



## Housing, Land and Property Sub-cluster Iraq COVID-19 Response Guidance Note

**Background:** The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Coronavirus (COVID-19) a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. The first case of COVID-19 in Iraq was recorded in Najaf on 24 February 2020. At the time of writing, the WHO had recorded 1,031 cases in Iraq, including 64 deaths. The latest figures on COVID-19 in Iraq may be found [here](#). The Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government have imposed extensive measures to prevent a large outbreak of the virus in Iraq, including closing airports and land borders, significant movement restrictions and nationwide curfews.

During the COVID-19 Operations Cell Meeting on 23 March 2020 the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) for Iraq requested the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG) to summarize critical humanitarian COVID-19 related preparedness and response activities which could be implemented in the short term if donor funding was made available. Thus, the below guidelines provide brief on how critical activities should be carried out during the outbreak by considering safe delivery of the HLP activities.

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*“Housing has become the front line defence against the coronavirus. Home has rarely been more of a life or death situation. I am deeply concerned about two specific population groups: those living in emergency shelters, homelessness, and informal settlements, and those facing job loss and economic hardship which could result in mortgage and rental arrears and evictions.”*

**Context:** COVID-19 has resulted in the deferral of HLP activities that require direct contact with beneficiaries. Moreover, all casework has been interrupted because of the closure of governmental offices, civil affairs directorate and the civil courts. Instead, partners are engaging in remote support to beneficiaries, such as awareness raising whenever possible within districts and remote legal counseling. A serious concern that arises if the pandemic is not successfully controlled, is the exposure of vulnerable households to unsafe housing arrangements, illegal increases in rent and eviction and lack of access to legal services such as compensation claims for damaged or destroyed properties.

The purpose of this document is to provide HLP actors in Iraq with a guidance to safe delivery of a limited range of critical HLP activities in the wake of the COVID19 outbreak in Iraq.

### How HLP activities are affected during the outbreak

Due to the closing of public institutions such as courts, Compensation Committees and sub-Committees as well as other administration offices, HLP support programs, including compensation claims and retrieval of HLP related documentation, have been fully disrupted in most governorates.

In the interest of safe programming, and in line with the [restrictions imposed by authorities in both the Federal Iraq and Kurdistan Region] the HLP Sub Cluster recommends the deferral of all activities that involve direct contact with and between beneficiaries, including in-person information sessions, in-person legal counseling.

The HLP Sub-cluster recommends instead that its partners shift to remote implementation of HLP activities in line with safe programming criteria and the priorities activities as outlined below to address the acute HLP needs the pandemic is causing in Iraq.

### **HLP issues exacerbated during the outbreak**

Measures to contain the COVID19 virus include the closing of schools, businesses and government institutions, as well as far reaching mobility restrictions through a comprehensive curfew. Due to this curfew, a loss of livelihoods across a broad range of sectors can be anticipated – especially amongst small private businesses, low-income workers, and day laborers in the informal sector. As a result, vulnerable populations, including those residing in informal settlements, are at a higher risk of eviction and utilities cut-offs due to an inability or difficulties to pay rent and utility fees.

Ensuring safe, secured, and dignified housing, with working utilities is of the essence during this crisis, especially during the containment phase of COVID19. Evictions and utilities cut-offs *can exacerbate a health emergency* – eviction threats often cause households to prioritize paying rent rather than paying medical costs. Utilities cut-offs *deprive people of essential resources for basic sanitation (water) and access to information (electricity)* – which increases the chances that those who have lost access to utilities will come into contact with others while obtaining these necessities outside their homes.

Moreover, evictions themselves *undermine the necessary measures to stop the spread of the virus* - like self-isolation, social distancing, and proper hygiene practices. Evicted families may move in with friends and families, exacerbating overcrowding and increasing chances of transmission. Evictions are especially dangerous for the elderly, children, people living with disabilities and underlying medical conditions. Women are especially vulnerable to forced eviction if the male relative through whom they access land or housing dies. All of these factors may be at play for out-of-camp IDPs, especially those living in informal settlements, for returnees, refugees and vulnerable host communities alike.

Another HLP related issue that may arise during the COVID-19 response includes due diligence around the construction of emergency medical and hygiene sites, to house displaced populations, and to bury those who die during this crisis. Earlier this month, there were [reports](#) of bodies of COVID-19 victims being sent back to hospital morgues, because Iraqi religious authorities, tribes and townspeople feared that the respiratory illness could spread from the corpses to nearby population centers. As we have seen in the [past](#) and as we are [currently seeing](#), a lack of due diligence and community understanding and acceptance around these sensitive issues may potentially lead to conflict and violence within community.

#### **1. Advised HLP action during the COVID-19 response phases**

The [UN's Global HRP for COVID19](#) indicates the following response to increased evictions must be accelerated or scaled up to achieve its Strategic Priorities 2 and 3:

- Monitoring of eviction cases, particularly among vulnerable groups
- Support for protective measures such as moratoriums on evictions and rental support

According to the [National Protection Cluster Recommendations/Observations on the Criticality of Humanitarian Response Plan 2020 Activities in Relation to the COVID-19 Situation in Iraq](#), advocacy, and awareness raising activities on HLP-related issues and potential rights violations may continue, and remote legal assistance should be maintained wherever possible. In addition, the 'Mapping of humanitarian activities to prevent, mitigate or respond to the spread of COVID-19 among affected population in Iraq' as compiled by OCHA and the NCCI, recommends the following priority activities in the field of HLP:

- Provision of remote legal counseling
- Setup of referral mechanisms to cash for rent support
- Awareness raising

HLP partners are encouraged to continue to support beneficiaries in line with these prioritized activities whenever is responsible and safe. In light of this, the HLP Sub-Cluster endorses the following HLP activities during the COVID-19 emergency response phase:

- Provision of remote legal counseling of households threatened with eviction or utility cut-offs during the COVID-19 outbreak
- Awareness raising on HLP related issues and advocacy for government suspension of all evictions utilities cut-offs for the duration of the COVID-19 response as a public health measure
- Remotely activating alternative local dispute resolution mechanisms and find local community leaders to prevent evictions
- For the most critical cases, set up referral mechanisms to humanitarian actors who are able to provide cash for rent support for beneficiaries at risk of eviction
- Remotely executed community level needs assessments with regard to the increased risk of evictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Suggested survey questions in English, Kurdish and Arabic may be requested from HLP Sub-cluster.

Should HLP partners wish to include information on the containment, prevention and response to COVID-19, staff should be trained by health actors. It is strongly recommended to avoid misinformation and exclusively use the WHO and Health Cluster developed COVID-19 messages and information resources, available in English, Arabic and Kurdish [here](#).

Prevention and mitigation measures to protect staff and beneficiaries should be put in place. HLP Partners are advised to provide their own staff and service providers with training on approved guidance and ensure they are conforming to these standards.

#### **Useful links**

- 1- [WHO's COVID19 Dynamic Infographic Dashboard for Iraq](#)
- 2- [Standards and criteria for dignified evictions & departures](#) (this is a living document - let [alexandre.bourque@nrc.no](mailto:alexandre.bourque@nrc.no) if you have any questions or feedback)
- 3- [Global crowd sourced map of government measures to secure housing, land and property rights during COVID](#) initiated by the global HLP AoR
- 4- [Key Message and Action for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Camps and Camp Like Settings](#) (jointly developed by IFRC, UNICEF, and WHO)

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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