

Child Protection Sub-Cluster: Co-coordinator Kirkuk Mission Report
27 – 30 July, 2015

July 27-30, 2015, the Child Protection Sub-Cluster Co-coordinator for Iraq was in Kirkuk to learn about the current situation in the child protection and its coordination. In Kirkuk the Child Protection Sub-Cluster Co-coordinator met with OCHA/UNAMI, IMC, SCI, Mercy Corps, CDO, MEDIA, the Kirkuk based Protection Cluster Coordinator and the Shelter/NFI and CCCM Focal points. She also conducted a field visit in an unfinished house with 2 IDP families in Tarklan. This note summarizes key findings and issues identified during the trip. It also provides recommendations to address them. To be commended is the hard-work of the humanitarian community in Kirkuk and their commitment to serve the people and children affected by the conflict in such a difficult and challenging operating environment.

Overview of Current Situation

Throughout the crisis, the Kirkuk governorate has seen continuous influxes of IDPs particularly from Anbar and Salah-Al Din and from what today are ISIS controlled areas. As of July 02, IOM-DTM figures report the total number of displaced populations stands at 63,613 IDPs families (381,702 individuals) accounting for an estimated 12% of the overall displaced population in Iraq. MODM Kirkuk reports 110,000 IDP families (600,000 individuals). While movements into Kirkuk continue, including through internal displacement, IOM-DTM also indicates a number of return movements from Kirkuk, mainly to Tikrit. Continuous movement in and from Kirkuk is expected to continue.

While no detailed profiling exists, amongst those displaced there is assumed to be a high number of female-headed households who fled ISIS-controlled territories together with their children. It is likely some of these women and children paid middlemen to facilitate their movements, and that during the journey some might have been exposed to violence.

Entry of IDPs from Salah-Al Din and Anbar into Kirkuk is through a checkpoint located south of Daquq. IDPs face security screening at the checkpoint. No humanitarian actors are allowed at the checkpoint. This makes it difficult to monitor the situation, profile those who enter, and where needed provide ad-hoc assistance to vulnerable children, including identification of unaccompanied and separated minors. Not all IDPs are allowed entrance. It is unclear on what grounds people are denied entry.

Access to assistance and services is limited to IDPs who have been registered. Although no estimates are available, it is reported some IDPs are not registered. Some of these are women and children. There are many challenges with registration including a general fear of IDPs who are associated with ISIS. This is not limited to men. Women and children who flee alone may leave immediate family and other relatives behind, including their husbands and fathers. This leads to suspicion about their potential association with ISIS. Sometimes these suspicions lead to the inability to register as IDPs.

It seems that in the last weeks there has been an increased rate of forced returns for IDPs who are not registered and that do not live in camps. Forced returns are also being expanded to registered IDPs through the confiscations of their documents, including women and children.

Without access to registration IDPs are not allowed to receive services. For those who are registered, economic and livelihood options remain limited. This increases their likelihood of resorting to negative coping mechanisms. It was noted that, as a result, some women, including some girls below the age of 18, might be resorting to sexual labor as a means of survival. This further increases their risk to violence and exploitation. It also exacerbates social tensions and stigmatization.

An increasing number of children are reported to be involved in child labor. Children appear to suffer from trauma and psychosocial distress due to their exposure to war, unsafe and insecure travel conditions, and current living conditions in displacement.

In Kirkuk, an estimated 67% of IDPs live either in rented houses or with host families, 3% live in camps, and the remaining 30% live in informal settlements including unfinished buildings and religious and school buildings. Some of the unfinished buildings host three or more families. Many are located in the south of Kirkuk, and in areas that are generally more unsafe, closer to the front lines and where availability of services is limited. During a home-visit in a Tarklan village, it was noted four women, including one lactating mother, were living with a man and eight young children in an unfinished building. One of the children appeared malnourished. The man did not work.

Given the current conditions, children are vulnerable to violence and exploitation including recruitment into armed groups.

Mission Finding Based on Mission Objectives

1. Understand child protection interventions, and related gaps and areas of duplication:

Save the Children International (SCI), International Medical Corps (IMC), and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) are the main child protection actors in the Kirkuk governorate. SCI has an established presence in Kirkuk and runs child protection interventions through six CFSs, three located in Kirkuk town and three located in surrounding villages. IMC covers child protection in Laylan camp through one CFS and one YFS. CRS has a presence in Kirkuk but no established programs. A number of national NGOs also carry out protection and child protection interventions, including providing legal aid.

While there are no areas of duplication, current child protection interventions rely on static CFSs. Although important and beneficial, the lack of more mobile interventions make it difficult to ensure monitoring of the overall situation of displaced children in Kirkuk. This could result in needs not being identified, assessed and met.

The limited presence of child protection actors in proximity to entry/exit checkpoints challenges the ability of child protection actors to monitor and report on the nature and patterns of children's movements. It is also very hard to provide assistance to children in immediate need, including identification of unaccompanied and separated children.

Recommendations:

- Map out hard-to-reach and hotspot areas;
- Increase mobile child protection units to monitor the situation of children, provide children protection by presence, and ensure the needs of children are identified, addressed and met in a timely manner;
- Set up screening desk and rapid-response child protection teams, particularly in proximity of checkpoints to ensure the needs of vulnerable children, including unaccompanied and separated children are identified and met upon arrival.
- Consider integrating child rapid response protection teams to existing rapid protection response teams;
- Increase number and presence of qualified child protection staff to ensure quality in the child protection and provision of technical guidance and support; and,
- Build on existing capacities and strengthen collaboration with national organizations to ensure continuous access to monitoring and information, particularly in hard-to-reach, hot-spot areas.

2. Understand coordination structures and capacities related to child protection including coordination groups and focal points:

At the moment child protection actors meet and discuss child protection-related issues at the Kirkuk Protection Cluster. Through the Kirkuk Protection Cluster issues related to the child protection are raised, but in-depth discussion on child protection issues are limited because of the overwhelming number of protection concerns present in the governorate.

In Kirkuk there is no established Child Protection Sub-Cluster coordinator/focal point, and child protection actors do not have a fora where they can come together and work as a group. This makes it difficult to systematically share information, identify gaps, set up priorities, and mobilize a timely and effective response. Lack of an established child protection sub-cluster in Kirkuk also challenges information flow and coordination with the existing nation-wide child protection sub-cluster mechanisms, further increasing the gap between governorate level interventions and broader national strategies. While it is never a good idea to create new coordination groups without ample justification, considering the severity of the situation in Kirkuk, the size of the caseload, and the comparatively easy access to the governorate, there may be merit in establishing a group dedicated to child protection.

Recommendations:

- Identify a Kirkuk-based child protection working group coordinator. Consider SCI to take on this function, including through the nomination of an interim focal point until the deployment of a technical, qualified child protection staff member;
 - Provide the Child Protection Working Group Coordinator with a sample ToR and a basic training/orientation on coordination, to ensure he/she has a clear understanding of the role and is equipped with the basic tools and knowledge necessary to take over this function.
 - Establish a Kirkuk-based child protection working group where child protection actors can meet, systematically share information, identify gaps, establish priorities, and mobilize a response; and,
 - Establish mechanism to ensure regular information sharing between the Kirkuk based and the National Child Protection Sub-Cluster.
3. To review child protection coordination information management practices and gaps, and identify capacity building needs as they relate to Activity Info, data collection and recording:

Information management practices and gaps were not reviewed during this mission. However, it appears most child protection actors, particularly national NGOs, do not report their activities on ActivityInfo. Some lack capacity and others seem not to be familiar with the system.

Recommendation:

- Child Protection Sub-Cluster Information management to follow up on information management gaps and practices in Kirkuk.
4. Understand inter-cluster coordination mechanisms as they relate to child protection, particularly cross-cutting issues, inter-sector interventions, and broader protection issues:

The inter-cluster group in Kirkuk meets on a regular basis. Two UNAMI national staff members represent OCHA and assume inter-cluster coordination functions. The CCCM, Education, and Shelter/NFIs Clusters have established focal points. The Protection Cluster has an established group. UNHCR coordinates that group through an internationally appointed protection officer. Inter-cluster coordination efforts are however challenged by the limited availability of staff, resources, and cluster capacities. For the Protection Cluster, restrictions on movements also challenge effective monitoring of its responses.

Despite current operational challenges, existing inter-cluster efforts prove to be an effective entry point to further integrate child protection interventions and maximize broader child protection efforts.

Recommendations

- Establish clear coordination mechanisms between the Kirkuk-based child protection sub-cluster and the Kirkuk Protection Cluster to maximize broader efforts and promote integrated responses; and,
- Build on existing coordination efforts to ensure Child Protection is represented at the inter-cluster level and that linkages are strengthened with the existing groups, including CCCM and Education.