in particular boys, are left behind in 40% of assessed locations of displacement, particularly in Diyala, Ninewa and Salah al Din.⁵⁵ UNICEF reports that over 4,600 children have been separated from their families due to displacement dynamics.⁵⁶ Save the Children's assessment of returnees in Salah-Al-Din finds that 17% of interviewed households in Baiji are aware of unaccompanied children in their community. Family reunification services are currently mainly offered by international organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)/ the Iraqi Red Crescent Society.

Justice mechanism

The Constitution of Iraq confirms that litigation is a right guaranteed and protected for all.⁵⁷ The Child Rights International Network (CRIN) notes in 2015 that the country's juvenile justice system is focused on the prevention of delinquency and the rehabilitation of juveniles that find themselves in such a situation, but that “it remains unclear (...) just how effective this system is in practice.”⁵⁸ IOM DTM's 2017 *Integrated Location Assessment* finds that legal services are the least accessible of all services: nearly 30% of the returnee populations in assessed locations did not benefit from access to judicial institutions.⁵⁹ A UNDP survey found in 2017 that 22% of the interviewed population in five governorates considered an improvement in access to justice as a priority.⁶⁰

Freedom of movement

Freedom of movement in Iraq is respected under the Iraqi Constitution. Article 44(1) states that “each Iraqi has freedom of movement, travel and residence inside and outside of Iraq”. In practice, this freedom is a reality for some, but not others. Women require the consent of a male guardian to obtain a passport and their freedom of movement in the public realm is de facto curtailed in many areas.⁶¹ Furthermore, Human Rights Watch and many others have repeatedly raised the issue of unlawful restrictions on the freedom of movement of displaced people in Iraq.

Instances of forcible relocations into camps were recorded by UNHCR in 2016⁶². It should be noted that once in the camp, leaving is only possible with special permissions, a sponsor and valid documents, which many do not possess. This absence of freedom of movement in the camp which contributes to reduced quality of life, dignity and access to services is considered a major push factor towards precipitated returns.⁶³ On the other hand, even the freedom of return is not consistently guaranteed: as reported in the June 2017 *Protection Monitoring Report*, in Anbar and Salah Al Din, “a significant number of households are being prevented from return based on suspicion of affiliation of one of their family members to ISIL[ISIS].”⁶⁴

Mental health and psychosocial safety



Facilitators also noted that many children showed no signs of enjoying themselves or laughing during the focus group discussions, as if they had lost the ability to be children.

Save the Children
2016⁶⁵

In order for child-sensitive durable solutions to be ensured, mental health requires particular attention. Any child-friendly return environment must feature spaces where children can safely socialize and thrive. Children must be respected as part of the community and, free from discrimination, have a sense of inclusion. Reconciliation programs should be available to those wishing to benefit from them. Children with special needs or suffering from mental health disorders/trauma have a right to benefit from adequate care.

Nurturing environment

UNICEF reports in 2016 that Iraq’s National Child Protection System suffers from weak institutional capacity. “Protective space and access to safe recreational play for children in IDP camps, informal tented settlements, and other temporary shelters.”⁶⁶ An SCI-led multi-sector needs assessment in Salah al Din found that only 2% of interviewed households in Shirqat and 8% of households interviewed in Baiji knew of safe places outside of the home where children could go during the day. The March 2017 *Protection Monitoring Report* reveals that in one assessed location some women “struggling to deal with the behavior of their children in confined quarters were starting to beat their children.”⁶⁷

Punctual needs assessments might well generate valuable insights into the subjective perceptions of independence, inclusion and discrimination held by children (and, for that matter, adults). However, overall data speaking to these important indicators does not currently exist. It is clear from Save the Children’s Anbar needs assessment however that there are hardly any places children can go to with problems.

Community and family support, professional support

Some of the greatest sources of vulnerability and suffering in situations of conflict and displacement arise from the complex emotional, social and physical effects. It is essential to locally organize appropriate mental health and psychosocial support that promote self-help, coping and resilience among affected people. Conflict, displacement, violence and a climate of fear, have contributed to increased mental illness in Iraq.

ICRC notes in the context of an assessment in Western Anbar that “psychological distress, anxiety, nervousness, and negative coping strategies are widespread throughout all groups and are particularly acute amongst adolescent boys.”⁶⁸ Save the Children’s needs assessment in Salah Al Din finds that indicators of psycho-social distress in children were alarmingly high, with over four children out of ten suffering from trouble sleeping and nightmares, and over 30% plagued by anxiety. In spite of the clear need, the country has an acute shortage of psychologists that can meet the population’s mental health care needs.⁶⁹ In 2010 it was estimated that there were only 200 psychologists in the country, few of whom were trained in treating war related mental disorders. It can be assumed that today there are fewer.⁷⁰

3 Conclusions

From an overall perspective, Iraq holds the prospective to develop into a sustainable return scenario with the opportunities for positive development. However, stakeholders on the ground have pointed out that many of the returns currently taking place in Iraq are premature, and do not meet standards of dignity, safety and voluntariness.⁷¹ Indeed, as the number of premature returns increases, so too does the number of people pushed into secondary displacement. Mosul camp returnee monitoring data provides corroborating evidence, with recent data showing 10% of attempted returnees ending up back in camps and 25% of the remainder in secondary displacement.⁷² It thus appears that returns, in many cases, do not constitute a “durable solution”.

What makes for a voluntary, safe and dignified return in the Iraq context, particularly when children are involved? As this case study has illustrated, returns in Iraq cannot uniformly be considered safe. A localized and area based understanding must inform key interventions and support the approach. Returns often happen quickly after cessation of hostilities, with areas still not cleared of explosives and significant local tension threatening social cohesion. While most returns do appear to be voluntary, anecdotes point to the possibility of some returns being forced by the closure of IDP camps. Given the overall lack of information, returns cannot be considered well-informed and the promise of return incentives prompts many displaced households to return to areas not yet conducive to permanent returns in terms of habitability. Furthermore, the lack of documentation faced by the displaced in Iraq constitutes an obstacle to a dignified returns process.

The crucial mental health component is understudied in the Iraqi context. The health chapter of the SPHERE minimum standards contains a brief section on mental health, calling for “*access to health services that prevent or reduce mental health problems and associated impaired functioning.*”⁷³ It is possible to ascertain, based on scarce, dated and local (rather than overall) available data, that the available mental health capacity in terms of staffing and facilities does not meet the overall needs of the population.

In addition, the summary of available data shows considerable data gaps in regards to the status of children, and the status of child returnees in particular, along a range of important dimensions. A more comprehensive mapping of returnee needs and local contexts is needed to make tailored reintegration programs more effective. Monitoring and evaluation of returnee outcomes is also needed to better understand what works and in which contexts. Where monitoring is not feasible due to conflict and insecurity, returns should not be occurring.

The following steps are recommended with a view to allowing the international community to compile the information necessary to achieving durable solutions:

- It is difficult, based on available data, to compare the vulnerabilities of the displaced with those of the general population. Similarly, additional risks related to disabilities or to unaccompanied minors have been difficult to ascertain from existing data sets. Data collection should adopt a displacement focus, and data collection instruments should be standardized. Once collected, raw (anonymized) data should be shared among stakeholders rather than just presented in a report in the form of summary statistics.

- Respecting the Age, Gender and Diversity approach, information must be collected and presented disaggregated by age – lest the plight of the most vulnerable become lost in the aggregate of the population as a whole, or (in the case of selected areas and selected indicators) the returnee population as a whole.
- Child-sensitive indicators must feature more prominently in future rounds of data collection targeting both the displaced, and the population as a whole. While some relevant metrics (such as trafficking, child recruitment etc.) suffer from notorious underreporting, many are measurable and should be collected as a matter of course, by all, disaggregated by migration status and age. Those include the prevalence of child labor and child marriage, child malnutrition and school attendance rates, as well as data on the prevalence of children without any type of legal documentation.

These minimum standards currently only exist (in a measurable fashion) in one of the two realms covered by the child-sensitive durable solutions indicators: the SPHERE standards represent the most widely known and internationally recognized set of common principles and universal minimum standards in life-saving areas of humanitarian response and then additionally the UNHCR protection thresholds.

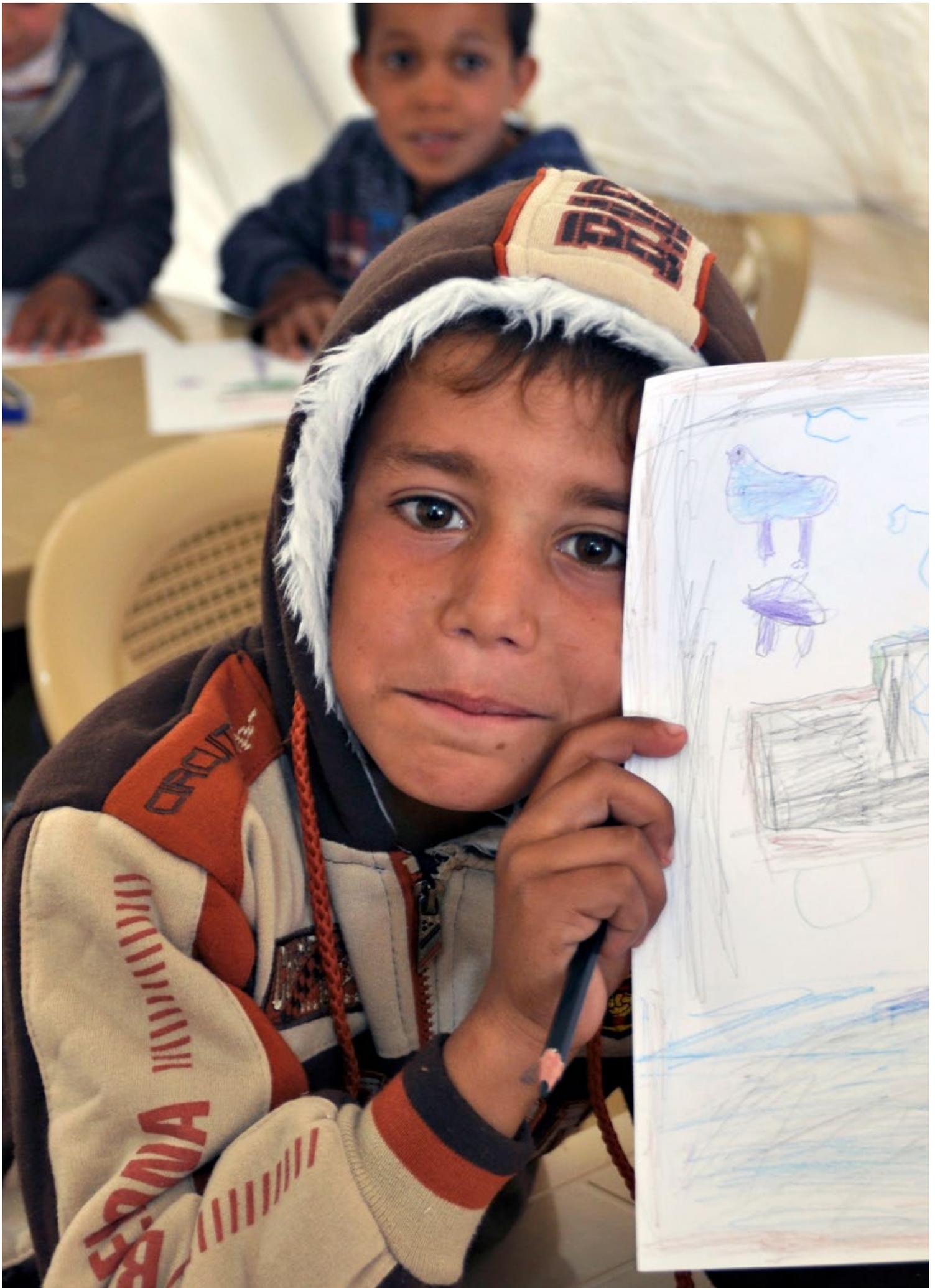
However, across all four domains of physical safety, material safety, legal safety and mental health, it remains difficult to determine how the displaced fare with respect to the host population, and if this forms the basis of a longer-term integrated solutions. The exact point at which a solution has indeed been reached is not universally agreed upon – this lack of specificity is also apparent in the context of Iraq. It is recommended that a monitoring scheme be developed which standardizes the generation of relevant ‘solutions’ data. Such data, disaggregated by age and migration status, should inform a broad stakeholder dialogue (including humanitarian and development actors along with Government, regional administrations and local authorities) on the topic of minimum standards in the Iraq returns environment.

Finally, differences in the different dimensions are subject to considerable regional disparities though this does not clearly show from this analysis. This calls for area-based solutions to displacement affected communities, and urgently needed more granular research particularly in the regions where high returns numbers have happened – enabling pragmatic advocacy, locally anchored response strategies and programming inclusive of and accountable to returnees, IDPs and host communities. Iraq poses a setting where we are able to make reintegration sustainable for all children.

Endnotes

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- 8 Nota bene: The distinction between different groups of displaced populations such as the internally displaced, refugee returnees, is particularly uncertain in the Iraq context. If, in other contexts, the term 'returnee' refers to a return to the country of origin across international borders, in the Iraq context both IOM and UNHCR refer to the millions of internally displaced who are deemed to have returned to the sub-district (though not necessarily the exact location) of former residence as returnees. This short piece focuses on IDP returnees and refugee returnees, with the understanding that given that many of the returnee households try, and fail to, re-settle in their original homestead, and might thus de facto be considered secondarily displaced / returnee-IDPs.
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Save the Children

Published by

Save the Children International
St Vincent's House
30 Orange Street
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+44 (0)20 3272 0300
www.savethechildren.net

First published September 2019

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