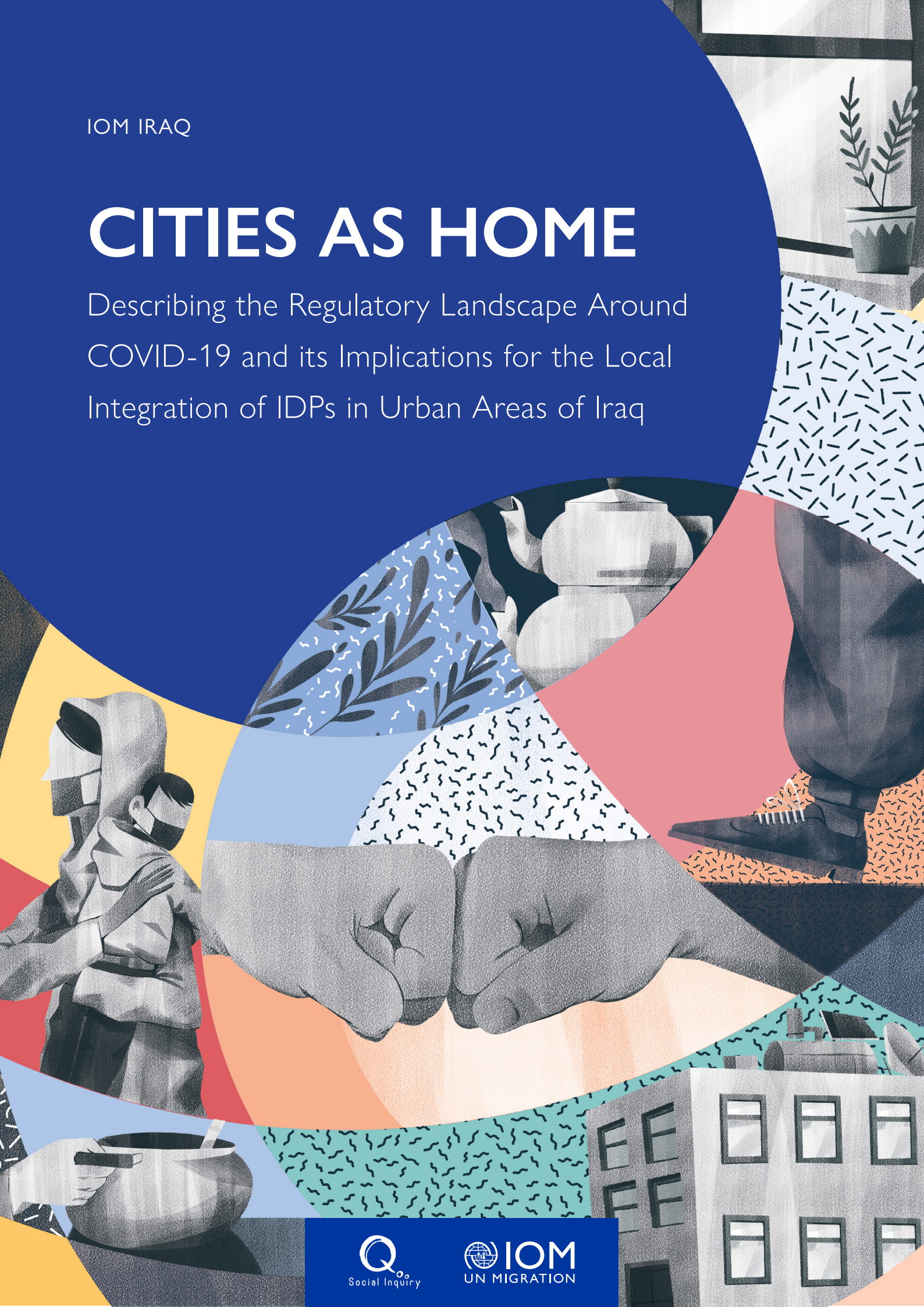


IOM IRAQ

# CITIES AS HOME

Describing the Regulatory Landscape Around  
COVID-19 and its Implications for the Local  
Integration of IDPs in Urban Areas of Iraq



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## INTRODUCTION

With the onset of COVID-19 in Iraq, cities face particularly high risk of virus transmission given their relatively dense populations.

This is especially true for those urban locations hosting large shares of the remaining 1.4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). The current situation thus makes it necessary to better understand the policy and regulatory landscape that surrounds IDPs in relation to the public health crisis, which may help or hinder their ability to pursue local integration as a durable solution to displacement.



This brief is part of a larger research project, *Cities as Home*, carried out by IOM Iraq, the Returns Working Group, and Social Inquiry, that explores both drivers and deterrents of integration across 14 urban locations that still host the largest share of IDPs in the country. The outputs of this project also include an analysis report on determinants of integration for IDPs and host community members, factsheets for each location, and four detailed case studies.

## METHODOLOGY

Following from the IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons,<sup>1</sup> this analysis focuses specifically on localised regulations in response to COVID-19 as they relate to movement, healthcare, employment, housing, and education.

Social Inquiry and IOM Iraq field researchers conducted a total of 40 semi-structured key informant interviews with provincial, district, or subdistrict level authorities and policy-implementers in those governorates still hosting the highest proportion of urban (out-of-camp) IDPs in the country.<sup>2</sup> This data was collected between May and July 2020, either in person or by phone based on public health regulations. Analysis here is supplemented with additional findings from IDP and host community datasets collected between December 2019 and February 2020 for the overall *Cities as Home* research project. It is important to note that the level of compliance and means of implementation of any directives reported are outside the scope of this analysis.



### WHO ARE THE KEY INFORMANTS?



Because the emphasis of this analysis is on the regulatory landscape in general with respect to IDPs, the key informants selected for interviews needed to either have direct knowledge of this environment or be individuals involved in implementing these regulations and instructions. They included:

- Provincial Council members,
- Representatives from Mayors' offices,
- Representatives from police departments and relevant security entities, and
- Members of the Directorate Generals of Labour and Social Affairs, Education, Health, and Migration and Displacement.

<sup>1</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution-University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> These governorates include: Anbar, Babylon, Baghdad, Dohuk, Erbil, Kirkuk, Ninewa, Salah al-Din, and Sulaimaniya. Diyala Governorate was not included here due to a deterioration of security conditions on the ground.

## FINDINGS

Overall, no COVID-19 measures target out-of-camp IDPs specifically, but rather are applied to all residents living in an area.

The spread of the virus and the measures to curb it, however, did hit IDP families as well as relatively poorer residents particularly hard, exacerbating existing economic inequalities. Authorities worked to alleviate these hardships to a certain extent given the public health restrictions imposed. This being said, making up the shortfall from what income was lost will be a challenge for all communities, specifically

for many IDPs and the poor in general, and will require targeted and immediate financial support. Strong, coherent, and area-based institutional responses to the public health crisis and issues emanating as a result of it also have implications for local integration, specifically as confidence in local administrations is a driver for host community acceptance of IDPs in particular.<sup>3</sup>



*Below are key findings on local regulations in response to COVID-19 related to movement, healthcare, employment, housing, and education as well as recommendations for intervention to assist both IDPs and host community residents in line with supporting local integration as a durable solution:*

- Movement:** The measures taken to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in relation to movement restrictions and lockdowns applied to all residents of a given location, regardless of displacement status. This approach makes sense from a public health standpoint and, if implemented as intended, would not contribute to specific negative targeting of IDPs. To compensate for these area-based restrictions, government and NGO aid distribution to IDPs switched from having recipients come to a certain location to receive aid packages to aid packages being delivered door to door to prevent large gatherings of people. In Anbar, authorities also noted that they increased monthly aid distribution to IDPs to twice a month.
 

What remains to be seen is whether or not the limitations in social interactions in general due to these restrictions have impacted progress toward local integration, given that IDP and host community interactions are significant drivers of it.<sup>4</sup> It may be the case that restrictions of movement and of interactions have negatively impacted ties or it may be that having collectively experienced this hardship together has strengthened them. These dynamics should be monitored over time.
- Healthcare:** By and large, no specific measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 were reported regarding access to healthcare beyond curfew and lockdown measures. Authorities in Erbil, however, noted that the Ministry of Health initiated COVID-19 testing for IDPs, but only for those in camps within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to help in keeping people safe and reduce its spread. In general, healthcare in both public primary health clinics and hospitals are provided at no cost to out-of-camp IDPs, as it is for all residents. The only exception to this relates to IDPs with security restriction issues, primarily those with alleged ISIL affiliation. These individuals are required to obtain ad hoc permission from security forces to visit hospitals for care. Access to healthcare for all is imperative in general and even more so in the midst of a pandemic and as such should be facilitated and monitored.
- Employment:** Authorities across all locations indicated that COVID-19 lockdown measures including curfews and movement restrictions heavily impacted IDPs and less well-off host community families economically. This is because these segments of the population, particularly IDPs, tend to work as daily labourers and, when the businesses and markets they worked for closed, wages stopped. Among adult male IDPs and host community

<sup>3</sup> IOM Iraq, Returns Working Group, and Social Inquiry, *Cities as Home: Understanding Belonging and Acceptance Among IDPs and Host Communities in Iraq* (IOM Iraq: Erbil, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

members surveyed for this analysis prior to the public health crisis, 32% and 15%, respectively, worked as daily labourers. Further to this, 59% of IDPs and 32% of host community households reported having neither savings nor access to borrowing should they need it. These relatively high rates may be further exacerbated by the loss of income due to lockdown measures and, as such, without savings or borrowing capacity, IDPs and host community residents are at increased risk of not being able to afford their basic needs in the sudden absence of income. This also has implications for local integration, as having savings and/or financial safety nets increases IDPs' feelings of belonging and host communities' feelings of acceptance of them.<sup>5</sup> It may hinder pursuit of other durable solutions as well. No specific measures were mentioned by local authorities to alleviate these economic concerns, but options should be considered to help those in most need, regardless of displacement status.

Cash distribution in emergency settings serve as a bridging measure to help people survive as the economic situation normalises as restrictions ease, depending on the public health situation, and authorities should facilitate appropriate access for humanitarian actors engaging in more expanded cash and livelihoods interventions. Increasing access to micro-loans and credit for small businesses as well as streamlining administrative processes for business owners to reopen are both also critical.

- **Housing:** Given the economic dimensions of the public health crisis as noted by authorities and by the relatively high economic precarity of both IDPs and host community members right before it, the current ability of families to be able to cover housing costs may be impacted. This may hold particularly true for IDPs, among whom 77% pay rent compared to 18% of host community residents. Despite this, no specific regulations were noted in relation to housing in response to COVID-19 and ensuing public health measures, with one exception. Erbil authorities reported that they had sent instructions to landlords requesting they exempt IDPs and poor families in general from rent for a few months or at least reduce the amount. Implementing or increasing rent support or cash for rent schemes for those in need may be critical, as would protection monitoring against surges in evictions.

- **Education:** In line with public health measures to limit public gatherings and prevent the spread of COVID-19, education provision in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq switched from in-person to online modalities for students. This posed challenges for IDP students, namely because many did not have access to the appropriate technology at home to participate. In Erbil and Sulaimaniya, local authorities and humanitarian organisations worked to provide computers and free internet access to IDPs and other students in need, though the demand was greater than what authorities could support.

Given these changes in education provision and the current domestic economic situation in many households, attention needs to be paid to any trade-off between student enrolment and child employment. This may be of particular concern for those who have previously experienced disruptions in their education (e.g., because of displacement or to support their families). Attention must also be paid to school enrolment decline due to the inability to participate in classes online because of lack of technology and internet, limited access to adequate and regular electricity provision, and/or other usage barriers. Finally, the impact of online learning on academic performance and developmental milestones should also be monitored, particularly among younger students.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

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