

CREID WORKING PAPER

Volume 2022 ♦ Number 16 ♦ October 2022

Engaging with Religious Inequality in Humanitarian Response: A Case Study from Iraq 2014–2019

Jeremy P. Barker

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Suggested citation:

Barker, J.P. (2022) *Engaging With Religious Inequality in Humanitarian Response: A Case Study from Iraq 2014–2019*, CREID Working Paper 16, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies DOI: [10.19088/CREID.2022.012](https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2022.012)

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ISBN: 978-1-80470-047-1

DOI: [10.19088/CREID.2022.012](https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2022.012)



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Charity Registration Number 306371

Charitable Company Number 877338

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Summary

This paper explores how religious diversity dynamics shaped humanitarian assistance efforts in the context of large-scale displacement due to conflict in Iraq, and what actions were taken to engage with religious inequalities through programmatic responses. It is based on fieldwork in Iraq, interviews with local and international humanitarian practitioners, and document analysis.

Keywords: Iraq, humanitarian action, vulnerability, protection, religious diversity dynamics, context analysis, religious minorities, genocide, internally displaced persons (IDPs).

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Acknowledgements

Special thanks are due to Mariz Tadros at the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) for her care and guidance in pioneering this work, and to the entire CREID team for their support throughout this research. Thanks also to Knox Thames (United States Institute of Peace) for his review and helpful feedback on this report and to Rachel Sabates-Wheeler for comments on various portions of this project. Finally, I extend my sincere appreciation to the individuals who shared their experiences and insights – some at significant risk – to inform this work.

1 Introduction

In the summer of 2014, nearly 2 million people in Iraq were displaced within a matter of weeks. Mosul (Iraq's second-largest city) and large swathes of surrounding areas of northern and central Iraq came under the control of the violent extremist group ISIS (also known as Daesh, Islamic State or IS).

The attacks of 2014 explicitly targeted some religious minority communities and would subsequently be recognised as genocide and crimes against humanity by numerous states and international bodies (United Nations 2021). However, this violence did not emerge spontaneously but should be seen against the backdrop of the conditions before ISIS's attack. According to Minority Rights Group, 'the situation of Iraq's minorities was precarious, particularly for those living in the Ninewa Plain and the territories disputed between the Kurdish authorities and the federal government' (Minority Rights Group International *et al.* 2017).

As a 2015 report by the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide observed, 'the early warning signs of potential atrocities against minority populations went largely unnoticed, or were misdiagnosed, meaning that preventive strategies that could have mitigated the risk to these populations were not developed' (Kikoler 2015).

The various United Nations agencies in Iraq recognised at the outset how the humanitarian response would be shaped by 'pre-existing vulnerabilities' and 'complex ethno-sectarian drivers of the conflict' (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) 2014). These factors would be directly relevant for meeting humanitarian and protection needs.

1.1 Engaging with religious diversity dynamics

This article uses the term 'religious diversity dynamics' to indicate the presence of religious diversity, including inter- and intra-communal differences and the multitude of dynamics created as individuals and communities from various communities interact. 'Religious inequalities' refers to the ways in which, on account of those religious diversity dynamics, individuals and groups may suffer systemic marginalisation, exclusion or even direct violence – including genocide, as in Iraq – on account of their religious identity, beliefs or practices (Tadros and Sabates-Wheeler 2020).

As Frazer and Friedli (2015) acknowledge in their work on conflict transformation, there is a need to move beyond ‘simplistic debates about whether or not religion is a cause of conflict’ to a more constructive analysis of the role of religion in conflicts and how increased understanding can shape the corresponding initiatives to respond to those conflicts. Frazer and Friedli consider five ways of thinking about religion and use a series of case studies to illustrate the relevance of understanding religious diversity dynamics: religion as community; religion as a set of teachings; religion as spirituality; religion as practice; and religion as discourse.

Acknowledgement of these religious diversity dynamics has led to an emergent emphasis on cross-cultural religious literacy, which encompasses not only the acknowledgement of these realities but also the development of competencies to effectively navigate them, including in highly fraught contexts (Seiple and Hoover 2021).

These dynamics can have direct implications for those affected by a crisis, the relationship with state authorities, as well as the local and international efforts seeking to provide assistance (Eggert, Kanwer and Mirza 2022). Religion is often subsumed as merely a subset of ethnicity, which can mask important differences, including differences on how it relates to conflict mobilisation (Stewart 2009).

Despite some growing recognition of religious diversity dynamics within humanitarian and development work, there is often a hesitancy to meaningfully engage with those dynamics (Marshall 2018; Wilkinson 2019). As Khalaf-Elledge’s (2020) research found, there is a certain taboo for many development practitioners regarding the ‘tricky’ subject of religion. Some view religion as too political and thus beyond the scope and mandate of humanitarian agencies; others view it as too sensitive or immaterial to be of significant concern. Some might feel that engaging with religious diversity dynamics would violate the core humanitarian principle of neutrality and impartiality. This tension – sometimes reflected in the pithy statement, ‘need not creed’ – can contribute to a lack of attention to how creed may contribute to, exacerbate or influence the particular needs of an individual, family or community (Tadros and Sabates-Wheeler 2020).

As this Working Paper illustrates, the religious diversity dynamics of a given situation can be significant for understanding and navigating that situation in a context of humanitarian assistance and displacement, especially in a country as religiously diverse as Iraq.

1.2 Religious diversity dynamics in Iraq

Religious diversity in Iraq covers religious communities as broad as Muslim, Christian, Yazidi, Kaka'i and Zoroastrian, but also the intra-communal and intersecting identity factors of religious denominations (e.g. Shia Muslim, Sunni Muslim, Chaldean Catholic, Syriac Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East, Protestant) and ethno-religious identity (e.g. Sunni Arab, Sunni Turkoman, Sunni Shabak and Sunni Kurd). These factors relate to religious preferences and rituals but also profoundly influence the political, cultural, social and security dynamics of the country. Recent years of war and political instability over wielding influence and state resources have wreaked havoc on Iraq's rich tapestry of religious communities.

The three largest communal groups account for approximately 95 per cent of the population: Arab Shia, Arab Sunni and Kurd. In addition to these largest groups, there are many other religious, ethnic and linguistic groups, including Christians (400,000 to 600,000), Kaka'i (110,000 to 200,000), Shabak (200,000 to 500,000), Turkmen (500,000 to 600,000), Yazidis (500,000) and others such as Baha'i and Sabeen-Mandaeans, with population estimates based on pre-June 2014 (Minority Rights Group International *et al.* 2017).

These common labels for Iraq's religious communities, which are themselves an alternation between religious distinction (Sunni and Shia) and ethnicity (Kurd and Arab), include their own level of diversity and contestation throughout Iraq's history, which reflects a particular type of sectarian society (Dodge 2003; Haddad 2011; Haddad 2020; Dodge and Mansour 2020).

Just before the 2014 events, Iraqi researcher Saad Salloum described the grim realities of Iraq's diverse religious communities.

This rich cultural diversity (ethnic, religious, sectarian and linguistic) is threatened by emigration and assimilation into the majority culture. Minorities risk becoming helplessly crushed beneath a complicated legacy of demographic manipulation and being ultimately lost in the conflict between major forces competing for space, power and fortune. Some religious minorities are endangered and may soon be consigned to memory especially since the challenges they face target not just their freedoms and rights but their very existence and sustainability in a land they have lived on for dozens of centuries and who have become so rooted in Iraq

that no one can imagine an Iraq without them. This is not an imaginary perception or an abstract warning; rather, it is a fact.

(Salloum 2013: 8)

The United Kingdom (UK) government's report outlining the strategic case for humanitarian assistance in 2014 starts by directly referring to these dynamics as a critical dimension of the context: 'In 2014, the conflict in neighbouring Syria and the *exclusionary*, low capacity *Iraqi government provided fertile ground* for the rise of ISIL in Iraq' [emphasis added] (Department for International Development (DFID) 2014a). The report goes on to explain that: 'Iraq is an oil-rich country, but faces serious security, political, economic and humanitarian challenges, not least the political exclusion of the Sunni population' (*ibid.*).

While the political exclusion of the Sunni population was a significant dynamic of the conflict, the exclusion or marginalisation of other religious communities – particularly ethnic and religious minorities – heightened vulnerabilities to various risks. These included targeted violence, protection concerns, large-scale displacement and the need for humanitarian assistance.

The specific targeting of religious minority groups is acknowledged in DFID's 2015 case for humanitarian and capacity building assistance:

As ISIL advanced across Iraq, ethnic and religious minority groups were singled out for particularly brutal treatment, and reporting indicates widespread violations of International Humanitarian Law by all parties to the conflict, including horrific reports of targeting of civilians and sexual and gender-based violence by ISIL and other armed groups.

(DFID 2015)

The religious diversity dynamics of culture and context are inescapable in many contexts. When asked about the significance of religion, one Iraqi official interviewed for this report replied: 'religion is the basic factor that influences everything that matters'.

Suppose this is accurate at some level or even merely understood to be true by the communities in which humanitarian actors work. In that case, it becomes vital for those who are providing assistance to understand and effectively interact with those dynamics.

As a senior UK humanitarian advisor reflected based on their experience in Iraq and dozens of other humanitarian response efforts:

You know, at all costs, what I want to do is understand how religion plays into their vulnerability, but also how in many ways religion can increase their resilience, and respect the role that has in the community life, in their family strength, in lifting up values that have been crushed after displacement.

This report aims to increase understanding of how humanitarian response efforts in Iraq identified and engaged with religious diversity dynamics. The landscape of religious persecution and inequalities between communities presents a necessary framing for understanding the context in which these acts took place and with which assistance efforts were engaging.

2 Background to the research

With mass displacement occurring in 2014, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) – the longest-standing and highest-level humanitarian coordination forum of the United Nations (UN) system – issued a ‘Level 3’ system-wide activation on 12 August, the highest level of international humanitarian response. As the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) noted soon after:

The ongoing conflict has displaced over 1.8 million people and *exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities* throughout the country. The historical waves of conflict dating from 1991, the highly scattered nature of displacement in Iraq, combined with the *complex ethno-sectarian drivers of the conflict*, presents a challenge for humanitarian actors to *equitably meet assistance needs and achieve effective protection monitoring* across the whole of Iraq. [Emphasis added]
(UN OCHA 2014: 4)

With these factors impacting the delivery of humanitarian assistance in 2014, this case study aims to contribute to the efforts of the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) to develop a research base and evidence on the relevance of religious inequalities for humanitarian and development programmes. This work includes undertaking research that contributes to mainstreaming awareness of Freedom of

Religion or Belief (FoRB) in development to ensure that policies and programmes are sensitive and responsive to inequalities on the grounds of religion or belief.

The focus of this report is not primarily on the role of religious actors or faith-based organisations (FBOs) as participants in humanitarian response. Instead, it focuses on how religious diversity dynamics shaped the humanitarian context in which assistance actors were working, how they responded to and engaged with those dynamics, and what lessons can be learned from those efforts.

2.1 Scope of the research

This case study focuses on humanitarian responses in Iraq from 2014 to 2019, covering immediate relief aid and early-stage recovery efforts with affected communities. The focus is particularly on UK-supported humanitarian efforts, including support via the multilateral systems and the Iraq Humanitarian Pooled Fund.

The research is driven by three primary research questions, each containing several subsidiary questions.

1. To what extent were assistance actors aware of religious diversity in their context and the related needs with regard to their programming in their context?
2. To what extent and in what ways were assistance actors taking deliberate measures to respond to religious diversity and discrimination, and is there evidence that these measures are ensuring equitable outcomes for people of diverse religious belief?
3. What lessons can assistance actors learn from the positive practice, innovative approaches and risks identified, and what actions are required to implement them?

2.2 Research approach and methodology

The research included three primary sources: key informant interviews with various stakeholders, programme and policy documents from the UK, UN agencies and grey literature (e.g. reports produced by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), situation reports). These were supplemented with informal field visits and conversations with additional stakeholders from local organisations and affected communities who provided contextual observations on relevant issues. Each source of information was analysed in line with the primary research questions.

2.2.1 Key informant interviews

Between November 2021 and February 2022, researchers conducted semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) with a range of actors, including current or former staff of the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), multilateral agencies, international and national NGOs, and community representatives. Interviewees spanned a range of roles and levels of leadership to expand the perspectives that informed the research. They included executive or country-level decision makers, senior programme or policy advisors, and programme staff. This range of roles provided important insights into various aspects of a project where religious diversity and discrimination were relevant factors.

The interviews included a mix of in-person interviews in Iraq and remote interviews. Interviewees were informed about the background of the project and how the research would be used. All the interviews followed a similar structure of major questions, with each interview varying based on the institutional mandate, programmatic emphasis and other factors.

Due to the nature of the research and to encourage more open and transparent conversations, all interviews have been anonymised. While some participants permitted conversations to be recorded for verbatim transcriptions, others requested that only written notes be taken. Interviews ranged in duration from 45 to 90 minutes.

2.2.2 Programme and policy documents

A further source of information analysed as part of this research is the programme and policy documents that describe the UK's humanitarian assistance programming for Iraq from 2014 to 2019. In addition to the specific UK project documents, the research also evaluated the Iraq Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) and the Iraq Humanitarian Pooled Fund (IHPF) annual reports. The UK was a significant contributor to establishing the pooled fund and other multilateral initiatives in Iraq.

Through DFID, the UK adopted an approach that prioritised working through the IHPF. As noted in its 2016 report on the humanitarian programme for Iraq:

DFID is an influential donor in Iraq, and we have encouraged and supported the creation of the IHPF as a way to allocate donor resources to the most urgent

needs (as identified by the UN). It has since become the second largest pooled fund in the world – with DFID as the lead donor.

(DFID 2016: 8)

The UK's commitment to humanitarian assistance in Iraq was considerable. At least £246.5m was contributed between 2014 and 2019, broken down as follows:

- 2014: Iraq Emergency Humanitarian Programme – £41.5m.
- 2015: Humanitarian and capacity building assistance to Iraq – £40m.
- 2016: DFID Humanitarian Programme for Iraq covering 2016/2017 to 2019/2020, programme value of £120m and additional supplement of £45m.

These documents represent an important source of information for understanding the policy and programmatic approaches adopted by the UK to the conflict in Iraq, how it analysed the situation, and what information or outcomes were sought and achieved through these efforts. As a significant contributor to multilateral approaches, the strategies and outcomes of those activities are also highly relevant for understanding the UK's assistance efforts in Iraq.

In addition to the DFID documents, many UN agency and NGO assessments, situation reports and other documents were reviewed during the research. These are cited throughout the report.

2.3 Considering religious diversity dynamics within vulnerability criteria

A key motivation underlying this research is to understand how religious diversity dynamics relate to meeting the needs and vulnerabilities of individuals and communities in humanitarian contexts.

As emphasised in the Wilton Park statement on assisting religious minorities in humanitarian crises, giving attention to these dynamics is in line with operationalising the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence (Foreign & Commonwealth Office 2018). To ensure that no vulnerable community is ignored or excluded, humanitarian actors should seek to understand religious diversity dynamics and identify the particular needs of individuals and communities to make smarter decisions based on needs and vulnerabilities.

In its guide for preparing a Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) and Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), UN OCHA defines how these two documents help guide a response. The first step in this process is to develop the analytical framework and key questions to inform the planning and decision-making. For each context, it is vital to 'consider what is already known on humanitarian consequences *for different population groups and sub-groups*, the gender dynamics, geographic areas and/or specific issues. Take into consideration the perspectives of the affected population itself' [emphasis added] (UN OCHA 2020: 4). Developing this framework necessitates clearly understanding how communities organise themselves into groups and sub-groups, of which religious identity is often a significant factor.

OCHA provides the following definition of 'vulnerability' and 'vulnerable groups' in the preparation of HNOs and HRPs.

Vulnerability/ Vulnerable groups: Vulnerable groups are people who present characteristics that make them more susceptible to suffer negative consequences from shocks or stresses, such as due to their age, gender, physical and mental ability, displacement status, type of livelihood, *belonging to a certain religious, ethnic, caste or political group*, living in certain areas etc. Vulnerable groups will be harmed by the shock or stress and suffer humanitarian consequences if they are not able to cope (by themselves or thanks to the assistance they receive).

[Emphasis added]

(UN OCHA 2020: 21)

Putting this definition into practice, including the religious dimension, requires awareness of different ways of communal organisation, and this extends beyond merely understanding who those groups are or where they live. Vulnerability assessments must consider the relationships within and among communities and how those become factors directly or indirectly related to humanitarian needs and responses.

As one researcher explained:

These divisions of people at the end of the day, what they are is labels. So whether we call somebody a Christian or a Shabak, it is what divides them. In the end, they group themselves into these groups. We, as researchers or UN or NGOs, do not care about their intrinsic beliefs, as in 'what is a Christian thinking?' 'What is a

Shabak thinking?' The only thing that matters is that this is what divides them. And when we do research, we are interested in what divides people – what unites them, but also what divides them. In the case of Iraq, it comes up to be religion, but at times it comes out of ethnicity or tribal affiliation.

Understanding how these dynamics of identity (whether religious, ethnic or otherwise) contribute to vulnerabilities and risks for individuals and communities should be a central facet in preparing the HNO. As the guidelines state:

Using the needs analysis in the HNO, identify factors which are directly causing the humanitarian consequences and factors which are indirect causes, including root and structural causes. Identify how the causal analysis can inform a stronger interface between the humanitarian and development responses. Factors directly causing humanitarian consequences, or having an aggravating impact, should inform discussions on which response activities will need to be initiated or scaled-up immediately or adequately resourced at a determined stage later during the implementation period.

(UN OCHA 2020: 10)

The intent, as stated here, is that this understanding of religious diversity dynamics, alongside other factors, can more accurately inform activities to meet urgent and longer-term needs.

The principle of impartiality is often noted to ensure that no distinction or preference is given on account of identity factors, including religious identity – ensuring that all decisions are based on ‘need not creed’. However, understanding religious diversity dynamics does not preference religious groups but helps humanitarian actors more accurately understand vulnerabilities. It is not assistance based on their creed but acknowledging the impacts on a particular community, identifying religious inequalities, and responding in order to address those needs.

An Iraqi programme officer from a UN agency shared an anecdote from working on a shelter project and recognising that religious minorities were being left out. He remembered that in addressing the issue, he argued that assistance should be for ‘the most vulnerable people in this crisis’ and that seeking assistance for religious minorities was ‘not because of their beliefs or religions, but because of their vulnerability’.

In reflecting on vulnerability assessments, an experienced protection specialist remarked on the importance of looking at the full range of vulnerabilities and considering the operational context and what factors require particular sensitivity. Doing this, the practitioner noted, does not necessarily require creating new tools but does mean greater attention to the affected communities: 'I think what we need to do is be more sensitive. I think we just need to ask questions better. And I think we need to listen to the answers better. I also think we need to use our rather relatively blunt data collection tools more sensitively.'

3 Defining the programmatic mandate and objectives

The post-2014 humanitarian response in Iraq provides a robust case study for considering how response actors did or did not incorporate religious diversity dynamics into delivering on programmatic mandates and objectives.

3.1 United Kingdom humanitarian assistance

An important first step in considering how humanitarian programme responses were aware of and engaging with religious dynamics is to understand the mandate of the response efforts. Key documents – the business case presented for DFID's *Iraq Emergency Humanitarian Programme* (DFID 2014), its *Humanitarian and Capacity Building Assistance to Iraq* (DFID 2015) and *DFID Humanitarian Programme for Iraq* (DFID 2016) – present starting points for understanding how the policies and programmatic objectives of humanitarian assistance to Iraq were framed and presented.

The case for the 2014 assistance programme states its purpose: 'To provide life-saving aid to people across northern and central Iraq who have fled ISIL', with the outcome being that 'the *most vulnerable groups* in Iraq have access to timely, appropriate and cost-effective humanitarian aid' [emphasis added] (DFID 2014: 2).

The 2015 business case states its purpose as: 'To respond to urgent humanitarian needs in Iraq and build the capacity of the Iraqi and international system to respond to the humanitarian crisis and deliver recovery and stabilisation activities.' The outcome of the intervention was described as 'Humanitarian aid and protection is delivered to the *most*

vulnerable in Iraq, and the Government of Iraq is supported to respond to the ongoing crisis [emphasis added] (DFID 2015: 2).

The 2016 case takes as its purpose: 'Provision of humanitarian aid to *vulnerable populations* in Iraq' with a target impact such that 'The *excess vulnerability* of conflict-affected groups is reduced in Iraq' [emphasis added] and an outcome that 'Conflict-affected populations in Iraq have access to timely, appropriate and cost-effective humanitarian aid, and have fewer life-critical needs thanks to improved service provision' (DFID 2016: 3).

As seen in all three programme descriptions, identifying vulnerability is a central factor shaping what and how assistance programmes are delivered and evaluated.

In the 2014 business case document, vulnerable groups are mentioned 11 times. They often include various illustrative descriptors such as survivors of sexual violence, people with disabilities, children, elderly people, pregnant women, people with chronic diseases, and people in hard-to-reach areas.

In the 2015 business case document, vulnerable groups are mentioned 22 times, and descriptors include female-headed households and people in hard-to-reach areas.

In the 2016 business case document, vulnerable groups are mentioned 43 times. Descriptors include women and girls, female-headed households, women and children, women, women at risk of gender-based violence, women at risk, families with special needs, families having five or more children under the age of 7 years, single elderly individuals, families caring for unaccompanied children, conflict-affected groups and, in one instance, Sunni Arab internally displaced persons (IDPs).

From more than 75 mentions of vulnerable groups across the three years of DFID's business case documents, and some two dozen illustrative descriptions of potential types of vulnerable groups who might require assistance, in only one instance is the religious or ethnic identity mentioned – that of Sunni Arabs who might be displaced into majority Shia or Kurd areas.

While by no means arguing that these are not legitimate vulnerabilities, it is notable that the documents fail to explicitly consider the targeting of religious communities for specific violence on account of their religious beliefs or identity. The absence is even more glaring

considering that many nations and actors recognised ISIS violence towards religious groups as 'genocide' and thus would highlight this as a factor for increased vulnerability.

That these dynamics did not warrant more than a single mention in the programme documents as a potential vulnerability factor, and the absence of even a single mention of the religious and ethnic minorities who were targeted with some of the most extreme violence – raises a question about whether and how the needs of those communities, including protection concerns, were being met.

3.2 United Nations humanitarian assistance

Another place for identifying the mandate of assistance efforts is in the annual Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) coordinated by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA).

The 2015 *Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan* (UN OCHA 2015a), which set out to raise US\$497.9m to reach 5.6 million people, describes the scale and severity of the crisis facing Iraq:

The humanitarian crisis in Iraq is a protection crisis. The ISIL insurgency is one of the most brutal in the world. Populations have been subjected to mass executions, systematic rape and horrendous acts of violence, including executions and torture. Children have been used as suicide bombers and human shields, sold at markets, killed by crucifixion and buried alive. Women and girls have been enslaved and subjected to grotesque sexual violence. The survivors of gender and sexual-based violence are suffering trauma and depression, and suicides have risen sharply, particularly among women and girls. Civilians who have remained in ISIL areas have been targeted, and are at risk of reprisal and retribution by combatants as they retake territory from ISIL.

(UN OCHA 2015a: 7)

The severe forms of violence affecting various populations and specific groups are heart-wrenching, including the use of children as suicide bombers and human soldiers, and gender and sexual-based violence against women and girls. However, notably absent is any mention of the identity factors of religious or ethnic communities and explicit targeting of communities by perpetrators of violence. It is not only absent in the opening

context description, but throughout the HRP; despite numerous descriptions of targeted assistance, ethno-religious dynamics are missing.

One country director described the significance of these documents, noting that 'The Humanitarian Response Plan is my song sheet. And it's how I play my cards so that I can hopefully get the right dance partner and funding.' The framing of issues and priority – or lack of – given to those issues ends up shaping the design of programmes and the availability of funding for humanitarian actors.

The strategic plan of the UN Protection Cluster for 2015 outlines its priorities, noting an emphasis on geographic areas heavily affected by conflict or high concentrations of displaced persons, along with an objective that 'specialised protection services will address the needs of girls, boys, women, persons with disabilities, survivors of violence, the elderly and others with serious protection needs' (UN OCHA 2015a: 26).

The Protection Cluster's objectives included supporting population profiling, identifying vulnerable individuals, and collecting disaggregated data (UN OCHA 2015a: 27–28). While several vulnerability categories are mentioned, religious identity factors are not included. Because this framework does not indicate that the needs of religious or ethnic communities might be considered and because they are not included within the related indicators, it raises questions about whether this framework is fit for the context. As a former protection officer reflected, 'I cannot recall any exclusive or explicit mention of this ethno-sectarian dimension playing into or informing decision-making with regards to protection services but age and gender were always a factor in the provision of services.'

The 2016 HRP sought to reach 7.3 million people, with an US\$861m budget requirement. It mentions 'sectarian violence' and its impact on division among communities and damage to national reconciliation (UN OCHA 2015c: 4). This concern is mentioned again as a concern within the response strategy: 'Partners also worry that sectarian violence is likely, including in return areas, and may possibly be exploited by armed actors' (*ibid.*: 11).

The complexity of the context is laid out in the overview to the 2016 HRP. However, again, there is no mention of the dynamics of various ethno-religious communities. Vulnerable groups such as women and children are mentioned in various ways. Within the five strategic objectives laid out for the HRP, there is a discussion of those groups particularly impacted by trauma, but nothing that approaches an explanation as to what factors may

have led to some communities being targeted by perpetrators of violence (UN OCHA 2015c: 10).

Within the 2016 HRP, specifically the section 'Overview of People in Need with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)', there is mention of the displacement dynamics of those coming in various waves and from particular locations, and how particular religious or ethnic communities were primarily concentrated in different areas (e.g. 400,000 in Duhok, of which many were Yazidis; Erbil, hosting 330,000, of whom some 60 per cent were from Sunni Arab communities, with 30 per cent Assyrian or Chaldean Christians, and the remainder from Shia Arab, Yazidi, Kaka'i, and Shabak communities) (UN OCHA 2015c: 24).

The Protection Cluster emphasises evidence-based advocacy and targeted assistance according to specific needs, which, it is rightly noted, will require 'collecting, analysing and reporting on critical information related to people in need, including disaggregated data, and identification of vulnerable individuals for targeted assistance' (*ibid.*: 30). Again, this shows an awareness of the need for granular data to identify and address the protection needs of those most at risk. However, there is no attempt to address religious inequality as one of the categories for those risks. In the same way that there is value in explicitly acknowledging the gender dynamics of the conflict or particular risks for people with disabilities, it would seem necessary to give explicit attention to other identity factors, such as religion, given the context.

The nature of the conflict included targeted violence and ongoing protection concerns for specific religious communities. However, because these dynamics were not explicitly acknowledged, it creates uncertainty about if and how they were addressed. The ambiguity created by the lack of precise data increases the likelihood that the impact of religious diversity dynamics on protection concerns may be ignored for those most at risk.

This lack of explicit action aligns with the Wilton Park statement (2018) and observations made by Wilkinson and Eggert (2021) in their assessment of the inclusion of religious diversity in humanitarian response. They found that while there is a growing focus on inclusion, particularly within the Protection Cluster, rarely does religious inequality receive significant attention.

4 Engaging with religious diversity dynamics across the phases of programme response

This section presents our findings and observations of how humanitarian actors have engaged with religious diversity dynamics across all phases of the humanitarian response or programme cycle. We begin with assessments and situational analysis, then programme design and implementation, and finally, monitoring and evaluation.

Within each subsection, the findings illustrate where there was awareness of religious diversity dynamics and deliberate steps taken to engage with or respond to those dynamics. We highlight instances where interviewees noted positive practices, key challenges or missed opportunities as these may represent key learning opportunities for future humanitarian response efforts to engage with religious diversity dynamics.

4.1 Assessments and situational analysis

The 2014 crisis that emerged in Iraq cannot be separated from the pre-existing conditions before the acute violence involved in the attacks in Fallujah, the fall of Mosul, then the further attacks across the Ninewa governorate, including the targeting of minorities in Sinjar and the Nineveh Plains.

We now move on to examine how these dynamics were considered during context analysis across various topics, and how this informed the needs assessments.

4.1.1 Context analysis: pre-existing marginalisation and targeted violence

The failure to address outstanding questions related to governance and security in these areas, including ethno-sectarian-based divisions, was noted for years prior to 2014 as a potential source of conflict and heightened vulnerability.

The *2010 Humanitarian Action Plan* (UN OCHA 2010) explicitly mentions these dynamics, particularly in relation to the security situation. While noting some levels of improvements, it highlights that 'of particular concern is the situation in Kirkuk, Mosul and other areas among the disputed southern boundary of the Kurdistan Region, where low-level violence between various ethnic groups persists and is exacerbated by non-state armed groups and insurgent groups' (*ibid.*: 7).

In 2014 and since, this area witnessed some of the highest levels of targeted violence and displacement of religious and ethnic minority groups. Although the *2010 Humanitarian Action Plan* states that its first strategic priority is to 'Target humanitarian and protection assistance to groups prioritised as most vulnerable due to conflict, discrimination, and neglect', the basis of that conflict, discrimination and neglect is not identified (UN OCHA 2010: 19).

As Kikoler (2015: 3) wrote, 'the early warning signs of potential atrocities against minority populations went largely unnoticed, or were misdiagnosed, meaning that preventive strategies that could have mitigated the risk to these populations were not developed'.

As a country director for an international NGO noted, 'Pre-existing prejudices towards Yazidis before 2014 left them more exposed to security vulnerabilities'. An Iraqi national who worked as a protection officer for an international NGO explained during an interview that:

We know in the context, in the context of minorities in Iraq, these people were targeted for their way of life, for their religion and faith. So it was a given that these people are, particularly Yazidis and Christians and Kaka'i, these three groups were targeted for their way of life.

While these pre-existing issues and forms of marginalisation may be perceived as topics of concern only for peace-building or development practitioners, they also have relevance for the more immediate response efforts of humanitarian actors. As one researcher said, humanitarian actors risk 'falling into the trap of the kind of inequality that was there before' and 'entrenching what was there and making it worse, if you don't pay attention to these issues'.

Understanding and engaging with these dynamics is vital for understanding the particular needs of a given community and ongoing tensions related to population movements, social cohesion dynamics and access to affected populations.

4.1.2 Context analysis: access to affected populations

Issues concerning access to vulnerable populations in hard-to-reach areas present another example of the relevance of understanding religious diversity dynamics. The perception or association of Iraq's Sunni Arab community as complicit with the violence perpetrated by ISIS is also a vital dynamic for understanding the operational context. As a

protection officer noted, various security actors had identified this particular population as a significant security threat. So as the conflict displaced those individuals, the responses toward them from security and political actors created heightened challenges for humanitarian actors regarding access and provision of services.

A DFID humanitarian advisor noted that this work of negotiating access to affected populations is one of the primary challenges that must be navigated. The 2016 HRP noted that of all the constraints affecting the operation, 'access remains the most paralysing', with particular attention to the 3 million people who were living in areas still under ISIS control (UN OCHA 2015c: 14).

Given the demographic and geographic make-up of the country and the nature of the conflict that had conducted a nearly wholesale ethnic cleansing of all non-Sunni Arabs from these areas, the result was that these religious identity factors were further amplified during the crisis.

4.1.3 Context analysis: actor mapping

The intentional mapping of actors with presence in areas where assistance is needed, including religious organisations and tribal leaders, could be critical for addressing the needs of highly vulnerable communities that might otherwise be inaccessible.

As the 'response monitoring' section of the 2016 HRP notes, 'building the evidence base for better targeting and monitoring is a priority'. The Inter-Cluster Coordination Group and Humanitarian Country Team were noted to be taking explicit steps as 'in hard-to-reach areas, engagement with tribal leaders, local organisations and religious endowments is expected to improve situation awareness and alert partners to critical gaps' (UN OCHA 2015c: 15).

As a positive example, an Iraqi programme officer working with a faith-based international NGO described their intentional approach to developing a context-specific analysis and actor mapping, to form the basis of their programmatic activities.

Building on a Do No Harm approach adapted for the Iraq context, their assessment first involved an actor mapping and group mapping to identify the characteristics of the communities, including religious communities. Then they deployed a focused survey to identify connectors and dividers, tensions, and assessment of the situation in the local

context. The survey results provided insights into the relationships between communities and allowed for a greater understanding of the religious diversity present.

The director of a Yazidi-led programme mentioned as one of the success stories its partnership with international NGOs to set up a 'Harikara brigade' (helpers' brigade) of people trained by international experts to provide psychological first aid for their community in the camps:

Since our entire community faces marginalisation, we are reliant on outside assistance. But at the same time, we want to have this assistance leave some residual benefit to our community... The model of building on international expertise to empower members of a minority community is a good one, and it would be great to see INGOs [international NGOs] and the actors with most of the funding in Iraq to do more to empower CSOs [civil society organisations] and local individuals in the delivery of services and goods to affected communities.

Navigating these dynamics – which are not only specific to recent developments but are built on pre-existing dynamics that include marginalisation, exclusion and sectarian violence – requires great attention and care. These factors would remain significant throughout the conflict and into later-stage recovery efforts.

As Lichtenheld and Saadi (2021) document in their work on understanding social acceptance among returnees in Sinjar, whether an individual fled ISIS or remained in ISIS-held areas was perhaps the most significant factor shaping perceptions of those who had been displaced, particularly among the Yazidi community, which was explicitly targeted by ISIS.

As the conflict dynamics shifted, these relationships between communities were a significant factor in whether displaced communities perceived they were able to return home. For assistance providers, the failure to understand religious diversity dynamics was a real barrier to delivering humanitarian aid and shaped communities' perceptions toward assistance efforts.

4.1.4 Needs assessments

Religious diversity dynamics also remain relevant as responses move beyond the context analysis and into the work of identifying needs as part of programme development. In Iraq, during this period (2014–2019), some international NGOs had a much greater

awareness of religious diversity dynamics and could tailor their programmes to better fit the needs of local communities.

Speaking candidly of his work with an international NGO and whether the programme design considered religious dynamics, a former programme manager said:

No, I don't think so. The problem is that we didn't have that much knowledge about these dynamics when we implemented the projects [in 2015 to 2016]. We found ourselves in the middle of something that we didn't have that much knowledge about. I felt the projects are not effective, in particular in those areas that are quite complex.

While many reports do not include specific details on these religious diversity dynamics, some needs assessments did include greater detail. For example, the Danish Refugee Council Ninewah/ Multisector Needs Assessment (2016) intended to map some of these dynamics to inform programmatic responses. It opens by highlighting the fact that:

...the northern region of the Ninewa Governorate, in northwest Iraq, is an ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse. Already one of the poorest and most marginalised parts of the country, the region has been profoundly affected by recent conflict, which has caused mass displacement and disrupted the primarily agrarian economy.

(Danish Refugee Council 2016)

The added level of data collection reflected in the assessment allows for the testing and validation of particular concerns of various communities against the data collected. As one former country director for an international NGO noted, 'The nature of the conflict in Iraq in that time and of ISIS's action in Iraq inherently caused higher vulnerability for certain villages or certain profile of religious people within a village'. A purely geographic mapping would not tell the whole story of understanding the needs within a given area and of the vulnerabilities of particular individuals and communities present there.

As well as recognising the varying levels of need, there was also an ability to evaluate alternative coping mechanisms and forms of support. Understanding these dimensions enabled a more nuanced programme design.

One of the interviewees who worked for an international NGO recalled an example from developing a cash assistance programme in a predominately Christian area. Through needs assessment and discussions with community leaders, they identified that many of the individuals most in need in that area were from a non-Christian community that did not have access to the same communal support mechanisms. As a result of this assessment, they could identify people whose needs might otherwise have been overlooked. A failure to understand the religious diversity dynamics could have resulted in this community not receiving needed assistance and not having access to local coping strategies.

One example of engagement with the religious and ethnic dynamics of the context can be seen in the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) 2018 report, *Ninewa Plains Multi-Sector Needs Assessment: January 2018*. The background section to the report notes the demographic realities of the high concentration of religious and ethnic minorities and targeted violence. In its methodology for conducting the research, the report intentionally acknowledges how the diversity characteristics of the area were represented in its sample of respondents while also noting where there were potential shortcomings (e.g. not only inter-communal religious diversity but also diversity within a given community may be relevant as well).

Household profiles and other examples were regularly disaggregated based on religious and ethnic characteristics throughout the CRS assessment. Additionally, the community profiles include an evaluation of the demographic characteristics, including religious and ethnic identity factors, and how these impacted timing of displacement and returns (Catholic Relief Services 2018: 8–19).

A similar awareness of the relevance of these factors is seen in the Danish Refugee Council (2018) report, *Multisector Needs Assessment: Ninewa Plains (2018)*. Its introduction also notes the religious and ethnic characteristics of residents in the locations being assessed (including Sunni Arabs, Sunni Kurds, Yazidi, Christian, Shia Shabak, and Shia Turkmen). The report includes a chart displaying the 'Ethnic composition of the respondents': 69 per cent Arab Sunni, 7 per cent Christian, 8 per cent Turkmen, 8 per cent Yazidi and 8 per cent Kurdish. The responses or needs are not further disaggregated throughout the report, nor is it immediately clear how the respondents' demographic relates to the area's demographics. The assessment also includes village profiles, which include a population profile inclusive of the religious and ethnic demographics for the

area alongside sector-specific needs for the assessed location (Danish Refugee Council 2018: 37–62).

The assessment's 'context overview' includes sections on the area's socio-political context and its demographic and ethnic make-up. These sections provide important context related to pre-crisis factors that influenced the political, security and development conditions, impacted in no small way by the status of these areas as disputed territories.

The context section also gives nuanced information that highlights how the conflict impacted communities in differing ways (e.g. differing timelines of displacement, location of temporary residence, timelines of returns, threats from armed actors) (Danish Refugee Council 2018: 11–12). These were not marginal details, but the report highlights that 'when investigating communities' displacement histories, significant trends could be identified, based on people's ethnic origins and each village's history of conflict'. These dynamics influenced not only when individuals or families left but also where they went to seek assistance.

Awareness of these power dynamics, elements of social capital, and domestic and international support structures all become important facets of understanding vulnerability and needs. As a former country director noted, this awareness (or lack of it) ultimately shapes and informs programmatic responses.

There are similar dynamics concerning returns, influencing when a family may return and the specific challenges they face if they do. In the 2021 findings of the Displacement Tracking Matrix, the percentage of Sunni Arab IDPs continued to decrease (from 67 per cent in 2018 to 59 per cent in 2021), indicating that the ability to return seemed to be higher among Sunnis compared with other communities such as Yazidis. The latter still make up 20 per cent of IDPs (International Organization for Migration (IOM) Iraq 2021: 11).

In identifying the objectives of its assessment for returning populations, the Danish Refugee Council explicitly lists as a point of focus 'mapping the current and historic ethnic, religious, tribal and demographic profile of the areas under study, including changes within communities witnessing significant returns' (Danish Refugee Council

2018: 14). Catholic Relief Services also noted its objective to 'better understand priority needs and gaps for diverse groups of returnees in the Ninewa Plain' (CRS 2018: 4).

The interviewees reinforced that investigating these dynamics is vital to supporting the return of communities. One who served in a programme staff role providing protection services commented that these factors were not well understood in the initial days back in 2014. Still, their importance became more evident over time in supporting the returns of displaced individuals and communities. As that interviewee explained:

But of course, what I have understood years later from my work, when you look into further after the conflict, like in terms of post-conflict stabilisation, reconciliation, and of course, when you go further into return dynamics... When there was a lot of focus on understanding what makes people return or what makes certain people not return, then it requires someone understanding to go into or explore the ethno-sectarian identity in a humanitarian context.

A senior protection advisor in Iraq from 2018 to 2019 noted the high value of validated and nuanced data that accounted for a full range of social and contextual factors, including religious diversity dynamics. She stated:

Because the overall context analysis was actually solid as opposed to something that someone had written in an afternoon, and it was based on interviews, it was based on visits, it was based on local knowledge that we did have sufficient information to say, 'actually, we know that religion is an issue and ethnic identity is an issue'. But even more so, we were able to say how it was an issue and where it was likely to double impact on work outside the camp or on girls' access to school, or expectations of children with disabilities.

Reflecting on a conversation with officials from another donor over the design of the humanitarian response, she recalled how vital it was to be able to say, 'Our evidence base shows us that in fact, these are the three areas in most acute need. These are the groups in those areas. And then these are the characteristics of those groups that increase or maximise their vulnerability.'

4.2 Programme design and implementation

The intentional engagement of religious diversity dynamics is an important element of understanding the context and plays a vital role in informing programme design and key elements of programme implementation.

An Iraqi who served as a programme manager for an international NGO, when asked about the relevance of religious dynamics to programme development, responded:

I think yes, it's 100 per cent relevant. Iraq itself is a diverse country, and religion and religious groups play a key role in the areas and some parts, they are the majority. So you have to be careful. When implementing a project, you have to have a kind of understanding about what's going on on the ground. Otherwise, you face lots of difficulties.

Applying an informed conflict-sensitivity approach that incorporates awareness of various identity groups helps organisations to understand local dynamics, as one researcher described: 'How do we not make these dynamics worse? How do we not entrench systematic existing status quo problems?'

One practitioner reflected on the tensions involved in addressing issues around marginalisation and exclusion linked to religious dynamics as 'some of these dynamics are borderline political issues that humanitarian and development actors do not touch'. He questioned how effective humanitarian or development programmes can be with these issues unaddressed, as this 'affects the services provided, it affects the livelihoods, it affects the social cohesion, it affects the provision of security to this date in these areas'.

4.2.1 Programme design

A local programme manager from an international faith-based organisation described their approach to ensure that programme design and vulnerability assessments were tailored to local community needs. They found that substantive engagement with local faith actors was vital as a part of the process, while maintaining active ownership of the programme.

For the Iraqi context, they adapted a Do No Harm approach analysis as part of a community-based targeting approach developed with and validated by the community. They employed a multi-phase process of initial drafts based on key informant interviews,

focus group discussions and needs assessments in order to prepare an initial draft. This draft was taken back to the community to validate the approach and to identify the most vulnerable individuals and households that would be targeted by the programme, and was then shared again with community leaders to increase support. This active communication helped to minimise tensions between the organisation and community leaders.

The programme manager described the implementation of this approach:

As part of the conflict analysis, we developed a questionnaire specifically to identify social cohesion issues for the Iraqi context. Actor mapping was vital to this effort, including the various religious communities and then to identify the connectors and dividers within this context that become relevant for protection concerns, for programme design, etc.

These conflicts that existed previously, even from other generations, you cannot solve them in one day or one project. What you need to do is that you need to consult these people. We found out when these people feel consulted or... they get the right consultation and they are part of the decision-making, then they will feel that they are in a better wellbeing. They will feel they have the dignity, they have the protection, they and you will see that they have decreased the negative coping strategy you can see in their life. And once these people feel dignified, you will see a good increase in social cohesion between them. If you let people [from different communities] collaborate in one project, you will see there is a level of increase in the trust in many great aspects.

Another anecdote was shared by a researcher working with an organisation in Sinjar, a predominately Yazidi area but with Sunni Arab communities too. The project sought to provide water to newly returned Sunni Arab families and involved digging a new well. Communal tensions were still very strong between some Sunnis and Yazidis in 2014 and resulted in blocking the digging of a new borehole. While the religious diversity dynamics may not have been the only factor at play here, addressing those dynamics was a critical factor in the successful design and implementation of the project.

Another design element noted by one practitioner was how understanding particular cultural and religious practices enhanced understanding of people's material needs. He noted, for example, that the livestock or olive production in some areas of Iraq, besides its

economic value, is also used as an important part of rituals for Yazidis, Kaka'i and Christian communities: 'The food will bring the community together, and that is kind of a symbolic capital, but also a way of showing you have been living side by side for a long time in Nineveh Plains.'

These examples reflect how an understanding of the religious diversity dynamics was explicitly incorporated into the programme design phase to effectively deliver outcomes for affected communities.

4.2.2 Programme delivery

Awareness of religious diversity dynamics can be directly incorporated into the programme delivery approaches. Several of the individuals who were interviewed shared anecdotes about tensions that arose due to failure to consider these dynamics fully. One facet of delivery is in the selection of programme staff, and awareness training provided to them, which can directly impact the programme's acceptance in a given community.

One country director noted that programme staff from one community refused to sit together or eat with those from another, which would obviously create relational tensions during site visits. Another executive from a Yazidi organisation described how a livelihood project to develop a community bakery was negatively impacted because of religious-based prejudice between those from a majority community towards those from the Yazidi community. They recounted how the project managers from a Muslim background would refuse to eat the food products prepared by Yazidis. The director of the Yazidi organisation said:

That is one reason we set up our own bakery training centre, which is now running well and quite successfully, to help empower our community and demonstrate that they can still have opportunities and move past discrimination.

Another senior programme manager with an international NGO recalled how these power dynamics would play out in interactions with government or camp officials. She noted how a religious minority woman in a very senior role always felt compelled to be highly deferential to those from the religious and ethnic majority community, which at times would hinder the ability to push for needs or for issues to be resolved.

Although almost everyone is aware of the severe violence and trauma perpetrated against the Yazidi community in Iraq, that same senior programme manager noted how

'that awareness is usually not accompanied by understanding the nuances of daily life for minorities'. She explained that these include:

...people refusing to eat Yazidi-made food, for example, or refusing to hire Yazidis. Systematic problems like Yazidis' lack of education or training makes it hard for them to gain employment. Some of these problems are social or in the form of business, and it is hard for external actors to affect these.

Another element of programme delivery that is relevant to religious diversity dynamics is the partnership with national NGOs and community and faith actors who already have an established presence within the affected community. In its discussion of operational capacity, the 2016 HRP explicitly noted the role of national NGOs and religious endowments in delivering on response priorities to access hard-to-reach areas. It states that: 'National NGOs and religious endowments continue to have the broadest and deepest reach, able to access difficult areas, including locations outside Government control. More than half of all assistance provided in the country is delivered by front-line organisations, many of which operate outside the cluster system' (UN OCHA 2015c: 13).

Collaboration with these organisations affected the religious diversity dynamics in an area. For example, where there are high levels of distrust on the part of one community towards another, partnership with an NGO or other implementer identified as belonging to a specific community may heighten tensions, hinder programme implementation, and perhaps increase people's feelings of vulnerability. Alternatively, there may be substantial benefits in collaboration between communities served by an intentionally multi-communal programme design that engages with and effectively mobilises the capacity of national NGOs, local faith actors and others to build trust between communities.

A senior humanitarian professional reflected on the opportunity to do better by meaningfully investing in local religious institutions and structures. Doing so could contribute to positive coping mechanisms and could provide not only high-quality assistance but also often offer a far more sustainable approach. This professional explained:

I think the more the humanitarian community sees that faith-based institutions in a local community can be unbiased and actually create some of the best fabric of continuous assistance, I think those stories, we need to tell those more. I think we can roll in a big aid operation that steamrolls right over those partners assuming

they are only assisting their particular ethnic, political, or minority religious group. I think we have to tell ourselves those stories [about the positive contributions of religious institutions because] especially when the big aid programmes scale down, who are the people actually continuing the aid?

One potential risk is that without a clear understanding of the dynamics, assistance efforts and resources may unintentionally contribute to repressive power dynamics or increase the factors that serve to deepen marginalisation.

In the 'Programme Overview' section of the DFID 2015 Business Case document, notes this as a specific issue of concern. As part of DFID's conflict-sensitive approach, the overview states that:

As a minimum we will ensure that our intervention does not increase instability in Iraq. We will work with partners to ensure that our aid is not subject to sectarian capture and is not perceived as favouring one group in Iraq over another.
(DFID 2015: 4)

A former country director also referenced an important aspect of project selection, which is that needs far outstrip available resources. A significant risk is that assistance will further exacerbate divisions if it is perceived as favouring one community over others and lacks sufficient whole community buy-in to the demonstrated approach for identifying and assessing needs. It was therefore important to tackle any such perceptions.

Consequently, having access to appropriately nuanced data is vital to fully understand the needs of communities targeted for assistance. Getting this right will have implications for programming; building trust with community stakeholders, including religious leaders, at all levels, is vital for successful implementation.

4.3 Monitoring and evaluation

A final element of the programmatic cycle to consider in terms of relevance and engagement with religious diversity dynamics is monitoring and evaluation, particularly regarding identified outcomes and indicators.

As one researcher who specialises in the community dynamics of post-conflict settings noted, there are often efforts to demonstrate the contribution of many interventions to improved social cohesion, but to truly measure the impact of interventions requires an

application of a systematic methodology. From his experience in Iraq working on interventions supported by UNHCR, UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) and IOM (among others), he believed that NGOs often attempted to measure impact in an overly simplistic way that does not provide robust evidence of beneficial social impact.

A second critique provided by this researcher was of an attempt to link interventions to social cohesion that did not have a demonstrated causal relationship. The provision of livelihood assistance or education, for example, may have only a minimal impact when people's grievances are about something else entirely. He explained:

Those things can be good, but it has a specific outcome more linked to material living conditions and so on, not social cohesion. If you want cohesion, don't build green houses, do something else that is more impactful.

This contrasted with the recommendation of another programme manager, who saw the value of collective projects that created the context for increased communal interactions and the development of trust through pursuing a collective outcome.

A common thread between both recommendations is that neither surface-level tensions nor the underlying conflict drivers are likely to be addressed without specific and systematic analysis and programme design and evaluation.

4.3.1 What is counted counts: indicators and outcomes

The value for disaggregated data is acknowledged and committed to both in UNHCR's Age, Gender and Diversity policy (UNHCR 2018) and the Sphere Project (2018) handbook on minimum standards. Yet in practice, the data on religious inequalities is quite limited, often stopping simply at age and gender, without explicitly considering the various diversity factors that may be relevant in a given context.

As noted previously, religious diversity dynamics are rarely named as a component of monitoring frameworks. Where disaggregated data is collected, it is almost exclusively restricted to age, gender and (perhaps) vulnerable groups, but without a clear indication of what factors make up those vulnerability criteria.

As an illustration, the 'protection' chapter of the 2016 HRP sets out the following data collection and needs assessment activities:

- Collect and analyse sex- and age-disaggregated indicators and respond to specific vulnerabilities/risks accordingly.
- In response planning, target populations including men, women, youth and vulnerable groups will be equally assessed and provided meaningful access to response activities (UN OCHA 2015c).

There is no detail, however, on who is included in those vulnerable groups. Were survivors of violence targeted at religious minority groups reached? The current approaches to monitoring and evaluation do not provide clear data to answer such questions.

Acknowledging potential risks and sensitivities, the Wilton Park statement advocated for disaggregated data to enable practitioners to determine whether ‘vulnerable groups and religious minorities most at risk are able to access and utilise humanitarian assistance’ (Foreign & Commonwealth Office 2018).

In their review of tools and guidance materials applicable to humanitarian response, Wilkinson and Eggert (2021) found a lack of guidance on how to include religious diversity dynamics in monitoring and evaluation frameworks. They provide a set of recommended questions that could help to add a religious diversity dynamics lens to humanitarian programme design, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and learning. Lessons learnt from approaches to mainstreaming awareness of gender dynamics provide an example of what can be done.

As an indicator of progress, the 2015 *Iraq Humanitarian Pooled Fund Annual Report* notes that gender and age analysis was included in needs assessments and reflected in the design of project activities and outcomes for every one of the nearly 40 projects supported by the fund (UN OCHA 2015b). Based on available data, it is not possible to say the same about the level of awareness as it relates to religious diversity dynamics.

A similar approach could be adopted to intentionally integrate increased awareness of religious diversity dynamics as a component of context analysis and of programme design, implementation and evaluation.

5 Conclusion

The case of humanitarian assistance to Iraq from 2014 to 2019 highlights that significant work remains to be done to mainstream the awareness and response to religious diversity dynamics within humanitarian response programming.

The population's make-up and the particular shape of the crisis in Iraq brought these religious diversity dynamics to the forefront, although the context pre-dating 2014 included deep religious inequalities. However, despite ISIS intentionally targeting religious communities with violence, humanitarian assistance programmes often failed to consider the religious diversity dynamics in areas where they were planning to deliver aid.

As is evident in the programmatic mandates, there is a clear commitment to reaching the most vulnerable individuals, families and groups. However, existing frameworks largely fail to include religious inequality as a potential vulnerability factor. Understanding and incorporating religious diversity dynamics into needs assessment practices can contribute to more robust and informed vulnerability assessments. As a long-time humanitarian practitioner noted:

I think that there is a growing sense of the need for any humanitarian response not to look at vulnerability as just black and white, but to look at vulnerability and special vulnerability groups, and that can include awareness of the religious minorities.

At the most basic level, and as another practitioner stated, it is simply asking, 'what's your operational context and what do you need to be sensitive to?' This is essential advice for those responding to humanitarian crises and seeking to meet the needs of those groups and individuals who are most at-risk in a given setting. Understanding people and communities and the wide range of factors that shape their lives is vital. In many places across the world – Iraq included – religious diversity dynamics are a vital component shaping people's lives and are therefore relevant for all those seeking to provide assistance.

6 Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended for assistance providers (and funders) seeking to more effectively address religious inequalities in humanitarian response.

1. *Incorporate religious diversity dynamics assessments into conflict and context assessment tools:*
 - When mapping the dynamics of a conflict, pay particular attention to how religious diversity dynamics are at play among the parties to the conflict (as drivers or mobilisers) as well as for those who are displaced or otherwise affected.
 - Consider how these dynamics shape relationships within and between communities, in relation to the state, and access to resources or available assistance.
 - Throughout a crisis response, evaluate how religious inequalities may influence factors related to timing and patterns of displacement and returns, restoration of services and infrastructure, or perceptions of governance and security.
2. *Explicitly include assessment of religious diversity dynamics within vulnerability frameworks to seek to identify and address religious inequalities:*
 - Alongside other potential risk factors for heightened vulnerabilities, religious identity status should be actively evaluated for how it may contribute to the risk of violence, impact on the accessibility of services, or other elements of potential vulnerability within a given context.
 - Seek ways to sensitively gather disaggregated data to identify and address religious inequalities to inform programmatic design, monitoring and evaluation.
 - Look for ways that religious inequalities may overlap or compound with other potential risk factors.
3. *Seek to secure full access to all populations:*
 - Within conflict settings, access may be restricted to some groups such as those from a particular religious community that has been discriminated against or treated as a security risk. It is vital to ensure that full humanitarian access is sought, such that sectarian tensions are not further exacerbated.
 - Recognise ways in which religious diversity dynamics and inequalities may shape displacement locations (e.g. camp vs. non-camp settings; urban vs. rural) and proximity to assistance providers.
4. *Identify, engage and meaningfully collaborate with local actors, including religious or faith institutions:*
 - Proactively map and engage with local actors, including religious or faith institutions, to assess individual and community needs and strengthen durable coping mechanisms and resources.
 - Where possible, partner with religious or faith institutions to build trust between communities, access hard-to-reach populations, empower marginalised or oppressed groups to redress religious inequalities, and invest in sustainable solutions.

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