Coordination in Transition: How NGOs are Navigating and Adapting beyond the IASC

Case Study #3: Humanitarian and protection response after transition – Iraq

The IASC clusters in Iraq were deactivated at the end of 2022, following an HC/HCT decision to *"hand over or simply exit most components of the joint response"*.[1] Transition planning was done at individual cluster level, and there was no overall HCT humanitarian transition strategy. Some sectoral groups were set up to take over coordination; although the HCT continued, these were not linked. The NGO forum, NCCI, was dissolved in 2023. Participants describe a resulting coordination reduction, with the greatest impact on L/NNGOs. These factors seem also to have led to a fragmentation of understanding of humanitarian and protection needs and response.

Key learnings

☐ Transition without an over-arching strategy is risky. The Iraq experience illustrates how sector-level planning alone can lead to fragmentation, gaps, and unclear priorities.

☐ NGO coordination is fragile without formal platforms. But if they *are* sustained, NGO platforms can provide opportunities for NGOs to collaborate on coordination to meet their own response needs.

☐ Deactivation of the IASC mechanisms can severely weaken collective humanitarian understanding. Sustaining this requires resourcing, planning, and buy-in for joint needs assessments and protection monitoring, and a joined-up (simple) coordination system open to all actors.

☐ Funding is a key determinant of continuity. Transition planning should consider the response impact of reduced funding, and plan flexibility as the need for coordination diminishes or changes.

Understanding and responding to humanitarian needs

Disagreement on 'humanitarian' need during transition

There was some debate during transition as to whether continuing needs required 'humanitarian' assistance and protection, 'durable solutions' interventions, or were related to structural issues and best addressed through development.[2] Some specific populations were generally understood as having higher needs,[3] but there was no agreement to continue to collectively monitor or prioritise these groups. Support to some of these was also a priority for durable solutions response; one respondent wondered if that made it easier to dismiss continued humanitarian prioritisation by assuming the caseloads would be picked up elsewhere.

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[1] HCT meeting minutes, March 2022 in Global Cluster Coordination Group, *Note to the EDG*, 24 February 2023, p.2
[2] Global Cluster Coordination Group, *Note to the EDG: Learning from the cluster transition in Iraq*, 24 February 2023
[3] E.g., IDPs living in informal sites and some camps; some profiles of families facing higher protection and exclusion risks

Fragmented response and understanding of needs

Two-and-a-half years after cluster deactivation, INGOs and L/NNGOs continue to deliver some humanitarian activities, with much reduced funding. However, almost all participants stated that while they have a good understanding of the locations where they work, they have a limited understanding of the 'big picture'.

Sectoral coordination groups have become uneven, with different leadership (government, UN, or NGO), varying membership (in some, NGOs have limited roles), different remits, and not linked together. Without cohesive coordination or active collective monitoring of priority issues from a humanitarian perspective, the understanding of humanitarian needs and response seems to have fragmented after the clusters deactivated.

Assessment actor REACH, who had previously conducted annual Multi-Sector Needs Assessments in collaboration with the clusters, conducted one household-level 'Cross-Cutting Needs Assessment' in 2023, a year after cluster deactivation. This identified a few remaining 'pockets' of higher humanitarian need and called for monitoring of vulnerable communities.[4] This monitoring does not seem to have been continued.

This fragmentation is also apparent in the 'Humanitarian Transition Overviews', drafted by OCHA to provide a light needs outline and priorities. The 2023 version used cluster information. The 2024 version used the REACH assessment on remaining needs, but response information was compiled from mainly HCT actors on their own implementation. Without a formal coordination system, there has also been limited tracking of any gaps of concern – although, there are now few funding options to fill these.

HRP end: decline in funding and analysis

There was a 'significant decrease' in humanitarian funding after the HRP ended and the IASC clusters were deactivated.[5] Despite a main reason given for the transition in 2022 being funding decline, the 2022 HRP was 66% funded.[6] While some major donors continued funding after transition, a reduction did then happen. This led to gaps in addressing remaining needs, and reduced NGO capacities to undertake analysis. One respondent recounted a major donor that did continue funding asking NGOs how to quantify needs in the absence of an HNO/HRP. The donor stated that they believed humanitarian response was still relevant, but that without data it was harder for them to internally justify continuing to channel funds to Iraq.

Limited NGO response coordination and reduced advocacy

Limited exploration of options for NGO self-coordination

Collective NGO engagement during the transition through the NGO forum NCCI had a strong advocacy focus: primarily on the continued need for some humanitarian and protection response, and for NGO inclusion in subsequent coordination. Despite dissatisfaction with the transition, respondents recounted little exploration of NGOs' specific needs for coordination, and how these could be met.

While L/NNGO networks formed for specific topics continue to work with their members, NCCI, which had wide membership, dissolved in 2023. This seems to have limited the possibility for NGOs to explore

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[4] OCHA, *Humanitarian Transition Overview Iraq*, 2024, using REACH's Cross-Cutting Needs Assessment 2023 analysis
[5] REACH, *Transition Brief: Cross-Cutting Needs Assessment (CCNA) – Key Findings*, October 2024
[6] OCHA, *Humanitarian Transition Overview Iraq*, 2023 and OCHA, *Humanitarian Response Plan Iraq 2022*, 2022

alternative or complementary coordination to meet their own response needs, after cluster deactivation.

Reduced collective NGO advocacy

Two and a half years after the transition, collective NGO advocacy efforts seem much reduced. While some L/NNGO networks do advocacy work on their specific topics/mandates, respondents described very limited collective NGO advocacy efforts outside of these.[7] One INGO participant noted: *"We haven't had many pressing issues where I'd have wanted to do more joint public advocacy [...] But we don't really have a way to do it anymore [without an NGO forum]. We could do it bilaterally, but it would be a lot harder."*

Protection response, monitoring, and advocacy

Protection was a critical issue throughout the crisis in Iraq,[8] and has remained a focus for remaining donors. With funding decline, response is considerably diminished – as is information on the protection situation. After transition, some joint protection monitoring was organised by the Protection Platform (see below) but later ceased. Other efforts were made but were limited in scope or time: efforts by some specialised working groups and networks were less inclusive and had less donor recognition; ECHO funded a Protection Consortium of three large INGOs for analysis and advocacy as well as response, but this was tied to funding.[9]

One participant recounted having tried to convene some NGOs to resume joint protection monitoring but being met with lack of interest and capacity after funding cuts. While NGOs continue some programming, 2.5 years after transition the collective understanding of the protection landscape now seems limited.

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[7] The only recent advocacy mentioned was on NGO access through the Access Working Group, supported by OCHA.
[8] Initially, centred on the Protection of Civilians (OCHA, *Iraq Strategic Response Plan 2014-2015*, October 2014). Later, including heightened risks for some groups of displaced people and for families perceived to be affiliated to extremist groups, and issues such as loss of civil documentation (OCHA, *Humanitarian Response Plan 2022: Iraq*, March 2022).
[9] See, for example, Protection Consortium Iraq, *Durable Solutions for Remaining IDPs in Iraq,* DRC, IRC, NRC, 2024

Protection coordination

When the Protection Cluster transitioned, a Protection Platform was established, co-chaired by UNHCR (on humanitarian protection) and OHCHR (on human rights), covering all communities including refugees and minority groups. UNHCR's global commitments, including on the Agenda for Protection, influenced its willingness to maintain leadership. Child protection and GBV coordination were taken forward separately.

The Platform had a small group of members: UN agencies 'contributing to UNSDCF protection objectives' and one INGO and one NNGO representative. (Although, once the NGO forum dissolved, respondents described how NGOs' ability to act in a 'representation' role broke down in all coordination groups.) Other protection actors (all other NGOs and donors) were invited to meet every two months.[10]

The Platform's design reflected the HC's priorities: a shift to development, and a focus on the UNSDCF. Its remit was for advocacy and technical support, not coordination. It aimed to:

☐ Provide technical support and strategic advice based on protection needs – to UNSDCF actors, NGOs, public institutions, donors, and especially to durable solutions actors.

☐ Undertake advocacy on key protection issues (in the context of development).

☐ Ensure the centrality of protection in the UNSDCF.

☐ Encourage a human-rights based approach for humanitarian/development/peace programming.[11]

In 2023, the Platform identified three priority topics, for which it developed workplans: complex cases and civil documentation, rights of ethnic and religious minorities, and climate change and human rights. Community-based protection was highlighted as a priority in a member survey, but not taken forward.[12]

Some of the Platform's work included: Organising joint protection monitoring, which took place for the first year or so, aiming to maintain joint analysis to 'at a minimum' raise issues to the UN Resident Coordinator. Organising trainings on human rights engagement for NGOs and HCT and UNCT members. Conducting a mid-year initial evaluation, at which the need to include more NGOs and civil society actors was identified.

At the time of writing, the Platform had not met since the end of 2024, although in mid-2025 an effort to revise the ToR had been underway. Some respondents described appreciating it providing a bridge between humanitarian and development actors. But, noted that in a difficult environment for protection advocacy, it was unclear what success the Platform had been able to achieve.

Notably, participants described feeling the absence of *operational* protection coordination after the Protection Cluster deactivated.

10 For more on the Protection Platform structure, see: IASC, *Guidance on Cluster Transition and Deactivation: Annex E – Examples*, 2025 and Protection Platform Iraq, *Frequently Asked Questions*, May 2023
11 Protection Platform Iraq, *Terms of Reference*, 14 August 2022 [draft]
12 Protection Platform Iraq, 'Briefing with Donor Country Representatives – Minutes of meeting', 31 October 2023