



# LINKING CVA AND SOCIAL PROTECTION IN THE MENA REGION

IRAQ CASE STUDY

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

**Background:** Since 2014, cash assistance has assumed a growing significance in the international humanitarian response for refugees, IDPs, returnees and host communities, with a gradual trend towards consolidation and harmonisation of cash assistance, through adoption of multi-purpose grants and harmonisation of delivery through consortia. Alongside this the government of Iraq has committed to develop a safety net system and the Social Protection Network (SPN) has become established as the country's main cash based social transfer programme. There is acknowledgement by government and non-government actors that responsibility for delivery of assistance should gradually transition from humanitarian actors to government where possible.

**Linking CVA and social protection:** Since 2018, development and humanitarian partners and government have come together to develop a road map for the way forward on linking CVA and social protection. A workshop convened by DFID and the World Bank, and a subsequent inter-agency scoping study managed by WFP, have recognised that the government's SPN programme is best placed to meet the needs of conflict-affected households that are vulnerable to future shocks or poverty. Furthermore, overlap in the targeting models for the SPN and assistance provided by humanitarian actors can provide a starting point to align CVA with social protection and support a gradual transition of the humanitarian caseload onto the government programme.

### MAIN LESSONS FROM THE IRAQ EXPERIENCE:

**Political and legal aspects can enable or constrain this approach:** In Iraq there was already demonstrable government support for use of cash modalities, and social protection was a strategic priority of the government in the national development plan, creating an enabling environment for discussion on these issues. On the other hand, changes to the government in 2018 contributed to delays in moving forward with action planning.

**Entry points:** There can still be entry points to build linkages between CVA and social protection in displacement contexts, even where national social protection systems are still emerging. In this case, aligning humanitarian CVA with the social protection system provides a route to transition some of the current humanitarian caseload to ensure that over time needs of the chronically poor and vulnerable are more sustainably and predictably met by government. In a departure from their 'traditional' role as 'implementers', humanitarian actors can also act as 'enablers' to develop the wider capacity of these national systems and programmes.

**There are risks as well as benefits to linking:** Operationalising this vision requires strong systems and processes for data management between the actors involved, and a willingness to share data. The multiplicity of humanitarian actors, each with their own data management system and fields makes it difficult to consolidate a humanitarian case load to refer to. There are no protocols for data sharing between government and humanitarian actors, leading to inefficiencies, duplication and gaps.

**Coordination across organisations and disciplines is needed:** Progress to date has been heavily influenced by improvements to coordination that have been achieved at all levels. Donors emerged as a key player driving the necessary coordination both operationally and at policy level. To improve coordination of activities 'across the nexus' and support the above vision, the government and humanitarian actors set up the Iraq Social Protection Forum (SPF) in late 2018.

**Progress requires a longterm vision and financing across the nexus:** To effect the changes needed requires commitment, and investment, over the medium to long term. At the same time, funding from humanitarian donors is declining. NGOs have advocated for continued humanitarian funding while national social protection systems remain under-developed .

## BACKGROUND TO THE CONTEXT

Over the past six years, Iraq has been dealing with a protracted and complex crisis. The cross-border impacts of the conflict in Syria, the ISIS insurgency in 2014–17 and macroeconomic shocks have contributed to cycles of unrest and displacement and to a deepening of poverty and food insecurity, especially for displaced households.<sup>1</sup> In the absence of a well-developed social protection system, the international humanitarian response in Iraq has been addressing the needs of households affected by the displacement.

Since 2014, cash assistance has assumed a growing significance in the response for refugees, IDPs, returnees and host communities, with a solid evidence base emerging to support its efficacy in meeting a range of basic needs. There has been a gradual trend towards consolidation and harmonisation of cash assistance, through i) adoption of multi-purpose grants (MPG), which have become the core transfer instrument to meet multiple needs, complemented by additional transfers for specific needs,<sup>2</sup> and ii) collaboration of INGOs implementing CVA to work together (Cash Consortium for Iraq (CCI)) with the aim of building a harmonised approach to Multipurpose Cash Assistance (MPCA) delivery, fostering closer operational coordination, and expanding geographic reach.<sup>3</sup> Multipurpose Cash (MPC) provided by humanitarian actors has remained short-term in nature, essentially designed as an emergency response. While making a valuable contribution to fulfilling a households' immediate survival needs, this is recognised as not being the most effective or sustainable form of assistance in a protracted crisis, to address what are in many cases long-term or chronic needs.

Establishing an effective safety net system has been a strategic priority of the Government of Iraq (GoI) and development partners since 2012, and prior to the insurgency progress was being made, for example the adoption of a Social Protection Law, and efforts to reform the Social Protection Network (SPN), the country's main cash-based social transfer programme.<sup>4</sup> Since 2014, the fall in oil prices and escalation of conflict constrained efforts to reform targeting, improve efficiency and expand coverage of social protection.

There is widespread acknowledgement among government and non-government actors that responsibility for delivery of assistance to households should gradually transition from humanitarian actors to government, with humanitarian action continuing to support short-term and acute needs. While Iraq continues to be ranked amongst the most fragile states in the world,<sup>5</sup> the situation is gradually improving. Since late 2017 this has enabled the GoI and humanitarian actors to focus on developing more durable solutions. This commitment is reflected in the priorities of the National Development Plan and Poverty Reduction Strategy 2018–22.<sup>6</sup>

## LINKING CVA AND SOCIAL PROTECTION – THE STORY SO FAR

Prior to 2018 there were already efforts on the part of humanitarian cash actors to link with the national social protection system – albeit in an ad hoc and uncoordinated way. For example, since 2015, UNICEF was working through the social welfare officers of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) in one governorate (Dohuk) and 'piggybacking' on these institutions to implement humanitarian CVA there.<sup>7</sup> The CCI also piloted a mechanism that provided assistance to displaced households needing to access civil documentation and then referring these cases to government social protection. UNHCR also worked in partnership with government departments to support displaced households to establish their legal identity and access government services

<sup>1</sup> Khan and Clerici (2019). World Bank estimates that poverty rate among displacement-affected populations (38%) is nearly twice as high as the rest of the population, whereas, according to Multi Cluster Needs Assessment data, up to 2.8 million people in the country are considered to be vulnerable.

<sup>2</sup> Khan and Clerici (2019). Since 2015, there has been a specific chapter in the Humanitarian Response Plan for MPC.

<sup>3</sup> Oxfam Iraq (2018).

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF (2017); WFP (2019).

<sup>5</sup> Khan and Clerici (2019).

<sup>6</sup> The new Poverty Reduction Strategy 2018–22 prioritises safety net reform and development, including improving coverage of the poor and vulnerable, reforming inefficient programmes, developing common systems for data-sharing, identifying chronic and temporary needs, scaling up support for those affected by disasters, and engaging with non-governmental actors on implementation (WFP 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Smith (2017); UNICEF (2017).

and social benefits.<sup>8</sup> In late 2017, dialogue on building linkages between humanitarian cash assistance and social protection to foster durable solutions began to gather momentum and to become more focused at the national level, and the response as a whole.

First, donors in the country came together in a strategic effort to improve the coordination, harmonisation and effectiveness of humanitarian cash programming in Iraq, including linking humanitarian cash assistance to Gol's social protection systems.<sup>9</sup>

In January 2018, WFP organised a workshop for humanitarian actors to begin a dialogue on how to improve data interoperability across CVA programmes.

In April 2018, DFID in partnership with the World Bank and MoLSA convened a two-day workshop that brought together representatives from government and international humanitarian organisations to develop a road map for the way forward on linking CVA and social protection.<sup>10</sup> It was recognised that MoLSA's SPN cash transfer programme was best placed to meet the needs of conflict-affected households vulnerable to future shocks or poverty. Details were shared of the respective proxy means test (PMT) targeting models used by MoLSA on the SPN, and by the CCI and other Cash Working Group (CWG) members on humanitarian MPC programmes. These models were found to have a significant degree of overlap in criteria, suggesting that these schemes presented a good starting point for future efforts to **align** CVA with social protection. An Action Plan identified key actions to move forward with linkages, including in targeting, referrals and information management.<sup>11</sup>

A scoping study in 2018 managed by the World Food Programme (WFP)<sup>12</sup> subsequently built upon this to further develop concrete options for alignment. This study mapped the major government safety net schemes and humanitarian transfer programmes operating in Iraq, comparing coverage and capacities, design and implementation features, and complementarity between schemes. It concluded that reforms of the SPN have established it as the 'core safety net' programme in the emerging national system. It concluded that **aligning** MPC programmes of humanitarian actors with the SPN can support a gradual transition of the humanitarian caseload onto the government programme, providing a long-term support mechanism for the most vulnerable displaced beyond the short duration of the current MPC programming cycle, creating exit pathways for humanitarian actors, while contributing to national system development. It also recommended that reforms to the targeting, transfer value and delivery of the Public Distribution System (PDS) could make it more accessible and relevant to the needs of the vulnerable and displaced. It highlighted several actions that humanitarian actors should undertake to enable these changes, including **aligning** targeting approaches and criteria between MPC programmes and the SPN, establishing system interoperability and unique identifiers to facilitate data-sharing, seeking consent from MPC beneficiaries for sharing of their data with MoLSA, capacity building for MoLSA social workers, supporting IDPs to replace lost ration cards and re-register for PDS in their new locations, and supporting the Gol to revise the food basket MEB.<sup>13</sup>

Since then, various actions have taken place to move this agenda of 'responsible transition to the SPN' forward. The CCI Technical Working Group undertook a review of its MPC targeting model and collaborated with UNHCR, World Bank, REACH and the CWG to develop and test a revised PMT for targeting future CVA. This adds new indicators with the aim to align with targeting on the SPN, to 'pre-identify' households that are likely to be eligible for government assistance and facilitate future transition to the national scheme.<sup>14</sup> The new models were approved by the CWG in October 2018, to be adopted by humanitarian cash actors in January 2019. UNICEF have invested in capacity building for social welfare officers in areas such as data collection, targeting on humanitarian CVA, case management and complaints management. The CCI is continuing to assist displaced households to recover missing civil documentation. It is hoped that the establishment of a Joint Data Centre between the World Bank Group and UNHCR can be the foundation for the data harmonisation that is needed.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>8</sup> DFID Iraq (2017).

<sup>9</sup> DFID Iraq (2017).

<sup>10</sup> DFID Iraq (2018b); DFID Iraq (2018a).

<sup>11</sup> Oxfam Iraq (2018).

<sup>12</sup> This was under an EC Technical Assistance Facility operational in nine countries facing protracted crises, including Iraq. The aim of the facility was to explore how social protection systems can be strengthened in fragile and forced displacement contexts, to address humanitarian needs in a more cost-effective, efficient and predictable way.

<sup>13</sup> WFP (2019).

<sup>14</sup> Oxfam Iraq (2018).

<sup>15</sup> Khan and Clerici 2019).

# LESSONS FROM EXPERIENCE

## POLITICAL FACTORS CAN ENABLE AND CONSTRAIN THIS APPROACH

The Iraq experience highlights the different ways that political factors can influence progress in this space, both positively and negatively. There was already demonstrable government support for use of cash modalities, which were widely used in humanitarian operations as well as in the national social protection system. Another key enabler is the policy measures undertaken by government, as set out in the national development plan and poverty reduction strategy, which create the enabling environment for discussion on these issues. On the other hand, the elections and changes to the government in 2018 contributed to delays in moving forward with action planning. There may also be political barriers to reforming the PDS, given vested interests at stake.

## ENTRY POINTS

The Iraq experience highlights that there can still be entry points to building linkages between CVA and social protection in displacement contexts, even where national social protection systems are still emerging. In this case, alignment of humanitarian CVA with the social protection system provides a route to transition some of the current humanitarian caseload to ensure that, over time, the needs of the chronically poor and vulnerable are more sustainably and predictably met by government, while humanitarian needs are addressed in a more efficient and predictable way.<sup>16</sup> Humanitarian actors have various entry points to support this transition. In a departure from their 'traditional' role as 'implementers', humanitarian actors can also act as 'enablers' to develop the wider capacity of these national systems and programmes. The WFP scoping study provides several suggestions including:

- Targeting: aligning targeting approaches used on MPC programmes with the SPN, based on the proxy means test.
- Providing MPCs as 'transitional assistance' to bridge the income gap while eligible households await access to government benefits<sup>17</sup>.
- Improving the data management systems used on national social protection programmes.
- Capacity building for social worker, bringing in capacity support from UN agencies and cwg partners
- Subject to government funding, supporting a scale up of SPN coverage through assisting in the registration process.
- Cleaning and de-duplication of records and consolidating these to contribute to an emerging social registry of households, for use on other government and partner programmes (both long-term social protection and emergency).

The Socio-Economic Vulnerability Assessment Tool (SEVAT) for identifying vulnerable households for MPC looks at multidimensional vulnerability and can therefore facilitate cross-sectoral referrals. Besides identifying people in need of MPC it can also identify severely vulnerable households in need of other specific humanitarian assistance. Besides identifying those that are eligible for the SPN, it can identify those that are ineligible but still vulnerable, who can be supported in other ways (by the humanitarian system or other future government programmes).<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to other countries in the region, where discussion and activity, in this space has been dominated by donors and UN agencies, in Iraq there are entry points for a multiplicity of actors, including INGOs. NGOs, through the CCI, have retained a larger stake in the design and delivery of the cash component of the humanitarian response and are as a result more directly involved in any transition strategy. While certain donors and UN agencies have played a lead role (DFID has been a key player, while the ECHO-funded technical assistance is implemented by UN organisations), the process itself and the resulting action plans have been inclusive. Indeed, the work of the CCI prior to 2018 set essential foundations for this approach by promoting harmonised design and implementation of CVA.

<sup>16</sup> WFP (2019).

<sup>17</sup> Since MPCs is considered as a transitional assistance, adequate funding would be required to cover current and expanded SMEB/MPCA and the time interval before recipients might move to SMEB.

<sup>18</sup> Oxfam Iraq (2018); WFP (2019).

## BE AWARE OF THE RISKS AND LIMITATIONS AS WELL AS THE BENEFITS OF ALIGNMENT

There is clear consensus emerging in Iraq of the potential for humanitarian actors to contribute to national social protection system development by aligning with the SPN. At the same time, WFP's scoping study, as well as other literature, have highlighted certain challenges with this approach, which must also be borne in mind:

- Operationalising this vision requires strong systems and processes for data management between the actors involved, and a willingness to share data. The multiplicity of humanitarian actors, each with their own data management system and fields, makes it difficult to consolidate a humanitarian caseload to refer to.<sup>19</sup> There are no protocols for data-sharing between government and humanitarian actors, leading to inefficiencies, duplication and gaps.<sup>20</sup>
- The focus to date is on the SPN, as the 'natural counterpart' to the poverty-targeted basic assistance provided through MPC by humanitarian organisations. On the one hand this programme is the most well developed and is the logical locus around which actors can coalesce, and it is important not to be too ambitious and risk overburdening the national system with multiple simultaneous initiatives. On the other hand, the WFP scoping study recognises that effective social protection systems 'layer' programmes to address poverty and vulnerability throughout the lifecycle. There is a risk that this focus on the SPN reduces attention of government and partners on the need for progress towards a broader national vision of a social protection floor, with a range of transfers alongside access to services to different groups according to their needs. The WFP scoping study highlights that humanitarian actors can help to support development of a foundational social register which can form the basis of a future SPF.<sup>21</sup>
- Capacity gaps in the SPN can undermine progress towards the necessary reforms. Access to the SPN is currently limited by short application windows, mainly due to concerns about fiscal capacity. A rolling application is needed to support population of a social registry. To do this will require significant investment in the social worker network. The SPN is also not operational in newly liberated areas. Actors need a strong communications strategy, to manage expectations of households that are included in the waiting list. Expanding coverage of the SPN requires more financial resources.<sup>22</sup>

## COORDINATION ACROSS ORGANISATIONS AND DISCIPLINES IS NEEDED, WHICH REQUIRES INVESTMENT AND LEADERSHIP FROM DONORS

Progress to date has been heavily influenced by improvements to coordination that have been achieved at all levels. Donors emerged as a key player driving the necessary coordination both operationally and at policy level. Donors came together to harmonise their requests and efforts with humanitarian cash partners, catalysing greater harmonisation of MPC and setting the foundations for linking with social protection. DFID and the World Bank then convened the 2018 workshop, which brought together government and humanitarian actors on the topic for the first time. The formation of the CCI, and the CWG, were influential in driving adoption of harmonised approaches to MPC design and delivery that are helping the alignment, and have enabled a coordinated approach to piloting and roll-out of the new targeting model. Development and humanitarian actors tend to operate in siloes. To improve coordination of activities 'across the nexus' and support the above vision, the government and humanitarian actors set up the Iraq Social Protection Forum (SPF) in late 2018.<sup>23</sup> This has led to increased engagement between and adoption of joint approaches by the CWG and SPF including participation of the CWG in social protection meetings, joint assessments, joint reviews of transfer values, coordination of learning events, etc.

Continuing to improve operational coordination will be essential to overcome the challenges outlined above, such as improving consistency of data management and facilitating data-sharing. In this aspect, the WFP scoping study highlighted that competing agendas of operational agencies, each with a desire to maintain their

<sup>19</sup> DFID Iraq (2017); Khan and Clerici (2019).

<sup>20</sup> WFP (2019).

<sup>21</sup> WFP (2019).

<sup>22</sup> WFP (2019).

<sup>23</sup> Oxfam Iraq (2018).

organisational footprint and systems, can reduce incentives to collaborate, and may lead to agency mandates rather than national priorities driving the direction of change. This may constrain efforts to improve coordination of humanitarian action and social protection.

## PROGRESS REQUIRES A LONG-TERM VISION AND LONG-TERM FINANCING ACROSS THE NEXUS

Realising this vision in Iraq will require long-term engagement and multi-year financing ‘across the nexus’. WFP’s scoping study report highlights that, to effect the changes needed requires commitment and investment over the medium- to long-term. It also recommends that international agencies should draw on expertise from their development and social protection departments to support this vision. The CWG recommends the adoption of multi-year, multi-partner strategies as an effective template to mobilise the changes that are needed.<sup>24</sup> However, funding from humanitarian donors is declining. For example, the DFID humanitarian business case for 2019 dropped much of the proposed transition work and focused more on the core humanitarian activities of the CCI, due to funding limitations. The CCI has advocated for the need for continued humanitarian funding while national social protection systems remain under-developed.<sup>25</sup> There is also a need for transitional financing strategies that facilitate a switch to more sustainable development funds. At the end of 2018, the Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF) for Iraq increased funding for safety net development.

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<sup>24</sup> Khan and Clerici 2019).

<sup>25</sup> Oxfam Iraq (2018).



The Cash Learning Partnership

Building linkages between humanitarian cash and voucher assistance (CVA) and social protection (SP) has become an increasingly prominent topic over the past five years and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has been at the centre of this evolution. The objective of this resource set (the crib sheet and 6 regional case studies) is to ensure that CaLP trainers and course participants in MENA (and elsewhere) have access to the most significant and relevant examples from the region on linking SP and humanitarian cash and voucher assistance (CVA). The resources cover Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Turkey and Yemen. The crib sheet summarises the main activities (programmes, assessments and analyses, events and policy and coordination initiatives) of interest, highlighting key lessons learned, and signposting to related documentation. The in-depth country case studies focus on national experiences of linking CVA and social protection in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen.

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