



# Child Protection

and COVID-19

Iraq Case Study

## The impact of COVID-19 on children<sup>1</sup>

In Iraq, the COVID-19 pandemic is threatening to reverse the gains made in relation to child protection and well-being in the past few years. School closures initiated by the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government were some of the longest in the world, at 63 weeks,<sup>2</sup> and affected 11 million children. School reopenings have been inconsistent and fluctuating. Many children have not been able to access remote educational modalities due to low computer ownership, limited access to internet and poor connectivity. This has left up to 7.4 million children without access to education during the periods of closure.<sup>3</sup> Children who could access remote schooling received poor quality education as many teachers could only teach 50% of the time. This potentially impacts children's short-term educational attainment and their future overall development.<sup>4</sup>

Prior to the pandemic, one in five children in Iraq lived in poverty. Since the onset of COVID-19, with a rise in unemployment in an already fragile economy, that figure has risen to up to 40%<sup>5</sup>. There are also signs that violence against children is increasing, and access to basic services, such as routine health care, is limited.<sup>6</sup> The economic impacts of the pandemic, along with the extended school closures, have led to an increase in negative coping strategies, including school drop-out, child marriage and child labour.<sup>7</sup> In surveys of refugee and asylum seekers in Iraq, UNHCR found "there was a sharp increase in the percentage of [households] reporting turning to child marriage (42%), child labor (17%), and/or selling household items (17%) to generate funds."<sup>8</sup>

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has had many, varied impacts on children's protection and well-being. Child protection organizations, such as World Vision Iraq, have had to adapt their programming to meet the enhanced and particular needs of children at this time.

The objectives of World Vision Iraq's COVID-19 Response are:

1. Scaling up preventative measures to stop the spread of the virus
2. Strengthening health systems and workers
3. Supporting children impacted by COVID-19
4. Collaborating and advocating to ensure the most vulnerable children are protected.



40% of the children in Iraq live in poverty

1. This case study was developed by Malia Robinson, International Consultant, Qanaa Salih, Children in Emergency Officer for World Vision Iraq and Marjorie Arotih, Program Development and Quality Assurance Manager, World Vision Iraq. It was reviewed by Joy Cheung, Sr Advisor Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, World Vision International.
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## World Vision Iraq's adaptation and strengthening of child protection programming

At the time of the lockdown, all structured face-to-face psychosocial support (PSS) programmes, such as those focusing on improving well-being and building life skills, were replaced with an inter-agency intervention called the **Family-based PSS Support Kit**. This was an inter-agency effort of the PSS Task Force, under the Child Protection Sub-Cluster, which targeted families who could not directly access community-level or online support. World Vision Iraq is a member of the Task Force, and particularly contributed to the development of the kit's monitoring tools. Our communications team was also engaged in the development of the kit.

The Family-based PSS Support Kit provides guidance for parents supporting two age groups: six to 13 and 14 to 17 years. It covers messages for caregivers about the importance of their own well-being, includes stories and comic books for different ages explaining COVID-19 and how to take precautionary measures, and provides activities for families to do together while in lockdown. The Sub-Cluster received feedback that the initial kit was not particularly effective. An inter-agency task force was therefore later convened to further develop the kit in light of feedback and suggestions provided by organizations who had implemented the kit.

During the lockdown, case management had to be done remotely, so **Standard Operating Procedures** were developed for that modality. Even though the lockdown has now ended, World Vision Iraq is still recommending that case management be done remotely in circumstances where face-to-face interactions are not possible. However, since the lockdown was lifted, face-to-face case management has resumed.

For **awareness-raising activities**, physical gatherings were avoided. Radio was used instead to share simple messages for caregivers about how to calm their children when they are scared or upset that they cannot go out and play with their friends. Posters were also developed, and child protection and COVID-19 messages were integrated across all the materials.

**Trainings for teachers, community members, volunteers and child protection workers shifted from in-person to online platforms.** Since not all participants had access to Zoom, Messenger and WhatsApp were more popular and accessible platforms for training delivery. Group sizes for trainings were reduced, given the challenges of conducting them through online platforms. The training style was also modified to a more conversational style so to maintain engagement in the absence of physical activities that normally keep participants focused during face-to-face sessions. Alternative activities were also developed that suited remote modalities to keep the sessions engaging.

The transition to remote modalities led to some **changes in activity content and monitoring.** For example, the Positive Parenting programme was reduced from nine sessions to five and for shorter periods of time. One reason for this was caregivers' inability to participate remotely due to challenges in accessing the internet and other platforms. It was noted that there was less interest in remote sessions than face-to-face sessions, and, given the stressors of the pandemic and other crises in the country, it was also more difficult to mobilize parents and caregivers. However, caregivers who attended the programme reported having better skills to manage children's challenging behaviour without the use of violence.



## World Vision Iraq's partners' adaptation and strengthening of their programme approaches and World Vision Iraq's role in supporting this process



World Vision Iraq and our partners faced the challenge of no longer being able to implement planned activities due to lockdown restrictions, but still having obligations to donors and communities. We jointly evaluated all our partners' planned programming to determine what was still feasible, what was not, what could be changed and what needed to be stopped. When new activities were initiated, our partners were assisted not only with capacity building on the content of the new activities, but also with the administrative needs of shifting budgets. One example was a partner's case management programme for vulnerable families.

Given the challenges of implementing the programme as planned in light of all the COVID-19 restrictions, as well as the increased economic needs reported by communities, the partner turned to a "cash for protection" activity. The case assessment and impact measurement component were both conducted over the phone, with only the cash distribution being conducted in person. Remote support and capacity-building was given to the partner to initiate this new activity.



## Examples of how World Vision Iraq's child protection programming adapted or changed its relationship with formal and informal child protection systems

World Vision Iraq has done substantial capacity building and professional development with teachers, school counselors and even administrative staff, to support them to shift to online modalities for delivering education programming. In addition, to ensuring partners had the capacity to deliver quality remote education for children, we also supplied learning materials. All of this was done in close coordination with the Ministry of Education. We also provided protection training for Ministry of Education officials which focused on the particular protection concerns arising from the pandemic. These included child abuse and exploitation, and children associated with armed groups and forces (CAAFAG).

At the community level, we are supporting Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) so that caregivers and teachers are working together to promote students' well-being during lockdowns. Specific to COVID-19, we have provided a lot of sanitation and hygiene supplies through school management committees and PTA.

### Engagement of Community Groups

World Vision Iraq has established Child Protection Committees (CPCs) with community leaders, which comprise of community volunteers who work to prevent and respond to child protection concerns in their communities. Substantial training is provided to enable the CPCs to develop Action Plans for child protection work in the community. With COVID-19, the face-to-face meetings normally held by the CPCs had to be reduced, so most meetings were conducted on digital platforms.

During the early stages of the pandemic, the CPCs' responses to protection issues arising from the pandemic tended to focus on awareness-raising and messaging, including distribution of the PSS Family-based Toolkit to households. Over time, though, the focus of the CPCs transitioned back to broader child protection programming.



## Overview of the ways World Vision Iraq has engaged faith leaders and faith communities in ensuring children are protected in the midst of COVID-19

One important way in which World Vision Iraq has engaged faith leaders has been through their inclusion in the CPCs, and not having separate faith-based CPCs. World Vision Iraq has also supported Christian and Muslim faith leaders in addressing child protection from faith perspectives within churches and mosques. We have noted that community-based child protection messaging is much more effective coming from faith leaders than other stakeholders, due to the respect and authority they command.

During the pandemic, COVID-19 awareness raising became an additional focus of the CPCs, although once community

awareness had increased, the predominant focus turned back to messaging on other child protection issues. These issues, such as child marriage and child labour, cannot be addressed simply through awareness raising, but instead require changes in knowledge, attitudes and behaviour.

Such changes take time and have been more apparent in areas where we have been operating for a long time. For example, we have noticed that in areas where we offer community-based protection, including case management, child protection incidents have reduced gradually over time.



### Impacts of COVID-19 on child marriage

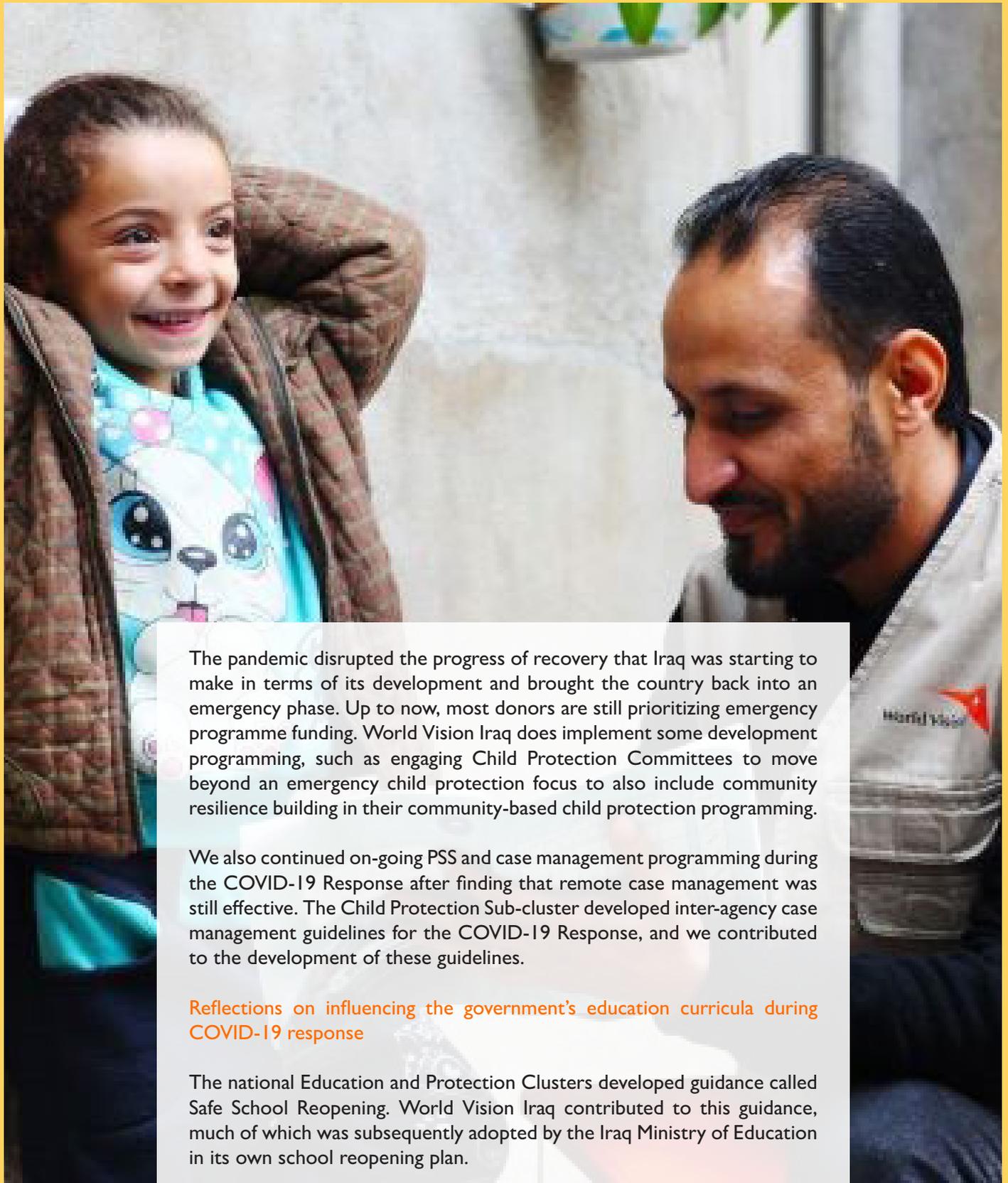
Monitoring has shown that child marriage increased in some parts of Iraq due to COVID-19<sup>9</sup>, particularly in areas where cultural customs supported the practice. One influence has been the negative economic impacts of the pandemic and lockdown which, in turn, can be drivers for child marriage since the latter brings some economic benefit for the girls' families. Other factors reported to contribute to increased child marriage during the pandemic are the isolation of lockdown, lack of access to school and peers, and resulting anxiety and depression; it was shared that marriage was a negative coping mechanism for girls' isolation, with girls viewing it as a means of escaping close supervision.

World Vision Iraq's work around child marriage primarily focuses on prevention and case management, delivered through community mechanisms.

Using community influential leaders who have social power and impact on the families have a greater impact on prevention and response to child marriage. Due to the fact that child marriage in the Iraqi context is very hard to respond to by the caseworkers, this approach was also adopted by the child protection Sub-cluster. At the meantime, we are contributing on the development of SOPs of case management through community based mechanism, which is in the process of finalization.

9. Gender Based Violence Sub-cluster Rapid Assessment on the impact of Covid-19 outbreak on Gender Based Violence in Iraq, May 2020

## Bridging the gap between development and humanitarian approaches in the COVID-19 Response



The pandemic disrupted the progress of recovery that Iraq was starting to make in terms of its development and brought the country back into an emergency phase. Up to now, most donors are still prioritizing emergency programme funding. World Vision Iraq does implement some development programming, such as engaging Child Protection Committees to move beyond an emergency child protection focus to also include community resilience building in their community-based child protection programming.

We also continued on-going PSS and case management programming during the COVID-19 Response after finding that remote case management was still effective. The Child Protection Sub-cluster developed inter-agency case management guidelines for the COVID-19 Response, and we contributed to the development of these guidelines.

### Reflections on influencing the government's education curricula during COVID-19 response

The national Education and Protection Clusters developed guidance called Safe School Reopening. World Vision Iraq contributed to this guidance, much of which was subsequently adopted by the Iraq Ministry of Education in its own school reopening plan.