

# BETTER ASSISTANCE IN CRISES RESEARCH

## ‘A bridge to those in need’ Frontline Provider Perspectives on the Accountability of Social Assistance in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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# Summary

This paper explores the accountability of social assistance in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), focusing on the roles of frontline staff of local and international organisations since government-led programmes became inactive in 2015. It highlights how local organisations can bridge gaps in social assistance by informing communities, supporting referrals, and contributing to social protection reform. The research also highlights cultural challenges faced by social assistance workers in Iraq.

Participants recommend integrating local networks into social assistance design, enhancing coordination between organisations, and involving frontline staff in decision-making. They also encourage proactive community engagement, making social protection policies more accessible, and using storytelling for accountability.

## Keywords

Accountability; social assistance; localisation; frontline staff; Iraq.

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# Executive summary

This paper examines the accountability of social assistance in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) from the perspectives of frontline providers. Since 2015, government-led social assistance programmes have been largely inactive, leading to a reliance on local organisations and international actors to fill the void. Local organisations in the KRI could be a vital connection between local, sporadic social assistance and future formal programmes that provide social assistance at scale. They could fill gaps in an informed way that is aligned with social assistance policy, provide information about available assistance, support referrals, and maintain relationships with communities. The study explores the existence of parallel systems, where local and international aid efforts operate side by side, often without coordination, to the detriment of vulnerable people in need of assistance. It focuses on the role that local organisations and civil society organisations can play in the formal social assistance system in future, and their roles in holding the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and international organisations to account.

The research emphasises the need for greater local involvement to ensure effective and dignified social assistance once government-led programmes are in place. Key issues include trust, coherence, and the participation of local actors in decision-making processes. By providing insights from those directly engaged in aid delivery, this study aims to contribute to more inclusive and responsive social assistance frameworks in the KRI. It can also contribute to broader learning and recommendations for other contexts where the absence of government systems means that local actors step in to provide social assistance.

Frontline providers' recommendations echoed findings from parallel research examining the lived experience of vulnerable people receiving assistance, which 'suggested building on... informal networks in a more organised way to better link those in need with individuals/organisations who would like to provide more consistent assistance through these channels' (Shaw, Rohwerder and Karem 2024: 59). Systematically leveraging personal and community-based networks to identify those in need of assistance, do case management, and provide specialised services can be a crucial way to scale the benefits of locally led social assistance.

## Key policy areas and evidence gaps going forward

Frontline and local perspectives and experiences should inform national social protection policy processes, notably the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework in Iraq (2025). Local organisations have filled gaps left from non-operational government social assistance programmes for nearly a decade, and can offer valuable insights into people's priorities.

There are also opportunities to layer assistance to the most vulnerable people across formal and informal structures, and to reinforce community networks that foster a sense of belonging and dignity for marginalised groups (Shaw *et al.* 2024). These renewed priorities could in turn strengthen the predictability, transparency, and ultimately accountability for people receiving aid who face chronic vulnerability and a complex web of social assistance programmes.

In September 2024, the Iraqi partner for this research, Pasewan, drafted a policy paper in Kurdish based on the research, and disseminated it across government, civil society, and the media. It carried forward the following policy recommendations.

- **Integrate local networks into institutional social assistance design and delivery**, especially for case management and response to shocks such as floods. The government can play a stronger role in promoting coordination and connections across local and international organisations.
- **More systematically include frontline staff** of local and international organisations in decision-making and integrate their participation into organisational cultures and strategy.
- **Promote proactive engagement with communities to design programmes** rather than only investing in reactive redress mechanisms.
- **Ensure that social protection policy and evidence are more accessible and relevant for all stakeholders.** Currently, social protection evidence and literature in Iraq is highly technocratic and context-blind, with some actors finding that 'large parts are unreadable' (key informant interview (KII) 3).

- **Decision makers should consider storytelling as an accountability tool, not just to capture the perspectives of people receiving aid but also to highlight the experiences of those providing it.** 'Interviewing the individuals working in social assistance is indeed important. Their perspectives, experiences, and challenges can shed light on the realities of this field and inspire others to get involved or support these efforts' (Pasewan and BASIC Research Team debrief, Sulaymaniyah, February 2024).
- **There should be more attention to the cultural and contextual elements that underpin the accountability of providing social assistance:** 'It's important to explore how society perceives those who work in social assistance and how they handle criticism. It can be tough when some [people] expect special treatment or spread rumours about political affiliations' (Pasewan and BASIC Research Team debrief, February 2024).

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## List of acronyms and abbreviations

AAP	accountability to affected populations
ACF	Action contre la Faim (Action Against Hunger)
CCCM	Camp Coordination and Camp Management
CFM	complaint and feedback mechanism
CLCI	Cash and Livelihoods Consortium for Iraq
GBV	gender-based violence
GRM	grievance and redress mechanism
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IDP	internally displaced person
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
ILO	International Labour Organization
IRC	International Rescue Committee
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
KRG	Kurdish Regional Government
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
MoLSA	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (KRG)
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PDS	Public Distribution System
PMT	proxy means test
SSN	Social Safety Net (in Kurdish sometimes referred to as Family Care or poverty reduction programme)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFP	World Food Programme

# 1. Introduction

Social assistance in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is a complex mix of government-led social protection, declining levels of humanitarian aid, and local (often *ad hoc*) community-based initiatives. This paper examines the accountability of this mix of assistance from the perspectives of frontline providers – that is, the people working at local levels to provide that assistance. By exploring their experiences and viewpoints, we aim to shed light on the operational challenges, motivations, and systemic issues that influence the effectiveness and integrity of social assistance in this region.

Since 2015, government-led social assistance programmes in the KRI have been largely inactive, other than the continuation of the large-scale Public Distribution System (PDS), leading to a reliance on local organisations and international actors to fill the void. However, international humanitarian aid has also been declining in recent years.

Through analysis of frontline providers' experiences, the paper identifies significant gaps between social protection policies and actual practice in social assistance. There is a great deal of emphasis on social protection reform in Iraq led by the government and supported by international institutions, though currently there is less traction in the KRI due to funding blockages from central Iraq and government reluctance to integrate refugee caseloads. This has led to the emergence of parallel systems where locally led efforts coexist – often uneasily and with little coordination – alongside internationally driven aid programmes. A lack of trust between actors, limited coordination, and a lack of participation in decision-making by local actors are undermining the accountability of social assistance.

Research on accountability from the Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) Research programme sought to answer the following questions:

- What do intersections between humanitarian accountability to affected populations (AAP) approaches and social accountability look like in the KRI: who is accountable to whom, and how do different actors participate?
- How are humanitarian and development approaches to accountability for assistance intersecting? To what extent are they linked to governance and protection challenges?
- What are the tensions and trade-offs between accountability to those receiving assistance and accountability to donors?
- What does 'locally accountable' mean for social assistance in protracted crises?
  - Which factors and/or processes contribute to stronger accountability, and how?
  - What are the capacities/skills needed to implement strong accountability?
  - How does social capital and, in particular, civil society play a role in accountability between communities and service providers?

The research set out to provide evidence on how to strengthen accountability pathways for social assistance in the KRI, and how assistance could be more dignified and inclusive, as well as to integrate the perspectives of frontline staff into the debates, policy and programming priorities of actors providing assistance. Box 1.1 provides an overview of the key definitions related to the research.

## Box 1.1: Key definitions

**Social protection** refers to a set of policies and programmes aimed at preventing or protecting all people against poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion throughout the lifecycle, with a particular emphasis on vulnerable groups (SPIAC-B 2019; Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004).

**Social assistance** is one part of social protection. The main social assistance modalities are food, cash or in-kind transfers, fee waivers for education and health, and state subsidies, for the poorest and most vulnerable people and households. We focus on regular food/cash/in-kind transfers, which the beneficiary receives without having to give a contribution. These transfers can be given either unconditionally or with conditions linking the support to the recipient's participation in public works, attending health clinics, or other activities. These transfers sometimes integrate livelihood, nutrition, or other support, and are then referred to as 'cash-plus' programmes. Social assistance in crises can be provided by development or humanitarian actors. Humanitarian assistance uses the same modalities of food, cash, vouchers, and other in-kind transfers as development assistance but can have different objectives, usually framed around saving lives and alleviating suffering (Slater and Sabates-Wheeler 2021).

**Social accountability:** This is the umbrella term for mechanisms that seek to operationalise direct accountability relationships between citizens and the state (Forster, Malena and Singh n.d.). Social accountability includes 'the extent and capacity of citizens to hold the state and service providers accountable and make them responsive to needs of citizens and beneficiaries' (Grandvoinnet, Aslam and Raha 2015), as well as 'a pro-active process by which public officials inform about and justify their plans of action, their behaviour and results and are sanctioned accordingly' (Ackerman 2005).

**Accountability to affected populations (AAP):** This is the commitment to use power responsibly by taking account of, giving account to, and being held to account by the people humanitarian organisations seek to assist (IASC 2017). In this paper, we either refer to social accountability in social protection programming, or AAP for humanitarian frameworks. 'Accountability' is understood as a general term that encompasses both social accountability and AAP framing of rights and responsibilities between rights-holders and duty-bearers.

**Accountability pathways** or lines are a 'blueprint' for how accountability is laid out and expected to function – which, if understood and mapped, can lead to a better understanding of how accountability pathways play out in practice. They influence broader considerations of power, social contracts, and inclusion (Seferis and Harvey 2022; Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* 2017).

**Frontline staff/aid providers:** Frontline staff have the most direct day-to-day contact with crisis-affected people and are directly involved in providing information, collecting and responding to feedback and complaints, managing expectations, enabling participation of crisis-affected people in the programme, engaging communities in making decisions, and implementing safeguarding policies (Reader and Cechvala 2023). In this research, frontline providers represent a range of entities, including government bodies (frontline providers are often social workers), local organisations, international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement, and UN agencies.

**Marginalisation:** According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), marginalisation is when 'disadvantaged [groups] are commonly poorly represented in political structures and decision-making bodies and consequently have little control over decisions that affect them. Lacking a voice in shaping their own circumstances, they are vulnerable to neglect. And when disasters strike, these communities are most likely to be at the back of the line for humanitarian assistance, if not totally forgotten' (UNDP 2010). Marginalised groups often include women, and people living with disabilities, who face additional risks such as gender-based violence (GBV) or sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) when social assistance provision is not accountable.

Source: Authors' own.

## 2. Methods

The study used a combination of qualitative and participatory methods. We worked with a local organisation, Pasewan, which conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with 17 research participants (see Table 2.1), and made 4 observation trips with local organisations in Sulaymaniyah and Duhok to distribution sites and to visit families (with their consent and without recording or photographing any events). The BASIC research lead on accountability joined the Pasewan team to facilitate face-to-face collective analysis workshops in Sulaymaniyah (3 February 2024) and Duhok (5 February 2024), with a total of 31 attendees. Further details of the approach, and a full list of the organisations involved in the research, are provided in the annexe (Tables A.1 and A.2). The interviews, workshops, and participatory work in the KRI was complemented by a literature review of social assistance in Iraq.

**Table 2.1: Research participants**

Stakeholder group	Participating organisations	Number of participants
Frontline staff (primary research participants) Interviews 1–17 Cited as interviews (Int)	Local organisations (13) Government (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs) social worker (1) Local staff of international organisations (3)	17 (47% women)
Frontline staff: workshop participants and Day in the life of Interviews 18–44 Cited as workshop	Local organisations (26) Government (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs) social workers (4) Local staff of international organisations (1)	31 (27 new participants)
Key informants KIIs 1–11 Cited as key informant interviews (KIIs)	CashCap, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) European Union (EU) World Food Programme (WFP) International Labour Organization (ILO) World Bank Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) United States Agency for International Development (USAID)	12 (33% women)
Total	29 local organisations 11 international institutions	56 (48% women)

Source: Authors' own. Created using project data.

Sulaymaniyah was selected to provide complementarity with the BASIC lived experiences research so that the accountability research with frontline providers was based on recipients' priority questions, mutually reinforcing the research objectives and proposed solutions generated. Sulaymaniyah was also selected because it is a region with diverse needs and a wide range of social assistance actors and modalities (ranging from community-based aid to large national programmes). Duhok was included because of its long history of humanitarian cash assistance and presence of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and provided a northern KRI perspective with different social assistance priorities.

Participatory methods offered different ways for people to share their experiences (confidentially, in group settings, through written testimonies, using audio-visual methods, and undertaking collective analysis in workshops). Participants in the research shaped the questions and informed the selection of the appropriate approaches and tools with which to capture their perspectives and responses to those questions. Participants were asked to provide stories and reflections on their roles and perspectives during key events in the social assistance programme cycle, including through the use of 'day in the life of' testimonies.

Participants were drawn from a diverse array of entities, including those that are local, independent, non-partisan, and international, as well as those with religious affiliations (predominantly Christians, Muslims, and Yazidis). Additionally, the group included organisations with political affiliations principally linked to local political parties. Social workers with local branches of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) were also included because although their offices lack the funds needed to provide social assistance to vulnerable caseloads, they still do case management and interact regularly with these families, as well as refer them to other aid providers for further support.

Although the people who ultimately participated in the research were very forthcoming in sharing their experiences, a key limitation was identifying organisations and individuals who would provide transparent contributions as opposed to more sanitised versions of their experiences that would portray their organisation in a positive light. Pasewan therefore spent time establishing open communication with potential research participants before selecting individual interviewees. The research team also invited additional people and organisations to participate in the collective analysis workshops (using anonymised findings) to widen the number of individual perspectives included in the study.

The study built on and linked to a complementary piece of BASIC research examining the lived experiences of particularly vulnerable people receiving assistance in Sulaymaniyah (see Box 2.1). The women living with disabilities and youth from Halabja involved in this participatory research designed the questions that shaped the interview guides for the accountability research outlined in this paper.

### **Box 2.1: BASIC lived experiences research in Sulaymaniyah, KRI (2023–24)**

The BASIC lived experiences research used qualitative, narrative, creative, and participatory methodologies to explore the lived experiences of disabled women in Sulaymaniyah and rural youth from Halabja trying to access social assistance and coping in crises. Participatory research processes with both groups were run by Pasewan (accompanied by the Institute of Development Studies) to generate stories of social assistance. They used creative visual/tactile methods to build contextual, emotional, and relational knowledge that may be missed by other research approaches.

The participatory process used during the lived experiences research involved reaching and engaging the most marginalised people; building trust, capacities and inclusive group dynamics; generating and sharing stories of 'lived' experiences in safe spaces; and community sense-making and re-framing of experiences. This helped participants to identify areas for their own action towards improving social assistance in the KRI. They ran a 'Protect my Dignity' campaign aiming to stop photos being taken by social assistance providers, which has gained the support of the public, some social assistance providers, and the Minister of Social Affairs. They also made videos to communicate key insights about the issues of social assistance provision. These products formed the basis of the dialogue with service providers in the accountability research (Shaw *et al.* 2024).

*Source: Authors' own.*

### 3. Social assistance in the KRI

This section provides a brief overview of the complex mix of international humanitarian and development support and government-led social assistance in the KRI. Iraq has experienced domestic and international conflict for decades, as well as mass displacement, political and social unrest, ethno-religious tensions, terrorism, climate change-related shocks, the Covid-19 pandemic, and economic crises, all of which have had a significant impact on its social and economic welfare (Action contre la Faim 2023).

Recent research on the social contract in Iraq from citizens' perspectives provides an in-depth look into how conflict (the 2003 invasion, the Syrian crisis, and later, the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, ISIS) and subsequent governance initiatives have affected the accountability pathways between citizens and the state. Current political structures are based on 'ethnosectarian competition', resulting in a modern Iraqi state that 'rests on fragmented authority' (Ardevini and O'Driscoll 2023: 419). Although citizens' main concern with the government was corruption and the state's inability to address it, a survey with more than 8,700 Iraqis found that 89.2 per cent of respondents were 'very dissatisfied' with the government's management of the country's resources in relation to the economy and service provision, including 82 per cent of respondents in the KRI (*ibid.*: 426). The same study also noted that 'service allocation has historically been used as a means to maintain social control through networks of patronage' (*ibid.*: 425; see also Brinkerhoff, Wetterberg and Dunn 2012). These dynamics continue to influence service provision and social assistance across the country.

There is a dual administrative system for social protection programming as a result of the political and administrative division between the Government of Iraq in Baghdad and the KRG in Erbil (Action contre la Faim 2023). Both systems have undertaken planning and revision exercises to improve the efficacy and reach of Social Safety Net Programmes (SSNPs) in the past 10 years. International actors are attempting to manage a transition from a humanitarian response to a development-orientated approach and collaboration with government partners in both parts of Iraq (Action contre la Faim 2023; Savage 2021). The Savage (2021) study notes that none of the initiatives to link humanitarian and social protection systems have been sustained or gained sufficient buy-in from all stakeholders despite goodwill and openness from both government and humanitarian actors. This is of particular relevance for the KRI, since the region hosts around 270,000 refugees from the war in Syria, which is approximately 90 per cent of Syrian refugees across Iraq, as well as small numbers of refugees from Iran and Türkiye (UNHCR 2024). Most refugees and IDPs from central Iraq are integrated into urban areas (around 66 per cent), while the rest live in nine designated camps (Pasewan and BASIC Research Team debrief, February 2024). Displaced persons, returnees, and host communities continue to struggle and need support to rebuild their livelihoods and overcome the challenges they face (Action contre la Faim 2023). In 2024, the United Nations (UN) reported that 56,000 IDPs (6 per cent) and 600,000 returnees (12 per cent) continued to have 'high severity' humanitarian needs, and a further 255,000 IDPs (27 per cent) and 1.9 million returnees (40 per cent) were categorised as having 'medium severity' needs (UN OCHA 2024: 10).

The main social assistance provision across all of Iraq is the Public Distribution System (PDS) managed by the Ministry of Trade, which provides the vast majority of Iraq's citizens with a monthly basket of subsidised food items (wheat flour, rice, vegetable oil, sugar, pulses, and tomato paste) (Action contre la Faim 2023; Mohamed *et al.* 2021). The Ministry of Trade at the Government of Iraq level implements the PDS in the KRI. The scale of the PDS has led to calls for its reform/modernisation, including a restructuring suggested by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and a significant narrowing of its eligibility criteria (Action contre la Faim 2023; UNHCR 2023a; KII 4). However, many Iraqis view the aid provided through the PDS as a right or entitlement, and therefore successive governments have been reluctant to reform it (Savage 2021; Alzobaidee 2015).

Prior to 2015, a large-scale SSNP in the KRI provided support to people living below the poverty line and in other categories of vulnerability (including people with disabilities, people over 75, and people unable to work). However, delivery of social protection by the KRG depends on budget transfers from the Government of Iraq, and during the crisis in 2015 the programme was scaled back to cover only people with disabilities; this programme remains active but is not operational due to budget constraints, which are explored below (Action contre la Faim 2023).

The policy framework for social protection for the KRI is laid out in a 2016 Social Protection Strategic Framework (SPSF) (KRG 2016). This set out a focus on rationalising the Social Safety Net (SSN) system through poverty targeting, and focusing on providing effective social care to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, given that only 11 per cent of the poorest were receiving cash assistance at the time (Action contre la Faim 2023; KRG 2016). Since 2022, the KRG, led by the Ministry of Planning, has worked closely with international institutions to update its social protection strategy through extensive consultations as well as hiring a firm to develop the strategy (KII 3; KII 8). In the annexe, Table A.3 provides an overview of formal social assistance programmes in the KRI.

There is also a national social protection reform process underway across Iraq, supported by international donors and UN agencies. However, in the KRI, there are legal stumbling blocks to recognising the ten-year-old Social Protection Law (2014) that underpins current reform processes. There are issues around whether the law requires ratification by the KRI parliament, and the current legal frameworks specifying categorical targeting rather than poverty or vulnerability-based eligibility (UNHCR 2023a).

Disagreements between the KRI and Baghdad over how social assistance should be financed is a major stumbling block to reform or expansion of government-led social assistance in the KRI. It has not received centralised funding since 2015, even to pay salaries, because of disputed oil sales (van Wilgenburg 2024). The KRI confirmed in early February 2024 that it had received 600bn Iraqi dinars (IQD) (approximately US\$458 million) from the federal government to start back-paying salaries (KII 3; KRG 2024), but the question of who finances social assistance programmes remains. The KRG insists that institutional social assistance programmes should be financed by Baghdad, which is constitutionally correct, but political disagreements have prevented funding to flow from Baghdad to Erbil, so the KRG maintains that it cannot provide social assistance via its institutional social protection programmes (KII 2).

In parallel with social protection provision and reform efforts, humanitarian assistance programming has been a major part of the response to the conflict with ISIL and the resulting displacement, return, and economic disruption (Savage 2021). Humanitarian cash focused on addressing short-term needs of vulnerable households, and was coordinated by the Cash Working Group (*ibid.*). Declining humanitarian funding following the reduction in conflict has led to reductions in humanitarian assistance and efforts to transition from humanitarian assistance, with the aim to integrate those still in need into social protection programming (Savoca 2023: 2).

Internally displaced persons were a priority group for humanitarian organisations scaling down and phasing out assistance programmes in the KRI. The inclusion of IDPs in the KRG-led SSN was unclear for many international actors, and there were restrictions for IDPs; advocacy by UN agencies managed to get MoLSA to waive registration laws, which was the first barrier for IDPs' access to social assistance (KII 4). In February 2023, MoLSA decided to assess 180,000 internally displaced Iraqis living in 25 camps in the KRI for enrolment in its poverty reduction programme (the SSN). According to UNHCR in late 2023, 'The Ministry also decided to prioritise the assessment of IDPs and IDP returnees in urban areas across the country, regardless of whether they are registered in the MoLSA's online registration system which is a requirement for any other Iraqi national' (UNHCR 2023b: 1). There was also a sense that government systems were not ready to take over large-scale humanitarian caseloads, such as the World Food Programme's (WFP) food distributions in the camps (KII 4). Some larger international organisations continued to support smaller caseloads of the most vulnerable people and families, according to their targeting priorities. Although WFP discontinued its cash assistance to IDPs in camps due to lack of funding in 2023, UNHCR retains a certain amount of multi-purpose cash for vulnerable cases (KII 4; KII 9).

The lack of established, institutional social assistance programmes in the KRI made the transition away from humanitarian aid very difficult for recipients and aid providers, especially local organisations that benefited from temporary humanitarian coordination but are now excluded as decision makers in social reform processes (Duhok workshop). It is also important to note that humanitarian programmes in the region did not include the majority of vulnerable Kurds who were not internally displaced or prioritised for humanitarian aid (Shaw *et al.* 2024).

While donors, policymakers, and government representatives discuss the political and financial implications of social protection reform, humanitarian assistance has scaled down considerably and the more informal, community-based, and localised social assistance efforts are unable to fully fill the gap. As a result, vulnerable communities, and households in the KRI who must rely on social assistance to meet essential needs, bear the brunt of these disagreements. This is especially true for people living with disabilities, as they have historically been prioritised for institutional social assistance in the KRI (and Iraq more broadly), but currently do not receive support.

In the absence of institutionalised, government-led social assistance in the KRI, humanitarian aid and locally led social assistance have become crucial avenues for vulnerable people to access support and in turn have direct implications for the accountability of social assistance, now and in future. These are explored below.

### 3.1 Local and community-based assistance in the KRI

In light of the limited government and declining humanitarian assistance described above, local and community-based assistance has expanded in an effort to meet need, but it is often *ad hoc* and financed through crowdfunding and local donors. It is also an under-researched topic in the KRI, so this subsection draws on the resources available as well as the BASIC research findings from the accountability and lived experiences projects. Although this has always been the case in the KRI, it is especially relevant in the current vacuum of formal social assistance. Shaw *et al.* (2024) found that in the KRI, 'participants recognised the critical role of informal networks (wealthy people, tribe, religious community, friends, and family) in supporting individuals and families in coping with hardship' (Shaw *et al.* 2024: 59). However, this 'temporary and compassionate response' is viewed as disorganised by communities and external stakeholders alike (KII 11; Shaw *et al.* 2024).

In the KRI, there are a broad range of organisations across a spectrum of affiliations and mandates or specialisations, many of which provide social assistance directly to communities (KII 8; KII 11). Among themselves, local organisations distinguish between independent NGOs and those with political or sectarian affiliations, where the aid provided often comes with conditions (voting, allegiance, etc.) beyond needs-based assistance (Sulaymaniyah and Duhok workshops).

*Independence is crucial in charity work, treating everyone equally. We avoid the political misuse seen in many charities. Our independence sets us apart from government officials and those politically or religiously affiliated.*

(Int 9, woman with a local NGO, Sulaymaniyah)

There is also tension between established, 'principled' organisations and opportunistic actors providing *ad hoc* assistance. Established organisations face bureaucratic hurdles such as a cumbersome yearly license renewal process, and difficulty accessing bank accounts that would enable them to receive and account for institutional funding, particularly from abroad. Conversely, anyone can set up an NGO (or multiple NGOs) without standards, certification, or accountability. This affects the image of established NGOs (both workshops). Moreover, the *ad hoc* nature of social assistance in the KRI in the absence of government-led programmes raises several risks in terms of aid consistency and accountability, issues that are explored in Section 5.

This spectrum of organisations is funded by an equally wide range of donors for different purposes, which further complicates the social assistance landscape and who is accountable for what. There is no mapping of funding pathways to local organisations in the KRI, so research participants were asked to list their organisation's main donors during the workshops. Examples of local and international donors highlighted in the workshops are outlined in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1: Donors of local organisations in the KRI**

	Sulaymaniyah	Duhok
Local (KRI)	Wealthy individuals Business people Companies Shops and supermarkets Doctors	Community members Business people Companies Shops and supermarkets Doctors
International	UNHCR International NGOs	ZOA; UNICEF; WADI (Association for Crisis Assistance and Development Cooperation); BMZ (German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development); WAP (local NGO); LDS (Latter-day Saints); NCM (Nazarene Compassionate Ministries); churches

Source: Authors' own. Created using project data.

Finally, what constitutes more formal social assistance and what constitutes crowdfunded support for individual cases are not mutually exclusive categories; often, the same organisations provide both types. Crowdfunding is a specific way of resourcing assistance for individuals in need. Organisations might have more orthodox targeting approaches and sources of financing and use crowdfunding at the same time.

Since government-led programmes stopped supporting people in the KRI in 2015, there have been two main types of local assistance:

- **Crisis-related (IDP/ISIS, Covid-19, natural disasters such as flooding, etc.):** Local organisations get information about communities in need from government, media, or word of mouth. They use an area or neighbourhood approach to identify families in need to prioritise recipients for assistance.
- **Chronic poverty or need:** Social assistance for vulnerable groups with chronic or recurring unmet basic needs not related to a particular crisis or shock (such as orphans, widows, people with disabilities, families without reliable income sources, etc). Generally, local organisations providing social assistance for those chronically in need do so with a small group of families or individuals already known to them (or within a community they know). After people approach them or are referred by another person or organisation, local aid providers conduct surveys to verify the information and the needs (KII 11; Sulaymaniyah and Duhok workshops; Pasewan and BASIC Research Team debrief, February 2024).

Aid modalities and delivery systems also vary by organisation, donor, and response, further complicating the social assistance landscape. Whereas some local organisations provide cash assistance, many deliver bespoke items. In-kind aid procured from the market is usually based on 'good prices from personal connections' (Sulaymaniyah workshop). The same providers that offer social assistance (transfers, whether cash or in-kind) often combine this aid with other types of support or social care, such as housing, medical assistance, or community projects (building mosques, hosting events, etc.). As a result, what is considered 'social assistance' in the KRI has evolved into a broad definition of financial support to vulnerable individuals or families, and blurs the lines between social assistance transfers that fill gaps left by non-operational government programmes, and other types of community-based aid or charity.

*We cater to requests from orphans, poor families, and donors. Assistance includes money, meat, food packages, kerosene in winter, and school clothes. We've also built houses during Ramadan and supported specific cases, like a student with a kidney transplant.*

(Int 9, woman, Sulaymaniyah)

*During distribution, we present aid as a donation from a friend through our organisation, maintaining confidentiality about the donor.*

(Int 11, woman, Duhok)

*Those who receive the aid are unaware of it. We take the donation to their house and tell them that it belongs to the Centre, and they pray for us. If we tell them to come here, there will be chaos.*

(Int 13, man, Duhok)

### 3.2 Approaches to accountability: government-led social protection and humanitarian assistance

This section reviews the current (up to 2024) accountability reforms and mechanisms that span social protection and humanitarian systems as they relate to social assistance programmes. Accountability mechanisms refer to the community engagement strategies, communication channels, and type of feedback collected by institutional providers (government or international actors). It is important to note that social protection actors often refer to grievance and redress mechanisms (GRMs), while humanitarian AAP references complaint and feedback mechanisms (CFMs) (Seferis and Harvey 2022). This subsection is based on a review of available literature and aid agency documentation (project reports and evaluations). Since literature on the accountability systems of local (informal) social assistance in the KRI is scarce (hence the focus of this research), this is covered in the following sections.

Beyond the social assistance sector, broader efforts to improve accountability mechanisms in Iraq are largely focused on top-down governance and systems-building by the government and their international partners, specifically:

1. 'Building the capacity of civil servants, parliamentarians, lawyers, judges, and civil society members who (at least on paper) hold accountability mandates;
2. Raising awareness of accountability (for example, teaching legal principles around topics such as anti-corruption measures to members of the bureaucracy and the public);
3. Funding or otherwise encouraging media and civil society watchdog groups' (Mansour 2023: 37).

International actors have focused on civil society strengthening as well as 'a wide range of economic empowerment and educational initiatives, with a view not only to enhancing economic opportunities but to counterbalancing the economic drivers of conflict or elite capture' (Mansour 2023: 39). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) combine institutional reform with private sector and business support. For example, USAID's Iraq Community Action Programme offers grants and technical assistance to local organisations working on issues such as human rights, governance, advocacy, and community development. USAID has also run the Iraq Civil Society Support Programme, a US\$40 million initiative to promote an informed and sustainable civil society (*ibid.*).

In the field of social protection, the transition away from humanitarian aid has also brought renewed focus on social accountability mechanisms across Iraq. The proposed Social Assistance Law includes 'institutional/administrative changes, the launch of a grievance redress system, and improved information management systems' (Shaw *et al.* 2024: 26). In the recommendations of its report into social protection programming in Iraq, Action contre la Faim (2023: 37) notes that 'putting additional emphasis on accountability can reinforce public trust and enhance transparency in the social protection system'. UN agencies involved in social protection reform work through government coordination structures and accountability mechanisms such as GRMs, filling gaps in technical capacity and supporting the national data centre to maintain updated systems (KII 4).

These efforts are still in the initial stages and focus on accountability for 'formal' or government-led social assistance programmes rather than broader accountability across different providers (civil society, mutual aid, humanitarian, etc.). Accountability mechanisms are still largely seen as slow and ineffective by those receiving aid. People receiving social assistance in Sulaymaniyah and Halabja felt there was only so much that providers could do to improve the accountability of their programmes: 'Although... there are good people working for change, participants perceived that many of the [providers] are weighed down by the system' (Shaw *et al.* 2024: 66). The risks of politicising social assistance and doing harm are explored further in Section 5.2.

Humanitarian actors have had a focus on communication with communities and AAP, with no shortage of initiatives. Examples include; (1) the Iraq Information Centre, managed by UNOPS; (2) the PSEA Network, co-chaired by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNHCR; (3) the GBV hotline, managed by UNFPA; (4) community resource centres, under the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) cluster and located in targeted areas of return; (5) IDP camp-based complaints and feedback mechanisms, managed by the camp management agency and the CCCM cluster; and (6) cluster/working group-specific feedback mechanisms (Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) 2019).

Humanitarian coordination efforts persist despite the phase-out of the cluster system, particularly focusing on durable solutions for issues such as support to returnees and broader food security. This coordination involves UN agencies and various other actors, including international NGOs and local implementing partners of international organisations, who collaborate to coordinate the provision of services, especially in camp settings, and address gaps in assistance. However, since the phase-out of the cluster system, there has been a noticeable decline in information-sharing, which is particularly evident in camps where residents now seek information from any available source due to the absence of a centralised coordination mechanism (KII 4). Although protection monitoring is integrated into many frontline teams' roles and responsibilities, community engagement more broadly is not, with some international agencies citing a lack of community-facing staff with the relevant competencies (KII 1; KII 4). AAP remains concentrated on individual agencies' operations, and complaint and feedback mechanisms in the KRI often specifically focus on targeting – the number one topic for complaints reported to the call centre – which is in line with findings from many other contexts (Seferis and Harvey 2022; KII 1; KII 4).

Despite these efforts, awareness and use of humanitarian accountability mechanisms by affected populations remain low. In December 2019, Ground Truth Solutions cited a Danish Refugee Council (DRC) Iraq data set from 2019, which found that only 38 per cent of people surveyed in their areas of operation were aware of complaints mechanisms (Ground Truth Solutions 2019: 7). Accountability mechanisms were concentrated in IDP camps, where even basic awareness of mechanisms for displaced people outside of camps and host community members was very low. Trust was high, but few people surveyed thought that aid providers took their opinion into account when providing aid – particularly in Sulaymaniyah (Ground Truth Solutions 2019: 3). As humanitarian programmes were scaled down and eventually phased out, so were the coordination and accountability mechanisms used to generate data on AAP and encourage aid providers to adapt their programmes based on the feedback.

There are positive signals about the role frontline staff can play in AAP. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) conducted a study into how frontline staff can enable the participation of crisis-affected people in the design and delivery of humanitarian assistance as part of its AAP standards, which included staff in Iraq as part of the primary research (Reader and Cechvala 2023). The research found that to enable the participation of crisis-affected people, frontline staff needed to have the following (*ibid.*: 5):

- Practical skills (such as soft skills of listening, empathy, facilitation, and cultural sensitivity) to implement participatory approaches and build trust with crisis-affected populations;
- Clear guidance as to what is expected of them to help them make time for and see participation as central to their role, rather than an optional add-on;
- Close connections with local partners, to improve access to, acceptance from, and understanding of the local context and community. This helps enhance trust.

Notably, gender is not mentioned in many of the humanitarian accountability initiatives, despite evidence that many women feel uncomfortable asking for assistance or providing feedback on aid (Shaw *et al.* 2024; Ground Truth Solutions 2019; workshops).

## 4. Frontline worker perspectives on accountability

This section presents the experiences of frontline staff involved in local, community-based assistance, and outlines the accountability learning implications for social assistance programmes in the KRI, both for people working with small local organisations and those working with larger, more formal and international organisations. It begins with frontline perspectives on the capacities and resources required to provide accountable social assistance, including what motivates and frustrates participants as providers. Dozens of participants shared their personal, specific experiences through a ‘day in the life of’ exercise, three of which are highlighted here. We analyse how these elements, as well as communication and decision-making at community level, affect accountability pathways for social assistance. This section then outlines how frontline providers conceptualise trust – a core element of accountable assistance – and engage with communities. It concludes by examining the duality of social media to either improve accountability or undermine it, also drawing on perspectives from the lived experiences research participants in Sulaymaniyah (Shaw *et al.* 2024).

### 4.1 Capacities, motivations, and frustrations

*We are a bridge between donors and those in need.*  
(Workshop participant, Sulaymaniyah, February 2024)

Participants in the research shared a common and clear understanding of the factors that enabled organisations in the KRI to provide predictable and accountable social assistance. The ‘day in the life of’ examples (see Tables 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3) and collective analysis from the workshops show a strong recognition of the importance of softer, interpersonal skills that frontline staff use to handle difficult situations. A participant in Duhok noted that, ‘you must be soft if they are angry’ (Duhok workshop). Research participants also shared insights on gender. In Sulaymaniyah, participants shared that organisations with women staff were more likely to understand gender-specific requests and be able to accommodate them (Sulaymaniyah workshop).

*To perform our job effectively, we require a strong desire to provide assistance, a robust plan, and serious aid. **Effective planning, an active team, a charitable mindset, and hard work are crucial factors** [our emphasis] that assist me in my job.*  
(Int 5, woman with local NGO, Sulaymaniyah)

Experienced local organisations have established protocols for social assistance distribution, including pre-planned calls to families, early set-up, and clear posting of recipients’ names, although the latter can raise concerns about data privacy (Duhok workshop). However, maintaining and scaling the quality of assistance remains challenging due to a lack of professional expertise across various fields, including accounting, and community mobilisation (Sulaymaniyah workshop). Additionally, difficulties in accessing specialised resources and qualifications, such as mental health expertise, further complicate the provision of comprehensive assistance (Sulaymaniyah workshop).

The role of volunteers was crucial for local organisations, whether they were established NGOs or less structured community-based groups. Volunteering within one’s community in the KRI is considered a significant contribution (Int 10, man, Sulaymaniyah). ‘Community response is crucial in social assistance. Honest and transparent work builds trust over time. Many contribute as volunteers, showcasing the kindness and generosity of people from various professions, including judges, engineers, and doctors’ (Int 9, woman from national NGO, Sulaymaniyah). Volunteers significantly alleviated the workload and enhanced organisations’ ability to reach more people directly, with one respondent noting that sometimes a single employed staff member is accompanied by 10–20 volunteers; the man noted that ‘any charitable organisation depends on volunteers and donors more than their employees’ (Int 1, man, Sulaymaniyah).

**Volunteers often replace social worker and outreach functions for local organisations.** Volunteers not only assist in operational tasks but also contribute to community outreach and information dissemination, as illustrated by the establishment of community centres and engagement of outreach volunteers to publicise services and share information within the community. Volunteers play critical roles in overcoming financial constraints and building trust, particularly when they bring specialised skillsets (such as doctors and nurses) or fill specific needs (such as truck drivers) (Int 11, woman, Duhok; Int 9, woman with local organisation, Sulaymaniyah).

*We have established a community centre where we publicise our services through announcements in the camp and on [our] Facebook page. We also have community and outreach volunteers who are selected from the communities we serve. They are based in Sulaymaniyah and help spread information about the services we offer. They share their phone numbers and addresses with us.* (Int 3, woman, Sulaymaniyah)

**Table 4.1: Day in the life of ‘C’, a lawyer with a local NGO in Duhok (2024)**

Starting the day	Arriving at the camp	Case management and duty of care	Feelings and follow-up
<p>I work part-time in the organisation (3 days a week). In Duhok city we have three centres (the main centre is in Duhok), which receives all cases belonging to IDPs, refugees and also the host community. The second one is in Khanke camp (only IDP cases) and the third is in Domiz camp (for refugees).</p> <p>In Duhok centre, people visit us to get treatment and our psychotherapists ask them if there are any legal issues they want to ask me about it. Same thing at the camp. I do visit the camps once every two weeks, and anyone [with a] legal issue can ask our psychotherapists in the camp and then we set up an appointment [for] the interview.</p>	<p>When I arrive, the first thing I do is go to Khanke camp. Visiting the camp and connecting with the people there makes me feel great.</p> <p>[People] approach me through asking the centre manager or the psychotherapist. Or I introduce myself before giving the legal awareness sessions.</p> <p>I will make it a point to listen to everyone at the camps and identify their problems. By giving them a platform to express their concerns, I am creating a safe and supportive environment. [I] provide them the phone number of the centre and tell them whenever they need a lawyer, one will be there.</p>	<p>I start visiting the house of the ones that have been registered.</p> <p>I start by introducing myself to them and telling them that every single word is going to be only between us and no one else will know about it. But again, the most common issues are related to documents. If the case I am dealing with is public, I say it in public. And if the case is private, [we] sit together in a room and listen to what he or she has to say. Every private case has to be confidential.</p> <p>In Domiz camp, most cases are related to tents, it is hard to get them a tent in the camp. In some cases, more than one family is living in a tent and there is not enough space for the people there. This makes me very sad and disappointed.</p>	<p>Once I’m back at the office, I’ll dive right into working on the information I gathered. Most cases make me happy when I have finished it positively, but sometimes I feel sad if I couldn’t solve the problem even if I know it’s beyond my scope.</p> <p>At the end of the day, it’s fulfilling to know that I’ve done my best to help others, even if I can’t fix all their problems.</p>

Source: Authors’ own. Created using data from a 45-year-old man, working in the IDP camps.

By contrast, frontline providers working for international organisations (or those affiliated with international networks or movements) were much more likely to emphasise the training and experience of staff than volunteer networks or being embedded within communities. The ‘human element’ is therefore defined very differently:

*The human element is critical, and a well-managed administrative process from start to finish is imperative. This includes identifying and training a capable team, ensuring their ability to evaluate and distribute aid, and handling interpersonal interactions effectively. Certainly, logistical supplies and material needs are crucial. **The success of any process relies on having well-trained staff, capable evaluators, and efficient administrators. Certain technical aspects may be better understood by experienced staff.** [our emphasis] For example, while suggesting a transition to technology-based payment systems, the community’s lack of tech proficiency led us back to cash transactions.*

(Int 8, man working with the Red Cross/Red Crescent, Sulaymaniyah)

**Government frontline capacity, mainly in the form of social workers, was seen as very limited.** Even without the current financial blockages, participants and key informants felt the government was ‘almost non-existent’, especially compared with the more organised and present local NGOs. The government staff ‘can’t offer anything, they are extremely disorganised, and they have no updated data’ (KII 11). The government cannot commit to their work – likely due to lack of salaries.

Government offices only have a two-hour daily window during which they can provide support; if people miss it, they need to return the next day. Civil servants have a limited ability to fulfil requirements; renewing IDs takes time, ensuring continuity of payments is problematic, and there are considerable delays in resolving issues. However, Pasewan observed during visits to government offices that despite these challenges, ministry staff treated everyone respectfully and did their utmost to resolve issues (Pasewan and BASIC Research Team debrief, February 2024).

During the interviews, most of the research participants perceived their role as charity as opposed to solidarity – charity as the vertical or hierarchical provision of aid that often reinforces power imbalances, versus solidarity as more horizontal mutual aid, co-designed by communities and providers (Hopman and Knijn 2022) – and ensuring the inclusion or uplifting of marginalised and vulnerable people. Yet during the workshops, many participants emphasised the need to go beyond short-term, *ad hoc* charity to work on solutions together with communities, in coordination with the government. **Local providers’ focus on meeting short-term needs is most likely due to the fact that that is how their support (and current systems) are set up.** This is an important consideration for building stronger accountability pathways for social assistance at scale going forward.

#### 4.1.1 Motivations

Frontline providers of social assistance, whether from smaller, community-based organisations or working with larger international entities, cited **a combination of personal pride and reward as well as collective benefits as a team and organisation as motivations for their work. These motivating factors offer insights into why frontline providers do the work, which in turn influences their perceptions roles and responsibilities, the quality of the work, and what they are ultimately accountable for.** On the personal level, frontline providers felt a sense of contribution to their communities, a role in creating connections and opportunities for people, and providing ‘psychological relief’, which was mentioned more than material relief. Interestingly, there were fewer differences between participants working with local versus international organisations when it came to which factors motivated them most strongly to provide social assistance, suggesting that social or cultural factors influenced frontline providers’ motivations more than institutional or organisational cultures. These motivating factors were also evident in the ‘day in the life of exercises participants contributed during the collective analysis workshops (see Tables 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3), some of which are highlighted in this paper. Accountability when providing social assistance was therefore about meeting expectations and connecting with people at an individual level.

*I take pride in helping vulnerable people. It makes me happy to provide assistance free of charge – a significant contribution to mankind.*

(Int 17, man, national NGO, Duhok)

*The satisfaction comes from participants’ reactions and feedback. When we establish connections, provide employment opportunities, and witness their psychological well-being, it’s fulfilling. The positive impact on participants, despite challenges in providing comprehensive assistance, motivates and brings joy.*

(Int 2, woman with local NGO, Sulaymaniyah)

*Equally important is creating a positive working environment for our staff, where they understand the significance of the services they provide and respect the confidentiality, dignity, and needs of the people we serve.*

(Int 3, woman with international NGO, Sulaymaniyah)

**Table 4.2: Day in the life of ‘A’, a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) officer with an international NGO in Sulaymaniyah**

Starting the day	Team meeting	Communication with IDPs and managing data	Feelings and follow-up
<p>I wake up early and get to the office before 9am. My first tasks are to check emails, because we coordinate everything through email. Every email I receive is important, because each email sent to me includes either an important task, coordination or a communication that needs to take place, training that I need to do with partners, or create a report based on data that I have to analyse for the project.</p> <p>Email is also how I communicate with [local] donors and respond to their requests for information about how the project has been going.</p>	<p>The team meeting is the next important part of my day because it's when we talk through the work and what challenges we face. We have a lot of external factors that affect the project progress, like a lack of coordination or no proper planning with stakeholders like local authorities, donors, partners, or communities.</p> <p>Our partners are located in different places throughout Iraq. We communicate through field visits, online meetings, and workshops. The online communication has been a successful approach to reach out to our partners, but sometimes, some of the topics need to be communicated through face-to-face meetings, like security problems or sensitive cases. Since the partners are located far, this is a challenge.</p>	<p>I am responsible for ensuring data accuracy and consistency. As a team, we call the project participants, ask them the questions, and make sure of their data like name, age, gender, location, and type of service they received.</p> <p>We had an activity to issue the unified national ID for the IDPs who are based in Sulaymaniyah. The team and I distributed the information successfully and reached thousands of IDPs to participate in the process with the Iraqi Ministry of Interior. We were able to provide assistance to hundreds of IDPs with no charges, because all services were free.</p>	<p>I like to make sure everything is going well before I go home, but in this work it's not always possible. Sometimes I am frustrated when things outside of our control affect our projects, like poor planning from the government or partners not being able to visit a place because of security.</p>

Source: Authors' own. Created using data from a 34-year-old woman, a supervisor of projects with IDPs.

#### 4.1.2 Frustrations

**Frustrations included a wider range of internal and external factors, starting with institutional challenges in securing adequate and consistent funding, to finding people with the right capacities to implement high-quality programmes and meaningfully engage with communities.** These barriers to providing predictable and effective social assistance affect organisations' ability to meet needs and be accountable to communities, leading to different frustrations about the inadequacy of their aid. Box 4.1 highlights the particular mental health implications for frontline providers of social assistance in the KRI.

*It can be frustrating when we face budget constraints or realise that creating meaningful change requires substantial financial and knowledge resources, particularly in terms of capacity building.*  
(Int 3, woman, Sulaymaniyah)

*I feel frustrated when the amount of assistance falls short of meeting the actual needs, especially when we discover specific requirements during our visits that were not initially known. It bothers me that our society still overlooks the needs of individuals with special needs.*  
(Int 5, woman, Sulaymaniyah)

*The societal need for assistance is both challenging and motivating. The sheer volume of requests, especially during initiatives like kerosene distribution, can be overwhelming. Witnessing the struggles of young widows and occasional delays or insufficient salaries for sponsored children can be disheartening.*  
(Int 10, man, Sulaymaniyah)

*Obstacles include a lack of budget, dedicated employees, and support from authorities. The challenges during the time of Covid-19, political and financial constraints, and even death threats have been frustrating. However, adapting to monitor cases online has been crucial to overcoming these obstacles.*  
(Int 4, woman with regional NGO, Sulaymaniyah)

There was also a **strong sense of frustration when people tried to abuse the system, particularly because needs far outweighed the resources available:**

*Frustration arises when participants exploit the assistance provided. Some demand more than specified or request items beyond our distribution scope.*  
(Int 2, woman, Sulaymaniyah)

*Witnessing fathers misuse aid, selling, or gambling with it, is disheartening. Controlling certain situations, like family dynamics, is challenging. Despite efforts with contracts and alternative distributions, societal norms, especially in areas like Sinjar, still favour male control.*  
(Int 14, woman with faith-based organisation, Duhok)

*Frustration arises when individuals question why they weren't assisted, despite many others being in greater need. Limited aid for 20 families necessitates careful selection.*  
(Int 13, man, Duhok)

Other participants cited wider frustrations with the operating environment in the KRI and Iraq more broadly, which affected both local and international organisations, but with local organisations and civil society bearing the brunt of rigid or exclusionary systems. **Many cited 'political and bureaucratic interference' that inhibited their inability to operate freely and respond flexibly to the challenging environment in the face of rising needs and limited funds.**

*Political associations often overshadow our work, hindering cooperation. Despite being a non-political organisation working on the Islamic curriculum, we face challenges.*  
(Int 10, man, Sulaymaniyah)

*We have sufficient places for distribution, and we also have volunteers. However, the challenge lies in maintaining our freedom as an organisation. Political and bureaucratic interference can hinder our ability to operate independently. The primary challenges stem from political and party interference. While I can distribute aid in places like Erbil without issues, challenges arise in areas where political influences are stronger, such as Sulaymaniyah. When I went to Sulaymaniyah through organisations, I faced insults and had my car documents confiscated. The political climate there created significant difficulties for me.*  
(Int 12, man, Duhok)

**Civil society actors perceived that the government lacked the resources and implementation capacity to provide accountable social assistance, and it was not in the driving seat despite its strong role in legislation, advocacy, and connections to the international system. As a result, the accountability of locally led social assistance in the KRI is highly personal but not systematic.**

Communities and aid recipients can access a lot of information, give feedback in real time, and resolve issues quickly – but only if they already know or come across the right people. It is also difficult for recipients to know which organisations to trust, and which are principled – an issue we explore more thoroughly in Section 5.

## Box 4.1: Mental health implications for frontline staff

Throughout the research process it was clear that local organisations, and in particular frontline teams, never seemed to be 'off duty', with some participants in Sulaymaniyah describing their round-the-clock availability to answer calls and follow up on issues (workshop). **The constant work and cumbersome processes, in addition to facing difficult situations and confronting overwhelming needs, takes a heavy toll on their mental health.** Absorbing this day in, day out, is an unspoken burden for many frontline providers.

*There are moments of frustration... It requires patience, especially during registration. For instance, when I inquire about a person's name and address, and they delve into their problems and suffering. Despite repeating my request for their name and address, they persist in discussing their issues.*

(Int 7, man, Sulaymaniyah)

*Disputes between clients can be challenging, especially when the truth surfaces later. The emotional toll is significant, particularly when dealing with survivors of traumatic events. Additionally, limitations in aiding individuals with severe physical conditions can be disheartening.*

(Int 17, man with national NGO, Duhok)

The research team reflected on how to consider frontline providers' mental health needs, and during the workshops, participants discussed how they coped. Although most did not seek professional or institutional support for their mental health (which is not widely available in the KRI), they mentioned their families' support and faith-based communities as key resources (workshops).

Source: Authors' own.

## 4.2 Accountability pathways and decision-making at community level

Accountability pathways are the processes and mechanisms that connect citizens (or recipients) to duty-bearers and hold the latter to account (Seferis and Harvey 2022; Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* 2017). One of the key accountability challenges is the increasing distance between decision makers (duty-bearers) and the people who receive aid, due to shifts towards remote management and online processes (Doherty 2023). Local organisations are often much closer to communities, physically and programmatically. Local NGO management in the KRI was often in direct contact with communities and recipients, as referenced in the interviews and during the workshops (Int 15, Duhok; Sulaymaniyah workshop). This proximity enabled more direct accountability pathways, decision-making at the community level, and quick adaptiveness to needs.

**Local organisations' more flexible structures and smaller scale of operations mean their decision makers often do more frontline work, reducing the distance between how decisions are made about social assistance and those who receive it.** Even managers of larger local organisations with multiple offices and programmes, who participated in the research, would regularly participate in or observe the delivery of social assistance. One director in Duhok shared that 'sometimes I go myself when distributing – for example, there are orphans in Akre, and the representative and I distribute assistance' (Int 15, man, Duhok).

**Collective decision-making was seen as crucial for transparency and accountability of the assistance, even in smaller organisations.** Local actors emphasised the importance of having organisational committees (sometimes with their donors present) that review registration forms and visit families to determine who is most in need. There was a strong sense of the need to segregate duties to avoid corruption and manipulation, as well as safeguard organisations' reputations in the eyes of the authorities and communities in need (Sulaymaniyah workshop).

*[Our organisation] operates with a committee, the Service Council, consisting of five founders. Properties and assets are collectively owned by the organisation, preventing personal profiteering. Legal matters are handled transparently, and the church, our primary donor, supports our efforts.*

(Int 11, woman, Duhok)

*Coordination among the 11 Centre members and representatives is essential.*

(Int 13, man, Duhok)

**Communication was a key component of this direct accountability between local organisations providing social assistance and the recipients.** The communication channels and priorities depended on the type of organisation, whether community-based or an international entity, with face-to-face engagement emerging as a priority in the KRI.

*Clear communication is essential. Recipients are informed about the project's origin, purpose, and why it was chosen. Expectations, such as thank you letters and reports, are communicated upfront. We emphasise transparency, explaining the need for media-related information and assuring recipients about the responsible use of their data.*

(Int 10, man, Sulaymaniyah)

*Feedback is received directly or through intermediaries. Staff discussions and a group chat facilitate internal communication and address shortcomings. Occasionally, external feedback prompts adjustments.*

(Int 9, woman, Sulaymaniyah)

*Regular meetings and a dedicated communication line for recipients facilitate the gathering of feedback.*

(Int 11, woman, Duhok)

*Information is shared through our website, printed leaflets, and direct communication with camp management. Introductions to new organisations involve detailing the aid we provide, creating awareness among potential beneficiaries.*

(Int 17, man, Duhok)

**Frontline staff of international organisations recognised the importance of building relationships through direct communication. However, their focus was more on communicating established activities and post-assistance feedback,** in line with many findings that the accountability of internationally led programmes focuses on validating implementation rather than co-design (Ground Truth Solutions 2019).

*Direct communication remains optimal. For instance, in livestock distribution projects, we gather people and communicate our intentions from the outset, ensuring clarity on eligibility criteria. We also use community groups for more detailed discussions, recognising that some may be illiterate and need assistance. Information can also be relayed through district directors, religious leaders, and social media platforms.*

(Int 8, man working with the Red Cross/Red Crescent, Sulaymaniyah)

*In order to communicate with people and process their feedback, I organise outreach sessions for community consultation before project implementation and after the project completions, I prepare a questionnaire for this purpose and interview the members of the targeted community, to get their feedback on the impact of the completed project and if it has met their expectations.*

(Int 16, man working with the UN, Duhok)

Although some organisations leveraged all available channels, including social media, others preferred to avoid the online proliferation of rumours and misinformation, as described by a woman working for a local organisation in Duhok:

*Information is disseminated through local leaders like mukhtars [traditional neighbourhood leaders] or mayors, avoiding social media to prevent misunderstandings and overcrowding during distributions.*

(Int 14, woman, Duhok)

Finally, **some participants reflected on how their communication and engagement with communities shaped not only their programmes but their organisational structures.** One director of a local organisation in Sulaymaniyah shared that:

*We employ social researchers, all of whom are women, to engage with our clients and representatives. Initially, we handled this ourselves but realised that these women felt more comfortable expressing concerns to them.*

(Int 10, man, Sulaymaniyah)

**Table 4.3: Day in the life of ‘B’, a Programme Officer with a local NGO in Duhok**

Starting the day	Visiting villages	Selecting villages and managing information	Feelings and follow-up
<p>I arrive at the office around 8:30am, have coffee, then open my computer. First, I check my email to see what my line manager has written to me about my tasks for the week. I reply to his email to inform him about the progress of the projects I’m responsible for, because we always have to keep a record, even if we will meet together soon.</p> <p>Second, I meet with the team to talk about what we are doing today, which is visiting villages where poor people live and need help from our NGO. I have a form with survey questions that I should ask to people in the village.</p> <p>We don’t have set criteria to select the villages, and we don’t know how we will help until we meet with the village representative and hear about their needs.</p>	<p>I use a road map to find the villages we have selected for assistance based on who [other] NGOs or the government [in Duhok] have told us need help.</p> <p>We start by talking with the <i>mukhtar</i>, who the people in the village have elected to represent them and [whose] position is approved by the government. We ask for general information about the village, what are their priority needs, what services they have [for health, education, water, and infrastructure,] what type of livestock and agriculture.</p> <p>Sometimes he brings us to meet other people to show us their situation, like a widow who cannot work and is responsible for her entire family. We ask our [set] questions, but people tell us even more about their situation – usually how it is difficult to get jobs.</p>	<p>After lunch, I go back to the office to finish the work. I’ll meet with my line manager to tell him what happened during my visits while it is fresh in my mind.</p> <p>We have a database to keep the information about each village. Villages will be selected based on the data I collected, but I don’t know which villages until we finish with all of the visits. We look for [places with] very poor people or no services, and then we give them help.</p>	<p>I feel frustrated if I could not go to all of the villages on my list, which is most of the time only three-quarters of the places I was [supposed to] visit. And it’s hard to hear so many difficult stories.</p> <p>At the end of the day, I will be happy to hear that my organisation did a great job in the village and I’m very thankful. Most villages give us a thank you letter for our NGO and the work.</p>

Source: Authors’ own. Created using data from a 40-year-old woman working with marginalised communities in rural villages.

**Research participants also had an innate sense of the importance of using the feedback they received from recipients and the wider community, particularly to maintain the credibility of their organisation.** Participants shared how their organisations structured processes to analyse and respond to feedback, emphasising that ‘a balanced approach involves convincing information sources and conducting internal investigations to validate claims’ (Int 12, man, Duhok).

*Criticism is gathered by our staff, discussed in bi-weekly meetings, and decisions are made collectively. Feedback is crucial for improvement. We are open to change based on constructive feedback. For example, altering aid items to meet specific preferences is considered, ensuring flexibility while adhering to donor guidelines. While not all suggestions may be implemented, we consider them and prioritise the donor’s preferences.*

(Int 11, woman, Duhok)

*Our representatives often inform us of family complaints. We meet here and evaluate whatever they have complained about. If someone has a complaint, we take it and try to find a solution. If people have reasonable criticism or suggestions that are within the policy of the organisation, we will treat them. But if it is outside our capacity, we tell them we can’t do that.*

(Int 15, man, Duhok)

**Several participants were also frank about the critical feedback they received about their own operations.** A woman with a local organisation in Sulaymaniyah noted that:

*In the past, we’ve received complaints from communities about our staff. In response, we initiated thorough investigations to address their concerns... It’s essential for all our staff providing services to understand that they are not in a higher position or better than those they serve simply because they provide assistance.*

(Int 3, woman, Sulaymaniyah)

Accountability mechanisms that are independent from the delivery of social assistance are crucial to establish and maintain robust accountability pathways (Ground Truth Solutions 2024; Barca *et al.* 2021). For social assistance in crises, these grievance and redress or complaints and feedback mechanisms often include one- and two-way communication channels like hotlines, surveys, and targeted consultations (Seferis and Harvey 2022). The lack of independent accountability mechanisms for most of the local organisations participating in this research was evident in the interviews and workshops. This was largely due to the fact that the social assistance programmes were small scale, often *ad hoc*, and had limited coordination. It was also apparent that locally led assistance could still reproduce social hierarchies and power imbalances. Aid providers made judgements and decisions based on the perceived validity and feasibility of people's feedback, with varying degrees of communication back to communities to close the feedback loop. Although there is limited evidence (in Iraq or elsewhere) of the extent to which local organisations have independent mechanisms in place, this was a crucial issue for the BASIC lived experiences research participants, who noted that they were expected to complain to the same people who provided the aid – a finding echoed in other contexts (Ground Truth Solutions 2024; Shaw *et al.* 2024).

*People's feedback hasn't significantly impacted our assistance methods. With around 2,000 children under our care, we follow a programmed approach, allocating resources based on a predefined plan. Occasionally, miscommunications occur, but we address them promptly. All criticism comes directly to me. Our open-door policy encourages individuals to voice concerns, ensuring transparency and accountability. We prioritise addressing feedback promptly, leaving nothing hidden from our staff.*  
(Int 10, man working with local NGO, Sulaymaniyah)

*We accept their feedback – for example, when we distribute assistance, someone calls us and says, there is a family in a certain house that has nothing. We write their name and check them. If someone criticises us or suggests that helping so-and-so next time, we accept it. My colleagues and I receive criticisms. We discuss them together and decide if the criticisms are true. When someone criticises and says your distribution is not fair, I tell him to name someone who is deserving, and we have assisted. We have taken all necessary measures in advance so that no one will complain, and we have known them all for many years.*  
(Int 13, man involved with local charity foundation, Duhok)

The limitations of organisations' capacity to meet the complex and evolving web of needs led to discussions on referrals, which are a key component of accountability systems for social assistance (Barca *et al.* 2021). **Despite their exclusion from the international aid architecture (humanitarian or development), research participants from local organisations described well-developed referral systems.**

*If I can't assist, I refer them to another lawyer or organisation. Monthly legal task force meetings [help us] coordinate efforts among organisations for effective case handling.*  
(Int 17, man, Duhok)

*We have implemented a referral system, crucial for addressing unmet needs. A service mapping initiative enhances organisational effectiveness. Focal points for referrals have been established, and staff received comprehensive training on the process. Referral forms, both internal and external, facilitate seamless collaboration with other organisations to support cases beyond our capacity.*  
(Int 14, woman working with national NGO, Duhok)

*We aim to empower individuals, knowing that even if our organisation doesn't exist in the future, they will have the strength to seek help elsewhere.*  
(Int 4, woman, national NGO, Sulaymaniyah)

**Participants were cognisant of potential negative effects of *ad hoc* referrals.** During the collective analysis workshop in Duhok, participants noted the difficulty in following up on referrals and how they can raise expectations of assistance (many had been on the receiving end of such referrals). As one participant said, 'Go to this organisation, they'll provide for you' means people arriving with high expectations without ever having interacted with the organisation (Duhok workshop). There was also a sense of the inflexibility of programmes to adapt based on feedback from frontline staff of international organisations who had to follow certain programme parameters (targeting, social assistance predetermined packages, etc.) (Int 8).

Interestingly, none of the local organisations mentioned referrals to international organisations. One participant from a UN agency described a typical interagency referral process:

*In cases where I cannot provide assistance, I share the needs [for assistance] with other UN agencies and NGOs through cluster and coordination meetings. Other UN agencies and NGOs may cover the areas that my agency cannot cover.*

(Int 16, man working with the UN, Duhok)

**The government was also lacking in participants' reflections on referrals.** Rather, they talked about engaging with authorities to advocate for shifts in policies and programme priorities instead of service mapping or individual referrals. This is likely due to the current lack of operational social assistance programmes run by the KRG.

*I can't limit it to government institutions; by 'authority', I refer to entities such as government institutes, political parties, security authorities, or tribal chiefs in the region – essentially, any governing bodies.*

(Int 8, man working with the Red Cross/Red Crescent, Sulaymaniyah)

*Another male participant in Duhok considered 'government' to include 'sheikhs, ministries, local authorities'.*

(Int 15, man, Duhok)

*If the issue falls within the government's purview, we engage in advocacy. We organise meetings with decision makers to highlight specific challenges faced by the community. In many cases, government leadership may not be fully aware of these challenges. As a result, they often respond promptly by instructing their departments and staff, and even issue official directives to address specific issues or facilitate assistance in a particular manner.*

(Int 3, woman, Sulaymaniyah)

*We use various channels to inform the community about our services. This includes meetings with government officials, community leaders, and religious figures. We maintain a community centre and a Facebook page to reach out to people. We encourage word-of-mouth recommendations, and people can contact us through our Facebook page, where dedicated staff respond to their inquiries. We also conduct field and house visits to inform the community about the services available.*

(Int 3, woman working with international NGO, Sulaymaniyah)

*Some situations are difficult to handle, and unfortunately, we can't always find a solution. Once, a man in his late 50s or early 60s came to me without any documents proving his Iraqi origin. After a lengthy process, we resolved the issue, but he passed away three months later due to illness, unable to receive aid because he couldn't prove his nationality.*

(Int 17, man, Duhok)

Across these experiences, **there was a strong sense that as the bridge between communities, authorities, and donors (or decision makers), frontline staff took on a disproportionate role for the accountability of social assistance.** 'Whatever you do for the people, it's not enough,' stated a participant in the Duhok workshop. The web of issues to meet requirements to access basic assistance makes it difficult for recipients to see progress. People are confused about processes, and when giving feedback they are dissatisfied. This puts organisations' reputations at risk if people perceive them not to be effective (Duhok workshop). The case study in Box 4.2 illustrates the experience of one frontline provider in this regard. Moreover, if these dynamics persist, it will be difficult for formal social assistance programmes to manage accountability pathways at scale.

## Box 4.2: Case study – Bearing the brunt of accountability in Duhok

A research participant (staff member of a local organisation) was registering internally displaced persons (IDPs) in a camp near Duhok to receive cash assistance via smart cards. One man did not have the legal documentation required for the registration. The staff member took the file and realised the marriage registration was incomplete, and therefore the household size did not match the [programme] data. Multiple government offices had to be involved in order to recognise the marriage, which took place outside of Iraq. The process was extremely complicated and new for the man, who did not understand why his marriage registration affected his ability to collect aid. The case was left pending, so the man and his family could not receive assistance.

The staff member took the file to the relevant ministry offices to chase down the documentation and approvals needed to register the marriage so that the man's assistance could be approved. In the meantime, the staff member fell ill and had to take leave. When his supervisor followed up on the pending cases and called the man to ask what had been done for his case and his experience of receiving support (a common accountability practice), the man said he had received nothing, and no one helped him. This reflected poorly on the staff member and the organisation's reputation, which discouraged him and his colleagues from engaging in the lengthy process of updating the registration going forward.

Int 17, man working with a local NGO, Duhok, who shared his experience during the collective analysis workshop (February 2024).

Source: Authors' own.

## 4.3 Trust as key to accountability

**Creating and maintaining trust between organisations and the people and communities that they were working with was seen (by interviewees and workshop participants) as critical to accountability.**

Trust is the foundation for accountability and is the basis for effective humanitarian and community work (Fox 2023). Trust in the KRI, as in similar contexts, is based on kinship networks, dignity, and social inclusion (KII 12; Zaman *et al.* 2023). Research participants cited three key factors that build trust in their work – transparency, kinship that fosters dignity and inclusion, and independent professionalism in the provision of social assistance. Table 4.4 outlines the key factors that enable trust in the design and delivery of social assistance as identified by research participants.

Transparency is a cornerstone of accountability (Fox *et al.* 2024), and its importance came across strongly when participants were asked about trust. **Participants spoke of transparency as clear information provision and aid delivery, as well as how transparency was paramount to 'avoiding political interference'** (Int 10, man, Sulaymaniyah). Transparent communication, secure handling of participant information, and prompt resolution of issues were key elements in building trust (Int 2, woman, Sulaymaniyah). Transparency in project management, including clear records and receipts, coupled with an organised approach (from project proposals to implementation), was also deemed essential for fostering trust (Int 10, man, Sulaymaniyah).

**Table 4.4: Enabling factors for trust (workshop participant perspectives)**

Sulaymaniyah	Duhok
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● An organisation’s reputation is key;</li> <li>● Do you treat people with respect? Are you sensitive to the needs of women and men?;</li> <li>● Do you provide assistance as you said you would?;</li> <li>● It’s better to propose projects than just ask for money: staff ‘explain the situation and provide evidence’ for why their project is needed (actual needs);</li> <li>● Involving recipients and giving them feedback builds trust;</li> <li>● Showing where the money goes: having a bank account and showing how it was spent;</li> <li>● Funds managed by a committee, not going to an individual;</li> <li>● Annual report published: activities and recipients (publishing budgets in the KRI could be problematic);</li> <li>● ‘Staff should be known’ to avoid fraud and abuse: announce themselves, wear badges.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● First and foremost, there needs to be trust within the organisation: for the staff and teams;</li> <li>● Confidentiality within the organisation;</li> <li>● Trust with donors is built through documents and financial reports, including photos;</li> <li>● Trust with community: provide assistance consistently, predictably and transparently;</li> <li>● Let them know that aid is free and media will not be shared;</li> <li>● Tell recipients how aid is funded;</li> <li>● Making reports publicly available and document the work;</li> <li>● A board or committee is essential for an organisation to be accountable and transparent.</li> </ul>

Source: Authors’ own. Created using project data.

**Social relationships, and personal stories based on those relationships, played a vital role in trust-building** (Int 5, woman, Sulaymaniyah; Int 12, man, Duhok). Integrity, including refraining from making false promises, was crucial in maintaining trust (Int 8, Red Cross/Red Crescent worker, Sulaymaniyah). The Pasewan Research Team observed:

*...the strong bond that formed between the social assistance workers and the people they were assisting. It was incredible to see how they became like a family or old friends in some cases. Close relationships created a sense of trust and comfort, allowing for more effective assistance and support. Additionally, it was inspiring to witness their unwavering passion for their work, despite the numerous challenges they faced. Their patience and dedication to helping others truly made a difference in the lives of the people they served. Their resilience and compassion were truly remarkable.*  
(Pasewan Research Team 2023)

**Highlighted strategies for maintaining trust, alongside collaboration with community leaders and institutions, included establishing committees for visits and feedback, along with honest communication and responsiveness to suggestions** (Int 11, woman, Duhok). Addressing psychological needs and soliciting feedback were also crucial for trust-building (Int 2, woman, Sulaymaniyah). The reliability of an organisation to meet expectations and ‘deliver on promises’ was particularly important to local organisations in contexts where some organisations fail to fulfil commitments (Int 17, man, Duhok). Others emphasised independence and equality, with practices such as not revealing recipients’ faces in pictures just to satisfy donor requirements while avoiding political misuse (Int 9, woman working with local organisation, Sulaymaniyah). ‘Providing quality items, consistent distribution schedules, and avoiding personal biases from staff help build trust’ (Int 11, woman, Duhok).

**The larger the programme, the more trust was about aligning people’s needs and priorities with a programme’s objectives, rather than co-designing programmes with communities.** As one woman working with a local organisation in Duhok noted, ‘Trust is built through focus group discussions, ensuring our aid aligns with their needs. While ideal planning involves surveys and discussions, quick project timelines often limit us to rapid assessments and observations based on reports from other agencies’ (Int 14, woman, Duhok). Box 4.3 explores how trust also influenced some providers’ decisions on aid modalities. Other participants in Duhok remarked that once communities noticed the logos of well-known aid providers like the UN, they expected to receive a substantial amount of aid – and so trust could not be established before managing expectations and aligning them with what the programme could provide (Duhok workshop).

### Box 4.3: Trust can influence modality decisions, especially for some male research participants

Although many participants spoke of the mutual trust built between their organisation and the communities they serve, and many local organisations provided cash-based social assistance, some described a mistrust in how the aid would be used that influenced the type or modality of social assistance they provided:

*We seldom provide direct cash to individuals due to concerns about proper utilisation. Instead, we negotiate with vendors for better prices, allowing us to provide essential items like food, medicine and household goods more efficiently.*

(Int 7, man, Sulaymaniyah)

*[We provide] cash, kerosene, heaters, and projects like clothing for orphaned students and food baskets. Money can be misused. Providing essentials ensures their proper use.*

(Int 12, man, Duhok)

*Our transparent administrative processes ensure recipients' rights are protected. Fingerprinting recipients for transparency, we currently assist 2,000 children, with plans to increase to 2,500 with more donors.*

(Int 10, man, Sulaymaniyah)

Global evidence shows that most aid recipients prefer cash-based assistance (CALP Network 2023). These perspectives demonstrate the importance of two-way trust between organisations and communities receiving social assistance to shape programme design; in some cases, the local provision of social assistance can reinforce power imbalances between aid providers and recipients.

Source: Authors' own. Sources cited.

#### 4.3.1 Community engagement

Local organisations in the KRI prioritised proactive communication, face-to-face meetings and continuous feedback from people they were helping – a feature also observed in other places (Tebbutt *et al.* 2024; Doherty 2023). They also had a **focus on involving communities in the design and planning phases of social assistance**.

*It involves involving the community from project planning, reflecting their real needs. We prioritise local labour and vendors for a more connected and community-driven approach.*

(Int 14, woman with faith-based organisation, Duhok)

Staff from international organisations also emphasised the importance of community feedback. When communities are involved in decision-making, it is usually about which needs to meet and what (or how much) to give, particularly with frontline participants from international organisations:

*Involving beneficiaries in the process is key. Their needs and opinions shape our approach. Community engagement, facilitated by local groups, is crucial. Nowadays, sharing information is as vital as material assistance, contributing to a trend known as 'information as assistance'. We often emphasise collaboration, acknowledging that different organisations can complement each other. While I may initiate a project, it's crucial to instil a sense of responsibility within the community, involving district managers, the irrigation department, and the residents in maintaining and sustaining the project.*

(Int 8, man working with Red Cross/Red Crescent, Sulaymaniyah)

A common theme relating to community engagement, from the perspective of local organisations, was to involve people at the pre-programme or planning stages, in order to better capture community priorities, communicate principles, and manage expectations of aid. This contrasted with the reluctance of frontline participants from international organisations to engage early on with communities for fear of raising expectations before the delivery of assistance – a key issue also raised by international organisations during the BASIC research on the accountability of social assistance in Somalia (Seferis *et al.* 2024).

## 4.4 The duality of social media

The use of social media in the provision of social assistance was a key topic and crucial concern for recipients in the linked study on their lived experiences (Shaw *et al.* 2024). People had concerns that details of receiving aid shared on social media were undermining their dignity. For local organisations and the frontline providers of assistance, social media was seen as particularly instrumental in the Iraqi context in terms of sharing information, showcasing local organisations' accomplishments, filling funding gaps, and overcoming bureaucratic hurdles.

Through the workshops and interviews, research participants outlined the duality of using social media to provide accountable social assistance. The fact that those receiving social assistance, especially participants of the lived experiences research, highlighted negative experiences with social media had a strong influence on the discussions. Many local organisations have standard operating procedures and specialists that help them amplify the positive use of social media (Sulaymaniyah workshop). But how can recipients know the difference between those documenting and those exploiting? The lived experiences research outlined the issue:

Social media has made things worse because now everyone can see you needing assistance, whereas beforehand those judging you were only those who happened to see you getting assistance in person... the harassment women receive online as a result is made worse by the difficulty they face in getting social media companies to remove abusive content reported by users from and based in the KRI.

The strong feelings generated meant that participants were refusing to take needed assistance, which defeats the purpose of social assistance, assuming those providing it truly intend it to alleviate deprivation. This undignified process may be a feature of the informal/semi-formal assistance system that has arisen in the KRI, as in many cases the informal/semi-formal providers seemed to perceive a need to publicise their actions visually in a way that a regular government social assistance programme perhaps would not. Our participants did not understand why if someone truly wanted to be charitable their actions needed to be shown. Being informal/semi-formal assistance, there were also fewer codes of conduct compared with more formal systems.

(Shaw *et al.* 2024: 63)

Frontline providers offered their organisations' perspectives on social media. Local organisations in the KRI use social media in three crucial ways:

- **Communication:** As a key channel in the accountability ecosystem of social assistance: for community engagement, information-sharing, identification of people in need of assistance, and mobilisation for distributions, organisational activities, etc.;
- **Fundraising:** To draw public attention to funding gaps and raise money for vulnerable cases (see examples below).;
- **Verification:** to document the provision of social assistance for donors and to maintain organisations' reputations for delivering on promised assistance. This last use was particularly problematic for the lived experiences research participants (workshops).

**Social media remains a vital communication tool for organisations that lack the resources or infrastructure to engage with communities and donors in other ways.** These platforms allow local organisations to share their work and spread awareness of the aid available to people, which in turn builds stronger relationships between these organisations and the communities they serve (Duhok workshop). Social media postings of aid that has been provided enhances organisations' reputations, with a participant in Sulaymaniyah noting that 'I will get bigger in your eyes' if an organisation can show proof of its work (workshop). Social media also acts a communication channel for accountability. As a participant from a local organisation in Duhok noted, 'Social media aids outreach. I ensure my contact information is accessible. Criticisms are addressed personally or by my team' (Int 12, man, Duhok). The use of social media as a communication tool was the least problematic use, as organisations generally shared information about their activities, and reporting on the assistance provided included anonymised information (e.g. number of people assisted, locations, etc.). Few organisations used social media to identify specific recipients, preferring to maintain more traditional methods of eligibility through face-to-face identification. One woman working with a local organisation in Sulaymaniyah noted that 'We also utilise social media [to identify recipients] but exercise caution due to experiences of misinformation and misuse' (Int 5, woman, Sulaymaniyah).

In terms of fundraising, frontline providers (particularly local organisations) underscored the importance of social media in accessing funding. **Often, social media fundraising would get money to local organisations faster than donors could, and without currency exchange losses or bank account blockages related to international transactions** (Duhok workshop). The amount of funds local organisations were able to raise and the speed at which they received support could not be replicated with a more formal or structured bureaucracy.

*Utilising social media to showcase our activities is a valuable tool. Public awareness through these channels encourages more people to contribute financially. Initially, people were unaware of our charitable efforts. However, after sharing videos locally and internationally, we garnered more support. While most of our work is conducted without visual documentation, we find it essential in specific cases, especially for significant medical expenses or housing needs. Visuals significantly impact donor contributions.*

(Int 7, man, Sulaymaniyah)

*[We take pictures and videos] for archival purposes. Our photographer follows set procedures, respecting cultural sensitivities. We blur faces if shared publicly. The first video collected 32 million dinars [approximately US\$24,500 with the formal exchange rate], and the second, 39 million dinars [approximately US\$29,850], with blurred faces.*

(Int 12, man working with local NGO, Duhok)

*These visuals have proven instrumental in fundraising. For example, a patient needing a liver transplant received substantial donations within ten days after sharing their story. By recording her story and sharing it, we managed to collect 55 million dinars [approximately US\$42,000] in just 10 days, enabling her to undergo the surgery successfully.*

(Int 7, man involved with community-based organisation, Sulaymaniyah)

**However, participants in both Sulaymaniyah and Duhok noted that social media was primarily used to raise money for individual cases, and it was difficult to generate institutional funding for local organisations or scale assistance for more people** (workshops). A participant in Duhok shared how they needed US\$70,000 to fund an operation, and they were able to raise US\$90,000 via social media within 72 hours. Since the money was earmarked for the family in question, they used the remaining funds to support the family's ability to earn an income – for example, by purchasing a taxi for the brother (Duhok workshop). The participant admitted that the organisation imposed this earmarking on itself ('it is dishonest to use the money on someone else'), and it would be difficult for the public to hold the organisation to account on its use of the funds (Duhok workshop). The social workers who participated in the Duhok workshop were especially positive about using social media to raise money for vulnerable people, because they felt it was a key source of funds given the current lack of operational government programmes.

Paradoxically, **special cases needed more visibility** – 'principled' or established organisations do this with the informed consent of the person concerned, but others do not (see 'Do no harm' subsection below). Research participants noted that acting on principles was left to the discretion of each organisation because of the lack of NGO standards and the inability of people to hold organisations to account. During the Duhok workshop, participants debated the implications of fairness and assisting those most in need if they did not want their stories shared on social media, knowing it would be much harder to raise funds for their situation. Some organisations shared their best practices but also reflected on an organisation's need for flexibility and responsiveness based on the situation.

**There was also a question of whether raising large amounts of money for special cases (surgeries, building a house, etc.) should be considered social assistance, and the relevance of this type of aid to more formal, government-led social assistance transfers.** Social assistance in the KRI encompasses a wide range of needs, often tailored to specific requirements (furniture, school uniforms, etc.), making scalability difficult (Int 1, man, Sulaymaniyah). This expansive definition creates tensions between addressing basic survival needs and providing more generous support. The influence of social media exacerbates these disparities, with reports of businessmen funding costly treatments and housing, potentially leading to unrealistic expectations of social assistance (Pasewan Research Team 2024). These expectations can undermine the accountability of formal social assistance programmes if social protection reform processes

are perceived to be slow or if the assistance provided by the government is more restrictive, as people will continue to seek crowdsourced aid and call it 'social assistance'.

**Using social media to fundraise for social assistance also invites scams**, as is the case in many parts of the world. Research participants described situations where dishonest organisations posted fake accomplishments or requested funds that were misused or appropriated; some even created fake social media pages using legitimate organisations' names asking for 10,000 IQD of phone credit in exchange for a house (Sulaymaniyah and Duhok workshops).

**The use of social media as a verification tool was the most controversial use.** Even without publicising images, there was a sense that taking pictures of distributions was an important form of aid verification in the KRI, almost like a version of biometrics used by some international organisations (Duhok workshop). As with fundraising, the reasons for which pictures were taken were left entirely to each organisation's discretion – for explaining purpose, use and retention to obtain informed consent, measures to protect anonymity, disclosing publication and who has access to the images, etc.

*We capture images solely for donors, ensuring transparency in fund usage. Although taken from behind, we never reveal the faces of those aided. While not a requirement for assistance, we take photos for project documentation and donor assurance.*

(Int 9, woman working with national NGO, Sulaymaniyah)

*Recipients are not required to be photographed or filmed. We take pictures mainly during the packaging process to provide donors with visual proof of the distribution. Trust has become a concern, and these images help maintain transparency.*

(Int 5, woman with community-based organisation, Sulaymaniyah)

*While Allah advises against boasting about good deeds, there are cases where disclosure is essential for encouraging further contributions. For instance, we recently provided a man with a three-wheel motorcycle, ensuring his anonymity but sharing the success on our social media to inspire donations. We prioritise proof for significant financial distributions, utilising TV advertising for fundraising campaigns like buying a house through shared contributions. We refrain from close videos, particularly of children, as we respect privacy.*

(Int 10, man working with local NGO, Sulaymaniyah)

**There is also the question of whether organisations obtain truly informed consent if vulnerable people perceive online publication of their needs as a prerequisite to receiving vital assistance;** some people consent, while others prefer anonymity (Sulaymaniyah workshop). Workshop participants in Duhok emphasised the necessity for coordination among donors, organisations and the community to manage expectations regarding media coverage, balancing the need to use social media for fundraising while not making it a prerequisite for receiving assistance, and respecting the privacy of vulnerable cases unwilling to share their stories online. The messages from lived experiences research participants about how their families can react negatively if they are shown in the media (or on social media) receiving assistance, resonated particularly strongly in Duhok, where frontline providers reflected on the social stigma of receiving aid that they often felt within their own families and communities (Duhok workshop). Social media and crowdfunded support play increasingly important roles in getting aid to people in crisis across the world. In the KRI, there is a unique mix of crowdfunded social assistance to fill gaps left by formal social protection programmes, using social media to demonstrate proof of delivery, which comes with a strong stigma of being recorded (Shaw *et al.* 2024). This makes social media a particularly pertinent issue for aid expectations and accountability, since culturally, social media will likely continue to be used by all local providers, including the government.

## 5. Challenges of scaling localised approaches

This section explores the challenges of scaling localised approaches, in light of ongoing social protection reform processes in the KRI and central Iraq (ILO 2024). It outlines the implications of parallel systems of social assistance in the KRI for accountability, and summarises concerns from those with lived experience as well as accountability research participants about the inconsistency of aid and its repercussions for ‘Do no harm’. We review perspectives on eligibility and identification, as targeting was a central issue for all stakeholder groups (including beyond this primary research). Finally, we explore the challenges of establishing, at scale, the trust needed for accountable social assistance systems, particularly with donors and between local and international organisations – a topic raised by the research participants as a key priority.

### 5.1 Parallel systems and a lack of coordination

In the KRI, locally led social assistance developed in parallel to plans to reform institutional social assistance led by the government, and as humanitarian aid scaled down in the region. This section explores the main repercussions of those parallel systems of social assistance – a lack of coordination that can lead to both exclusion and duplication, the issue of representation in formal processes, and the lack of data to inform better coordination and collaboration.

**Coordination with the government, especially *mukhtars*, is essential for distributing aid, according to participants in Duhok, but this interaction is activity-based and focused on logistics** (Int 15, man, Duhok):

*Connecting with relevant authorities is crucial, such as the Ministry of Peshmerga for aid near war zones. Permission is paramount. The Duhok General Directorate is informed of our camp visits, ensuring transparency. Government support, obtained through the provincial administration, is significant due to our voluntary and cost-free work.*

(Int 11, woman, Duhok)

The design of social assistance continues to develop in parallel between government-led, internationally backed social protection programmes and more local, *ad hoc* aid. **Local-level support often fills the gaps left by the formal system. This makes it difficult to identify clear accountability pathways between providers and recipients, especially when they offer similar types of aid but with very different roles, responsibilities and expectations.** As a frontline staff member of one local organisation explained:

*In the current situation, the Kurdistan Regional Government delays employee salaries, impacting livelihoods. Economic struggles, like the inability to afford essentials, arise. As a humanitarian organisation, we are addressing the needs of employees facing late payments and housing challenges.*

(Int 11, woman, Duhok)

*Despite the existence of a Social Support Fund Law, there is no funding available to support social cases, as stated by the Minister of Social Affairs.*

(Int 4, woman, Sulaymaniyah)

**There is also continued tension between formal social assistance in central Iraq, where salaries are paid and the SSN (family care) is provided, and aid in the KRI, where salaries are late or unpaid, and the SSN is suspended.** Research participants described how some families travel to Mosul to access family care aid (Duhok workshop; Int 7, man, Sulaymaniyah).

**Coordination was seen as more effective with international humanitarian actors.** Local organisations in Duhok were more familiar with the international system since they worked with the same communities, particularly after the influx of displaced people in 2014 (in Sulaymaniyah, the humanitarian response concentrated on the few IDP camps outside of the city). One man underscored how local organisations were involved in the response as independent aid providers, not just implementing partners: ‘We have distributed aid externally, particularly during the refugee influx. Coordination with the government and organisations like WFP ensured successful distributions in camps, including Kabartoo and Domiz’ (Int 15, man, Duhok). Workshop participants in Duhok also mentioned the key role of the UN Office for the Coordination of

Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in keeping local organisations informed during the 2014 crisis (ISIS) and noted that nothing took its place when the humanitarian coordination system folded into government-led structures, leaving a serious gap in local links to social protection reform processes.

Research participants in both Sulaymaniyah and Duhok highlighted the lack of coordination between organisations, particularly local institutions, who may be providing similar types of assistance to the same communities (workshops). During the Duhok workshop, one participant noted that 'We work all the time on the same problems, this is the first time we meet together'.

The lack of coordination across social assistance actors is also present between international actors. As one key informant from a donor agency remarked, 'It's indicative that we expect seamless coordination in-country when we don't do it – we [as donors] expect something from our partners that we ourselves cannot deliver' (KII 8).

**The lack of local coordination points to a broader representation issue for accountability: who represents civil society (non-governmental) perspectives in internationally led processes like social protection reform?** Existing policy processes are failing to consider the local organisations already providing social assistance in their communities (Sulaymaniyah workshop). In Duhok, participants shared that UN agencies worked with the relevant ministries on various social protection reform processes like targeting and registration, but did not involve broader civil society because they assumed that the government would engage local NGOs and community groups directly, which did not occur (Duhok workshop; KII 8). Moreover, the distinct roles of the government, NGOs with political affiliations, and other civil society actors (a mix of independent, sectarian and religious organisations) are not well understood by or integrated into international programmes (Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* 2024; KII 8; KII 11; workshops). International organisations can 'only' work with local organisations that meet their standards, even though other local actors may provide similar assistance; if international actors have not conducted a thorough mapping of aid providers and their affiliations, they run the risk of further excluding certain groups (KII 2).

In the KRI, international donors have tried to interact directly with civil society actors in Duhok, engaging with various groups such as research institutions and women's organisations (KII 8). These actors are concerned about the potential security implications of the American withdrawal from Iraq, and are apprehensive about the influence of powerful families, high corruption levels, and a shrinking space for civil society due to intimidation (KII 8). They urged international donors to encourage international NGOs to collaborate with local organisations so that they can amplify their concerns and suggestions without drawing attention to particular local actors (KII 8). However, high staff turnover is a problem for the continuity of ideas, as those designing projects may differ from those implementing or evaluating them (KII 4).

**In interviews and workshops, people also pointed to problematic disconnections between civil society and government in sharing and managing data** (Duhok workshop). Data serves as a critical component of operations, yet its availability and reliability remain major concerns for research participants. In Sulaymaniyah, local organisations noted the lack of comprehensive and available data on who provides assistance – or who needs it (workshop; Int 7, man, Sulaymaniyah).

Government data typically categorises recipients based on various criteria such as widows, orphans and students, with lists often refined through surveys (Duhok workshop). The absence of a trusted source for data complicates organisations' ability to provide accountable social assistance, with ministries reluctant to update data if they lack funds to provide aid, while local NGOs face challenges in accessing government data to assess its accuracy or credibility, particularly evident during crises (such as the IDP crisis in 2014), when precise figures on affected populations and specific needs are elusive (Duhok workshop). Furthermore, it was reported that there have been instances where local NGOs share recipient data with international NGOs, only for the latter to inadvertently compromise the confidentiality of the data, possibly due to mismanagement (KII 4).

**The lack of coordination between parallel local, international and government aid systems leaves little room for participation in programme design and decision-making processes, for aid recipients as well as frontline providers of social assistance.** Interviews reveal a lack of local or regional plans for anticipating basic needs, such as water shortages or conflict escalation, exacerbating environmental degradation and disregarding populations in contested or unstable regions, such as communities displaced near the border with Türkiye (Pasewan and BASIC Research Team debrief, Sulaymaniyah, February 2024).

Reactive social assistance provided in-kind triggers market panic and inflation, disadvantaging broader society while aiding only a small subset of people (KII 11). The Public Distribution System (PDS) serves as a psychological lifeline for individuals in unstable areas, highlighting the importance of considering local perceptions and realities when discussing retargeting efforts (KII 8). These perspectives underscore that coordination that does more to bring in the perspectives of local actors could strengthen the accountability and inclusiveness of social assistance, as those eligible for formal social assistance will continue to turn to local, often *ad hoc* support to meet their needs during cyclical crises.

## 5.2 Conditional compassion and ‘Do no harm’

People who are particularly marginalised or excluded were the subject of a complementary research project examining their lived experiences in receiving or being excluded from assistance (Shaw *et al.* 2024). This research highlighted inconsistency across different aid providers, the difficulty in distinguishing between different types of providers and opportunistic actors, their inability to hold providers to account, and the harm that this caused. Participants highlighted key issues that included:

- ‘Conditional compassion’ – aid receipt being conditional on political affiliation or religion or being asked to ‘look poor or sad’ on social media;
- The cyclical nature of vulnerability versus the *ad hoc* social assistance that was never enough to meet their needs; people wanted to see greater predictability and systemic support, particularly those who could not find employment due to their situation or condition;
- The need for dignity and choice.

The social attitudes towards those needing support in the KRI are stigmatising and generate strong feelings and psychosocial impacts such as hopelessness, which are barriers to accessing help, and which amplify the emotional trauma of living in a protracted crisis context (Shaw *et al.* 2024: 6).

The collective analysis workshops for the accountability research began by watching videos produced by participants in the lived experiences research, which prompted a discussion among frontline providers about ‘opportunistic’ actors, individuals or media outlets that often document vulnerability and poverty without people’s consent. Box 5.1 outlines the main characteristics of these opportunistic actors, according to research participants. These actors do not require the same level of accountability and administrative oversight as registered organisations, so the research participants were pleased to see the recipient-driven advocacy campaign ‘Protect my Dignity’, which grew out of the lived experiences research and sought to get organisations to commit to more dignified use of social media (Shaw *et al.* 2024).

### Box 5.1: Who are the ‘opportunistic actors’ in Duhok?

Workshop participants in Duhok estimated that the vast majority of local organisations and individual donors in the area were trustworthy, with approximately 20 per cent that were not. They described mistrust happening when:

- Organisations (or donors) do not follow through: they promise aid with limited ability to assist;
- There is no clear communication with communities;
- Individual donors<sup>1</sup> cannot meet their promises, or they transfer funds late, which makes the organisation’s activities late;
- Currency exchange issues or problems with the bank make donors or organisations look dishonest;
- Decision-making is opaque and lacks transparency;
- Organisations assist family members instead of people in need;
- Communities think that staff make a lot of money from their misery.

Source: Authors’ own (Duhok workshop).

<sup>1</sup> In this section, the term ‘local/individual donor’ refers to private sector entities or wealthy individuals that fund local organisations to provide assistance in the KRI. The vast majority are from the KRI, with a few individual donors cited from the Gulf states (see Table 2 for more details). The term ‘international institutional donor’ is used to describe foreign governments (UK, EU, US, etc.) or international organisations (UN, international NGOs) that provide aid to research participants’ organisations through more formalised contracts and projects.

There was a grey area between different types of 'legitimate' or principled aid providers, either in terms of institutional identity or a failure to deliver transparently and consistently. Some organisations provided assistance to anyone in need, while other established organisations offered aid only to those who met certain sectarian, political or religious requirements (see Shaw *et al.* 2024). Local organisations with more transparent processes and established procedures still relied on similar tactics as *ad hoc* actors to provide aid, with one man in Duhok noting that: 'I tap into personal resources, borrow if needed, and leverage support from donors and organisations to aid those in distress' (Int 12, man working with local NGO, Duhok).

**A large part of the inconsistency and harm (intentional or not) comes from the lack of standards and the *ad hoc* funding that cannot fill the gaps in social assistance left by formal systems (social protection or humanitarian).** *Ad hoc* funding (such as sponsorship models or seasonal giving), local donor dynamics, and variable standards (definitions) of aid were the main factors that affected the inconsistency of social assistance.

Intermittent and insufficient funding is a particularly problematic issue for local organisations in the KRI that have limited institutional funding and visibility on funding projections. Many participants felt they were not in a position to refuse any resources even if the unpredictability affected their ability to plan programmes. As one woman in Sulaymaniyah noted, 'The region's instability impacts donor confidence and reduces project effectiveness. People's hopelessness leads to low attendance despite the assistance offered, affecting overall project outcomes' (Int 2, woman, Sulaymaniyah). This unpredictability in turn makes it more challenging to be effectively accountable and transparent.

**The 'seasonality of funding' had both positive and negative effects on local organisations' ability to provide accountable and predictable social assistance.** During Ramadan, the start of the school year, and particular crises like flooding, individual citizens and wealthy donors tended to give more, but funding levels were difficult to predict (workshops). Even money that should be continuous, such as support to or sponsorship of orphans, was often provided in bursts – leading to different transfer values for people at the 'top of the list' (i.e. those prioritised for aid) (Duhok workshop). One person shared that when international organisations (like those in Qatar) sponsored individuals, they sometimes provided huge donations to orphans, then 'nothing' (KII 11).

**Participants felt that shorter-term funding with a focus on quantity over quality in the face of multiple crises contributed to accountability challenges due to overstretched capacities.** The push, usually from donors or organisations' management, was to support more people – so organisations took on more cases, leading to larger caseloads needing specialised support and frontline staff feeling as though they could not 'serve people better' when their capacities were overstretched (workshops).

Participants also raised issues around perceptions of an 'unjust' distribution of aid when donors (international and local) earmarked a particular group or specified the amount of social assistance per recipient. Lacking clear criteria and standards, frontline staff struggled to explain to communities why some people received more than others for the same needs (Sulaymaniyah workshop). This type of donor-directed aid limited local organisations' ability to respond to needs, especially when they selected locations or specific groups to be assisted, such as Yazidis in Duhok, 'without asking us who is more in need' (Duhok workshop). Some local donors only provide in-kind aid and not money, which makes it difficult to match the aid to people's actual needs and maintain the relationships and trust with communities that is necessary for accountable social assistance. As one woman noted, 'If it's cash I will know what to do with it' (Int 14, woman, Duhok). In other cases, individual donors may not say how long funding will last or give the total amount agreed upon, such as when a private donor committed to supporting widows for 14 years but stopped after 10 (Duhok workshop). This is a common occurrence with local donors, who often operate with 'no contracts, just contacts' and prefer personal relationships, and can balk at formal commitments (Sulaymaniyah workshop). Finally, several participants found themselves in uncomfortable positions when local donors approached them with funding offers that were clearly for personal gain or to 'show off' (workshops).

Moreover, many local donors were not interested in providing institutional funding. There was an acute awareness from frontline staff that this lack of investment in their organisations inhibited their ability to provide accountable social assistance:

*The donor who gives money prefers to purchase specific items for poor people. He doesn't want to allocate the money for vehicle rent. We would appreciate it if someone gave us a vehicle or gives us money for vehicle rental. That will allow us to accomplish our tasks better.*

(Int 1, man, Sulaymaniyah)

Local organisations that participated in the research were already trying to improve local donor predictability and flexibility in an effort to scale up social assistance. Interviewees and workshop participants said some local and individual donors were willing to 'listen and adapt' after their organisation explained why funding adaptations were important. Many shared proactive efforts to engage local donors before they give, with one man explaining that, 'Part of my job is to go to wealthy people, organisations that provide social assistance, or even ordinary people, and inform them that we have these people in need of social assistance, and whether they have special needs' (Int 1, man, Sulaymaniyah). Others described how they 'retrofitted' recipient lists to meet local donor requirements: 'The aid distribution aligns with categorised lists such as cancer patients, cerebral palsy, orphans, the poor, and housing-needy individuals. When a [local] donor pledges funds for building houses, I prioritise families with orphans and little children, adjusting requirements accordingly' (Int 12, man working with local NGO, Duhok). A few research participants also shared examples of refusing funding when individual donors were too controlling or imposed many conditions, although they admitted it was easier to refuse when donors offered smaller amounts (Duhok workshop).

**Many research participants wanted to see more social assistance provided by the government, with NGOs offering support or services for specific people or marginalised groups. This would require consistency and clear complementarity across formal social assistance programmes, something not yet achieved in the KRI.**

The myriad factors behind inconsistent social assistance, whether formalised through the government and international institutions or more locally led, contribute to poor accountability pathways and negative lived experiences (Shaw *et al.* 2024). The loss of dignity, perceptions that compassion is conditional on religion, political affiliation or 'deservingness', and trust being undermined by opportunistic actors continue to affect the accountability of social assistance in the KRI.

### 5.3 Local-level targeting: Accountable but hard to scale

Targeting was a significant topic for all stakeholder groups involved in the research, as well as the wider literature (Ground Truth Solutions 2024; Merttens, Hodey and Doyle 2024). This subsection explores why targeting is a central issue for the accountability of social assistance, and how frontline providers and key informants conceptualise eligibility and identification. Local actors described highly accountable local-level targeting approaches. However, these relied on strong local knowledge, so are both hard to scale and risk excluding people and communities not within existing networks.

Targeting is a crucial issue for the accountability of aid because it is a key programme design feature and the topic of many grievances and complaints (Blasinska, Lavrinenko and Thurston 2023; CALP Network 2023; Nzimbi 2023). Who is eligible for what, and why, is often poorly understood, becoming a source of miscommunication or even tension between groups who prioritise recipients differently. If communities do not understand who is prioritised and why they are eligible for assistance, or cannot influence the targeting process, they cannot hold aid providers to account if they think the assistance is not reaching those in need. The concept of fairness and who was 'most deserving' of aid featured prominently in recipient participants' experiences, and is echoed in other recent evidence on aid recipients' perceptions (Buder and Sattler 2024).

**Despite differences in targeting approaches between government, development and humanitarian actors, the same groups of people are broadly prioritised for social assistance in the KRI.** These include forcibly displaced people (IDPs from central Iraq as well as Syrian refugees, most of whom are Kurdish), orphans, people with disabilities, widows or separated women, the elderly, chronically ill people, and often (more generally) 'poor people' (workshops, interviews). Local organisations in Duhok noted that the

influx of IDPs, particularly after the ISIS takeover of Mosul in 2014, were a 'shock to the aid system' and changed the way organisations prioritised people for social assistance (Duhok workshop).

*Our conditions include a salary cap, chronic illness, low-income tenants, orphans, and individuals with special needs. We focus on aiding the most vulnerable, conducting extensive investigations to validate applicants' eligibility. **We fill out a comprehensive [paper-based] form including details like full names, addresses, family composition, and housing status** [our emphasis].*

(Int 7, man working with local NGO, Sulaymaniyah)

*Priority is given to those with chronic illnesses, disabilities, no salary, and renters. **Assistance is tailored for different groups, with donors sometimes specifying the target** [our emphasis].*

(Int 11, woman working with local NGO, Duhok)

**Local organisations generally worked with a prioritised list of recipients, whereas more formal aid programmes surveyed the larger population of target groups and established a (sometimes arbitrary) 'cut-off' point for eligibility, which clashed with local concepts of 'fairness'** (Sulaymaniyah workshop; KII 2; KII 9). Since formal social assistance programmes will also use eligibility criteria and cut-off points, the issue of targeting could further confuse recipients navigating the transition to government transfers in the future.

Research participants also repeatedly raised the concept of who was 'most deserving' of social assistance in their communities. A woman working with a local NGO in Sulaymaniyah described a multi-layered process to identify the most deserving: 'We assist deserving families, including the poor, needy, special needs individuals, and divorced. A committee ensures accurate selection, collecting detailed information about families. External sources like neighbourhood headmen contribute to 90 per cent accuracy' (Int 9, woman working with local NGO, Sulaymaniyah). **The definition of 'deserving' is generally based on community priorities of who should be considered the most vulnerable groups but with considerable discretion still remaining in the hands of aid providers.**

People were identified for social assistance via a spectrum of targeting approaches, from personal referrals to automated systems. It often depended on programmes' proximity to a community as well as scale. Organisations with smaller caseloads (e.g. 20–40 people per programme) relied heavily on community verification to identify those most in need, with one man in Duhok explaining that, 'in the small community, knowing each other facilitates identifying the poor and deserving. Refugees, part of the community since 2014, are also considered' (Int 13, man working with local NGO, Duhok). Many research participants described intricate outreach strategies with 'neighbours, landlords, and even children in the area... to ensure the right people receive assistance by evaluating their situations, collecting complete information, and updating our database regularly' (Int 5, woman working with local NGO, Sulaymaniyah). Other local organisations with larger programmes leveraged their social media presence and networks with other organisations to identify aid recipients (Int 1, man working with local NGO, Sulaymaniyah).

**Identifying and verifying recipients through local and personal channels still followed rigorous processes;** although most participants cited similar components to their processes, their methods and standards were usually organisation-specific. Most used a combination of referrals, home visits, community verification, assessment forms, and community decision-making to identify recipients of social assistance. The rigour of eligibility and identification processes for local organisations was based on 'avoiding emotional aspects' and taking decisions collectively, with the aim to objectively identify and assist the most deserving.

*When informed about a poor family, our team and I visit them. I avoid making final decisions alone. Being a team of five ensures a fair process. If cadres report multiple families, we visit to validate, emphasising adherence to the process to avoid emotional biases.*

(Int 11, woman working with local NGO, Duhok)

**Ensuring integrity and fairness 'without nepotism' remained priorities when targeting people for social assistance** (Int 13, man, Duhok). It is essential to communicate with potential recipients and document their feedback in real time. The provider-driven concept of 'most deserving' and the frontline staff's reliance on familiar networks, however, calls into question the inclusivity of locally led social assistance in the KRI, and therefore how accountable it is. The lack of standardisation and reliance on personal discretion in

localised social assistance could also mask biases, exclusion, and racism. This in turn creates different accountability pathways for different groups – personal channels for those within certain communities would not extend to groups perceived to be less ‘deserving’ or antipathetic to an organisation’s mandate.

**Many research participants mentioned that people ‘who need it the most hide it or don’t know where to seek help, often because of social stigma and cultural elements’, which was a key finding of the BASIC lived experiences action research in Halabja and Sulaymaniyah (KII 11; Shaw *et al.* 2024).** In Sulaymaniyah, accountability research participants highlighted that local organisations do not harmonise lists or share data, so it was highly possible that households benefited from several organisations – or that some vulnerable families did not receive any aid (workshop). Moreover, some of the most vulnerable people may not even seek help, with a frontline worker underlining that ‘the most challenging aspect of our work is identifying individuals who do not reach out to us directly – these individuals often require assistance the most’ (Int 1, man, Sulaymaniyah).

**There was strong concern on the part of most aid providers, local and international, to better understand who was left out of social assistance programmes given the mosaic of small-scale programmes and a lack of centralised data on people in need of assistance.** People with disabilities were prioritised for social assistance in the KRI, yet evidence suggests that they are the biggest group facing challenges in accessing aid (Action contre la Faim 2023). Social workers and case management were therefore crucial in identifying and following up with priority recipients.

The accountability of these highly localised approaches to targeting raises questions about how assistance could remain accountable when provided by government or at a larger scale. Local organisations are wary of programmes that ‘only’ use forms to identify aid recipients without other ways of verifying the information, as people could fill out incorrect/dishonest information; as one participant in Sulaymaniyah noted, ‘Some people have turned form-filling into a business’ (Sulaymaniyah workshop). Others expressed concerns about the duplication of recipients when people register with any organisation they can find – ‘Registering is like a job for them’ (Duhok workshop). They felt these attempts would only increase once government-led social assistance was reintroduced in the KRI, and that dishonesty would undermine the accountability of social protection systems going forward.

The UN, World Bank, and the Cash and Livelihoods Consortium in Iraq field-tested the proxy means test in 2019 in order to compare humanitarian targeting methods to the proposed targeting for social protection reform (KII 1). Across the more detailed findings, they noted that ‘sizeable errors in targeting exist, this is to add to administrative complexity and burden on social workers to conduct all these visits’ (UN Iraq *et al.* 2022: 8) Research participants felt that social assistance at scale would only be able to assist people in specific categories, given widespread needs and limited public funds. Moreover, the lack of government-led social assistance programmes since 2015 has contributed to ever-growing needs across broader segments of the population, requiring more personalised follow-up when people in need did not meet the eligibility requirements.

*Our authority is currently limited. For instance, if a person with special needs seeks aid, we can’t complete their transactions, as family care assistance has stopped. Even the Ministry [of Labour and Social Affairs] lacks authority in this regard, posing a significant obstacle.*  
(Int 6, woman working with local NGO, Sulaymaniyah)

Eligibility and identification also remain a challenge to delivering accountable social assistance at scale, especially given the high reliance on personal connections and informal networks to verify recipients. **The lack of systematised registration processes and overlapping or contradictory eligibility criteria could undermine future government-led social assistance, and make it difficult to scale both social assistance and referrals in accountable ways.**

## 5.4 Trust at scale

Trust as a key factor for accountability is particularly important when it comes to (re)establishing accountability pathways for social assistance, particularly through formal social protection reform processes (Fox 2023). There are three crucial types of relationships to consider when it comes to trust at scale for social assistance in the KRI: first, the trust established between people receiving aid and the duty-bearers (government and others); second, the trust between donors and implementing organisations, which can drive

how social assistance is implemented and how its accountability is constructed; and third, trust between local and international organisations working together to design and deliver accountable social assistance. Locally led social assistance requires a personalised and trusted approach that is difficult to scale.

**Interactions with government entities vary widely among organisations, with some successfully collaborating while others are apprehensive about even just visiting government offices**

(Sulaymaniyah workshop). The lack of social assistance from the government beyond the PDS exacerbates social problems for individuals and communities, potentially leading to harassment or even exploitation (Int 4, woman, Sulaymaniyah; Shaw *et al.* 2024). Social workers (the government's frontline providers) asked local NGOs if they could send their lists of people with needs because the Ministry receives requests but has no programmes in place (Duhok workshop; Int 6, woman working with local NGO, Sulaymaniyah).

This underscores general tensions between the KRG and civil society and communities more broadly. Some participants argued that the lack of a central budget from Baghdad since 2015 was just an excuse, and that KRG oil revenues could cover social assistance programmes and gaps in civil servants' salaries (workshops):

*In 2011, the assistance amount became 150,000 Iraqi dinars per month. Presently, social assistance has ceased. Those with a low income used to receive 100,000 Iraqi dinars, while those without a salary received 150,000 Iraqi dinars. This ended in 2015. A list of 2,500 people with special needs has been presented to the committee, but Ministry approval is pending. The Council of Ministers should allocate funds, but they claim to lack the necessary resources. This situation often leads to criticism from the poor towards the government.*

(Int 6, woman working with local NGO, Sulaymaniyah)

Workshop participants in Sulaymaniyah highlighted problems in levels of trust between local and international organisations. These vary widely and are often influenced by personal or past professional relationships. Local organisations often struggle to access international funding; as one participant shared, the Australian Embassy's shift to channelling funds solely through the Government of Iraq has limited direct support to local NGOs. Language barriers exacerbate communication challenges between local and international actors, and local organisations are concerned about the lack of reciprocated transparency from international organisations.

Partnerships with international organisations are noted for their detail-oriented and strict nature, sometimes resulting in fines imposed on local NGOs for not meeting objectives, and a perceived cultural insensitivity to local needs and programme designs. Although such partnerships can bring crucial funding to communities, they often prove challenging for local organisations to manage effectively, as illustrated by instances where programme ideas were allegedly appropriated by international donors or organisations after being shared by local participants (Sulaymaniyah workshop): 'We've given up submitting proposals if they only steal our ideas' (Int 24, man working with local NGO, Sulaymaniyah).

**Research participants from local organisations emphasised the importance of continuous relationships founded on transparency and shared visions for the work.** They cited many positive elements of local–international partnerships such as collaboration in proposal development, presentations, and joint decision-making, specifically about the types of aid needed. Local organisations rely on partnerships with international counterparts to gain experience, exchange information, and enhance their administrative and financial reporting capabilities. These partnerships also foster awareness between local communities and international aid initiatives, enabling international organisations to address issues raised by local organisations directly with international donors. However, these connections are often *ad hoc* and initiated on international organisations' terms, making it difficult to leverage these experiences as bottom-up initiatives to strengthen accountability between the government and its citizens, which is crucial in Iraq (Ardovini and O'Driscoll 2023).

## 6. Conclusions

This section outlines the recommendations from research participants during the collective analysis workshops on how to improve the accountability of social assistance, particularly for programmes and government-led systems at scale. It reviews the key policy areas and remaining evidence gaps going forward to encourage communities, decision makers, and researchers to continue their work on improving the accountability of social assistance.

### 6.1 Recommendations from research participants

One of the primary objectives for the collective analysis workshops with research participants in Sulaymaniyah and Duhok was to produce key messages for people deciding and designing formal social assistance programmes and policies in the KRI. The aggregated recommendations for the three main stakeholder groups – international organisations (UN, international NGOs, and donors), local donors (companies and philanthropic individuals), and the government (KRG and local authorities) – are outlined in the boxes below (see Boxes 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4) in the exact same format that they were shared with these decision makers.

The recommendations centre on three core ideas for improving the accountability of social assistance in the KRI.

#### 1. NGO standards that are fit for purpose and respect recipients' dignity

Participants would like to see guidance that is applicable to the social assistance sector that local NGOs can use to engage the community, using standards that ensure recipients' dignity and their right to receive assistance that is not politicised or stigmatising. This would provide stronger continuity, transparency, and ultimately accountability between the larger formal, government-led social assistance programmes and more local forms of support. It also reflects recommendations from participants of the lived experiences research summarised in Box 6.1.

*Streamlining bureaucratic processes for civil society organisations would significantly improve our efficiency. For instance, opening a bank account should not require extensive approvals and notifications. Having the freedom to operate without unnecessary hurdles from authorities would greatly facilitate our work.*

(Int 12, woman, Duhok)

#### Box 6.1: Dignity at the centre – Ensure a dignified and safe process for those in need

'Participants unanimously called for respect for privacy (especially no taking of photos) and dignity. Suggestions for actions relating to this included awareness-raising campaigns, use of 'no photo' logos, committees to prevent the use of photos, and rules or government legislation preventing the taking of photos of social assistance recipients. They recommended collecting up-to-date disaggregated data and proper assessment of social assistance seekers' needs, including through collaboration between social assistance providers to prevent duplication, so that tensions do not arise over who should be receiving assistance. They also wanted safety to be ensured during distributions, and a good atmosphere without tensions or discriminatory behaviours in distribution locations, so the process feels dignified...

Social assistance also needs to be provided consistently and when it is expected so people can plan according to what they will receive and not be let down. Providers rather than recipients should cover transportation costs associated with collecting assistance.'

Source: Shaw et al. 2024: 58.

2. **Area-based approaches to coordinating and implementing social assistance that include local organisations and are owned by the government as the key duty-bearer**, based on specialisations (added value) and mutual respect rather than political affiliation or hierarchical partnerships with major power imbalances between local and international organisations.

Suggestion: develop a local database overseen by a committee (Sulaymaniyah workshop)

*What we require additionally is better coordination and understanding from donors and the government, along with a commitment to drive the changes to the next level.*

(Int 3, woman, Sulaymaniyah)

3. **A commitment to connecting assistance to meet basic needs, often funded locally and ad hoc by individual donors, with more sustainable support.**

*We want to solve the problem, not just give the help.*

(Sulaymaniyah workshop)

Frontline providers' recommendations echoed the analysis from participants in the lived experiences research, who 'suggested building on these informal networks in a more organised way to better link those in need with individuals/organisations who would like to help to provide more consistent assistance through these channels' (Shaw *et al.* 2024: 59). Systematically leveraging personal and community-based networks to identify those in need of assistance, do case management, and provide specialised services can be a crucial way to scale the benefits of locally led social assistance.

## Box 6.2: Recommendations for international organisations

### 1. 'Make it easier on us': Remove barriers for local organisations to access international funding

- Remove red tape when it comes to small grants; invest in institutional funding/support costs; support organisations in meeting your technical requirements (audits, bank accounts, etc.).
- Invest in partnerships before projects are planned, to see organisations' work first-hand and address barriers early; examine exclusionary practices, such as when international organisations feel they need to hire someone to 'follow local partners' due to a lack of trust.

*It can be challenging to secure funds from international organisations, especially when there are additional requirements and routines imposed by the local government. Finding a solution to streamline this process would definitely be beneficial. Simplifying the banking system or finding alternative methods could help make accessing funds easier for organisations in the KRI. It's important to remove unnecessary barriers and ensure that assistance reaches those who need it most.*

(Research participant, Sulaymaniyah)

### 2. Prioritise better collaborations with local organisations beyond implementation partnerships

- Support government efforts to improve coordination between local organisations (see below).
- Give credit where it's due: several participants reported that their project ideas were shared with international organisations, only to be implemented by other organisations without credit.
- Invest in and support accurate data on areas and people in need, ideally led by the government; share it with local organisations so they can better plan the aid they will provide.

*Having a link between different organisations would be really helpful. It would allow them to have a shared list of people receiving assistance, so if one organisation is unable to provide a specific type of help, they can refer the person to another organisation that can. It would also help prevent duplication of assistance, ensuring that individuals aren't receiving support from multiple organisations unknowingly. It's all about collaboration and making sure resources are used effectively.*

(Research participant, Sulaymaniyah)

Source: Authors' own.

## Box 6.3: Recommendations for local donors in the KRI (companies, enterprises, individuals)

### 1. Invest locally and consistently to fill current gaps in the formal system

- Coordinate with the government to complement formal social assistance; for example, providing aid to those who would benefit from family care (SSN) but do not because of the lack of funding.
- Go beyond basic assistance and think about investing in people so they can access education, earn an income, and not need aid in the future.

*The government can play a crucial role in promoting corporate social responsibility (CSR). This not only benefits the community but also enhances the reputation and sustainability of the companies themselves. It's a win-win situation for everyone involved.*

(Research participant, Duhok)

### 2. Protect people's dignity and avoid imposing conditions that could politicise, stigmatise, or undermine the assistance

- Documenting distributions or sharing people's situations are important ways to ensure transparency as well as raise awareness and funds – but should be done with people's informed consent. Recording aid delivery with pictures or (social) media coverage should not be a requirement for people to receive assistance. The 'Protect my Dignity' campaign is an example of this in action.
- Too many conditions or constraints on funding, such as where the aid should go or to whom, make it difficult for local organisations to provide effective assistance. Giving money to local organisations is often preferable to donating items.
- Ensure that donations are predictable, such as keeping to the agreed timeline and budget.

Source: Authors' own.

## Box 6.4: Recommendations for the KRG and local authorities

### 1. Adopt local NGO standards and ease administrative burdens on local organisations

- NGO standards would help local organisations to get organised; mitigate fraud/corruption from individuals or entities that claim to help people but create organisations to make money or advance specific aims (political, conflict, etc.).
- Standards for local NGOs should go hand-in-hand with streamlined administrative procedures for organisations to register and operate (especially with regards to accessing bank accounts). This could help ensure that organisations meet requirements while improving the efficiency of registration and implementation.

*Dealing with unnecessary bureaucracy can be frustrating, especially when it comes to government-related tasks like license renewals. Having an online system for those processes would definitely make things more convenient and efficient.*

(Research participant, Sulaymaniyah)

- Currently, data on people needing assistance is not centralised or updated due to a lack of public funds; providing accurate data to local organisations on a regular basis would help coordination.

*The government should register and recommend the names of the people who need social assistance [even if the government does not have the funds to support them]. Then, they can provide that list to the organisations to use.*

(Research participant, Duhok)

### 2. Promote coordination among and across local and international organisations

- The government can play a central role in connecting its international partners with local organisations in an area. Local organisations would then have more predictable funding to continue their work.

*The government can play a crucial role in recommending, suggesting, or recognising local organisations to international organisations. By doing so, they can help these local organisations gain visibility and access to additional resources. This collaboration... can lead to more effective and impactful assistance for those in need.*

(Research participant, Duhok)

Source: Authors' own.

## 6.2 Key policy areas and evidence gaps going forward

It is clear that frontline and local perspectives and experiences should inform national social protection policy processes, notably the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework in Iraq (UN Iraq 2021). Local organisations have filled gaps left from non-operational government social assistance programmes for nearly a decade, and can offer key insights into people's priorities.

**Integrate local networks into institutional social assistance design and delivery**, especially for case management and shock response – for example, during the KRI flood response in March 2024 (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) 2024; KII 9).

- This is in line with governance policy recommendations: a 'networked' approach to empowering reformers (Mansour 2023: 2), as well as the recommendations from lived experience research participants (Shaw *et al.* 2024).
- Local networks should include frontline staff of international organisations. As the IRC report noted, in order to better empower frontline staff to enable participation, humanitarian organisations can systematically engage frontline staff in decision-making; strengthen understanding of participation and how to put it into practice; and integrate participation within organisational culture and strategy (Reader and Cechvala 2023). Changes in culture and ways of working, such as involving frontline staff in decision-making and promoting proactive engagement with communities to design programmes rather than only investing in reactive redress mechanisms, are more important than more manuals and toolkits (*ibid.*).

**Ensure that social protection policy and evidence are more accessible and relevant for all stakeholders.** Currently, social protection evidence and literature in Iraq is highly technocratic and context-blind, with some actors finding 'large parts are unreadable' (KII 3). As an international donor noted, 'If you need a coordinator to glue it all together, you need someone who can understand the intricacies and language for all stakeholders, we are unable to generate the discussions' (KII 8). Policy documents should be contextual and lay out the essential issues clearly in order to address challenges created by parallel systems.

Finally, Pasewan's research team offered two recommendations based on their experiences working with participants from both the BASIC lived experiences and accountability research projects. First, they **urged decision makers to consider storytelling as an accountability tool, not just to capture the perspectives of people receiving aid but also to highlight the experiences of those providing it.** 'Interviewing the individuals working in humanitarian assistance is indeed important. Their perspectives, experiences, and challenges can shed light on the realities of this field and inspire others to get involved or support these efforts' (Pasewan and BASIC Research Team debrief, February 2024). Second, they would like to see **more attention to the cultural and contextual elements that underpin the accountability of providing social assistance:**

*It's important to explore how society perceives those who work in humanitarian assistance and how they handle criticism. It can be tough when some [people] expect special treatment or spread rumours about political affiliations. It would be interesting to hear how they respond to such challenges and how they maintain their sense of pride and self-worth.*

(Pasewan and BASIC Research Team debrief, February 2024)

Local organisations in the KRI could be a vital connection between local, sporadic social assistance and future formal programmes that provide social assistance at scale. They could fill gaps in an informed way that is aligned with social assistance policy, provide information about available assistance and support referrals, and maintain relationships with communities.

There are also opportunities to layer assistance to the most vulnerable people across formal and informal structures and reinforce community networks that foster a sense of belonging and dignity for marginalised groups (Shaw *et al.* 2024). Box 11 summarises the actions emerging from this research that could contribute to stronger policy outcomes for the most marginalised. These renewed priorities could in turn strengthen the predictability, transparency, and ultimately accountability for people receiving aid who face chronic vulnerability and a complex web of social assistance programmes.

### Box 6.5: Actions from this research

A policy paper was drafted in Kurdish and disseminated across government, civil society, and the media.

Pasewan and BASIC can support local organisations in drafting two key documents suggested by participants:

- Local donor awareness and principles: An initiative led by local organisations to share common principles (see Box 9);
- Local NGO standards and coordination: A policy recommendation to the KRG (see Box 10).

Pasewan can also amplify local organisations' involvement in ongoing social protection reform processes, specifically local organisations' role in:

- Programme design: Community consultations on key programme decisions such as eligibility and social assistance transfer values;
- Provision of social assistance: Feedback and complaints/grievance and redress mechanisms, as well as referrals
- Monitoring and learning: Connecting feedback mechanisms and monitoring to programme adaptations and future policies.

*Source: Authors' own.*

# Annexe

## Research objectives and participants

Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) Research research on the accountability of social assistance in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) focused on the perspectives and experiences of frontline staff providing social assistance to vulnerable communities. It offers a comparative analysis of frontline perspectives with the existing literature on social assistance policies and programmes, aid recipients' perspectives, as well as BASIC lived experiences participatory research with people receiving social assistance (women with disabilities in Sulaymaniyah, and youth in rural Halabja). The specific questions for the research in the KRI came from the analysis done by the lived experiences research participants. Moreover, the research had two specific objectives:

1. To strengthen accountability pathways for social assistance in the KRI:
  - Contribute to more dignified, effective, and inclusive social assistance (aligned with the lived experiences research objective).
2. To ensure that frontline providers' perspectives inform accountability priorities for social assistance in the KRI: reflecting the full spectrum of social assistance in the KRI, including very localised (even non-cash) support.

**Table A.1: Research parameters: participants and methods**

Parameter	BASIC accountability focus	Details
Locations	<p>1. Sulaymaniyah</p> <p>2. Duhok</p> <p>To capture different types of programmes (large scale/traditional vs community-based)</p>	<p>1. Sulaymaniyah: Complementarity with lived experiences research and participatory methods (mutually reinforcing the research objectives and solutions generated), region with diverse needs and a wide range of social assistance actors and modalities (from community-based aid to large national programmes).</p> <p>2. Duhok: Long history of humanitarian cash assistance and presence of refugees/IDPs; northern KRI perspective with different social assistance priorities; closer in size to Sulaymaniyah (than Erbil or other hubs).</p>
Participants	Frontline responders/staff	<p>a. Social workers (linked to government-led social assistance/local authorities);</p> <p>b. Community organisations and local NGOs;</p> <p>c. International NGOs and Red Cross/Crescent movement;</p> <p>d. UN agencies: although they often implement programmes via partners (local and international), a UN participant was included as the organisation is a key decision maker in social assistance programmes.</p> <p>The team prioritised entities involved in multiple types of social assistance (see below) across all participant groups, as well as a few international organisations with programmes in both locations. They anticipated two-three participants per organisation to safeguard the anonymity of people's experiences and stories.</p>
Social assistance typologies/programmes	<p>Typologies were flexible, with a strong focus on cash-based aid:</p> <p>a. National cash-based social assistance;</p> <p>b. Humanitarian cash assistance;</p> <p>c. Community-based support (likely in-kind);</p> <p>d. Complementary social assistance programmes.</p>	<p>a. Three key programmes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Social Safety Net Programme</li> <li>– Public Distribution System</li> <li>– Social Benefit for Victims of Wars (if applicable).</li> </ul> <p>b. Based on lived experiences research in Suli, included fuel support in winter, specific aid for people with disabilities, etc.</p> <p>c. Other relevant programmes: financial support to farmers, small business owners (women); other organisations supporting prosthetics, support to rural youth on their identified priorities (livelihoods).</p>
Methods	<p>Qualitative methodologies:</p> <p>a. Semi-structured interviews (Pasewan);</p> <p>b. Observation and audio-visual documentation (Pasewan);</p> <p>c. Collective analysis, 'day in the life of'.</p>	<p>a. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted with research participants and key informants using interview guides based on questions prioritised by lived experiences research participants (aid recipients).</p> <p>b. Given the political sensitivities and 'Do no harm' considerations around affiliation-based aid (local organisations assisting and even withdrawing assistance (Action contre la Faim 2023) on the basis of political or religious affiliation), Pasewan complemented the interview and participatory methods with observation.</p> <p>c. The project prioritised participatory methods with research participants, whereby they shaped the specific questions and informed selection of the appropriate approaches/tools that capture their perspectives to answer these questions. Participants were asked to provide stories/reflections on their roles and perspectives during key events in the social assistance programme cycle.</p>

Source: Authors' own. Created using project data.

**Table A.2: Research participants**

Stakeholder group	Participating organisations	Number of participants
Frontline staff (primary research participants) Interviews 1–17 Cited as interviews (Int)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Horizon Relief</li> <li>2. Rehabilitation, Education, and Community Health (REACH)</li> <li>3. Heartland Alliance</li> <li>4. Democracy &amp; Human Rights Development Centre (DHRD)</li> <li>5. Civil Development Organisation (CDO)</li> <li>6. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)</li> <li>7. Humanitarian League Organisation</li> <li>8. Chaka Organisation</li> <li>9. Suly Social Affairs (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, MoLSA)</li> <li>10. Hope of Poors for Humanitarian Support</li> <li>11. Zallal Organisation</li> <li>12. Jeyan Foundation</li> <li>13. CAPNI (Christian faith-based organisation)</li> <li>14. OCPH (affiliated with Caritas)</li> <li>15. Humanitarian Association</li> <li>16. Lalish</li> <li>17. UNICEF</li> </ol>	17 (47% women)
Frontline staff: workshop participants + Day in the life of Interviews 18–44 Cited as workshop	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Horizon Relief</li> <li>2. REACH</li> <li>3. Chaka Organisation</li> <li>4. Heartland Alliance</li> <li>5. DHRD</li> <li>6. Suly Social Affairs (MoLSA)</li> <li>7. Humanitarian Association</li> <li>8. Sarwary Halabja</li> <li>9. Halabja Disabilities</li> <li>10. Bakhshin Organisation</li> <li>11. ZAD Organisation</li> <li>12. Zhyan Bakhshan</li> <li>13. WADI (Association for Crisis Assistance and Development Cooperation)</li> <li>14. Zhinda</li> <li>15. Zallal</li> <li>16. Zakho Social Affairs</li> <li>17. Humanitarian Association</li> <li>18. Jiyan Foundation</li> <li>19. Nasry Church</li> <li>20. CAPNI</li> <li>21. Lalish Charity Foundation</li> <li>22. OCPH</li> <li>23. Duhok Social Affairs (MoLSA)</li> <li>24. Organisation of Martyrs</li> <li>25. Barzani Charity Foundation</li> <li>26. Nesha</li> <li>27. Balsam Foundation for Sustainable Development</li> </ol>	31 (27 new participants)
Key informants KIIs 1–11 Cited as key informant interviews (KIIs)	CashCap, UNHCR, EU, WFP, ILO, World Bank, GIZ, USAID	12 (33% women)
Total	29 local organisations 11 international institutions	56 (48% women)

Source: Authors' own. Created using project data.

## Social assistance programmes in the KRI

**Table A.3: Social protection programmes in the KRI (formal)**

Programmes	Actor	Targeted population	Criteria/ description	Delivery mechanism	Reach (individuals)	Status
Social Safety Net Programme	MoLSA, Ministry of Planning	12 categories of persons with disabilities, 9 vulnerable groups	Targets persons with disabilities due to financial constraints	Electronic Smart cards	81,000	Active <b>but not operational</b>
Social Workers	MoLSA	Poor people (below the poverty line)	Provides support for beneficiaries under the SSN programme for persons with disabilities			Active <b>but not operational</b>
Public Distribution System	Ministry of Trade (at the Government of Iraq level)	Universal, but aims to target vulnerable households	Universal, but the government is considering reform to target vulnerable and food-insecure households	In-kind through food ration agents	More than 40 million people	Active
Social Security Scheme (private sector)	MoLSA	Private sector workers	Covers old age, disability, survivorship, health, and work injury for private sector employees <sup>2</sup>	Monthly contributions and benefits through MoLSA	50% of the labour force	
Pension (public sector)	Ministry of Finance	Public sector employees	Covers public sector employees	Bank transfers	50% of people aged 65 and above	
Covid-19 Support	MoLSA	Vulnerable households	In-kind support (food and fuel) for self-identified vulnerable households	In-kind support (food and fuel) through MoLSA	N/A	Completed
Social Benefit for Victims of Wars	MoLSA	Civilian victims of war and conflict	Support for the vulnerable civilian population affected by war and conflict	Electronic Smart cards	N/A	Unclear
Livelihood support: vocational training programmes	Directorate of Vocational Training under MoLSA	Unemployed persons, persons with disabilities	Targets unemployed persons and persons with disabilities for skill development and labour market integration	In-person training sessions under MoLSA	2,216 training sessions in 2021	Active
Livelihood support: small loans for entrepreneurs	MoLSA	Entrepreneurs aged 15–45	Targets entrepreneurs to develop existing or start new businesses	Financial support through MoLSA (discontinued)	N/A	Discontinued <sup>3</sup>
Child-targeted interventions	Ministry of Education	Children who dropped out of school	Brings children back into the schooling system			Active

Source: Authors' own. Created using data from *Action contre la Faim 2023*: 8, 23.

During 2020, MoLSA provided Covid-19 support to vulnerable households in the form of in-kind support such as food and fuel (one-time distribution) (*Action contre la Faim 2023*). Ministry workers self-identified vulnerable households through visits rather than working through any existing social assistance programmes (*ibid.*).

<sup>2</sup> There are discussions about expanding the scope of social security coverage, mainly to workers in the informal economy (*Action contre la Faim 2023*).

<sup>3</sup> MoLSA supports the re-implementation of small loan support in the future (*ibid.*).

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