



Left: Loading materials on a truck after redeeming vouchers.
Right: Materials used for roofing and a new water tank in place.
Photos: Neil Brighton/NRC

Situation before the crisis

In general, Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan Region came from both urban and rural locations in Syria with large Kurdish populations. Many of the refugees living outside of the camps were later arrivals and more likely to have fewer resources.

Situation after the crisis began

The majority of refugees in non-camp settings had secured rental accommodation in urban areas, though some lived rent-free. Only a few households lived with Iraqi host-families.

Conditions varied from finished apartments, with written or verbal leases, to crude structures that were poorly built, or erected quickly to either lay claim to a piece of land, or to demonstrate that a claim was in process. The latter structures were very poor, including limited or no WASH facilities, lack of windows and/or doors, poor connections to utilities, and damaged roofs.

Shelter strategy

When the project started there was no consolidated, holistic strategy for supporting the urban caseload in Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I), with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) preferring to support refugees in camps. This was despite the fact that an estimated majority of refugees (60%) lived in urban areas outside of camps.

The national strategy was drafted in the context of Central and Southern Iraq, and did not account for the specific context in KR-I. The

strategy consisted of three combinable approaches:

- Rental subsidies (though these were not seen as viable unless all refugee households benefitted).
- Building low cost shelters on land allocated by the government.
- Subsidies to host families to build additional rooms and/or make renovations.
- Many rudimentary structures were on government land which meant the local authorities had full control over its official usage.
- In the case of structures built on private land, much of the land ownership was in dispute, so no official applications for building permits could be made.

The KRG's reluctance to support non-camp populations was based on a concern that it would a 'pull factor' by exceeding the level of services in camps. Interventions had to be seen as emergency, life-saving responses, which meant that construction or robust rehabilitation of shelters were not viable options for humanitarian actors.

However, much decision-making power was devolved to the individual governorates and some authorities were more open to supporting the urban caseload than others.

Project implementation

The organisation initially planned to facilitate robust housing repairs for those most in need. However, obtaining local authority approval was not possible for a number of reasons:

- The strategy of the local authorities was to avoid incentivising movement out of camps.

Given this constraint, the organisation decided to implement a project providing vouchers for some repair and maintenance activities which did not require building permits. Repairs would use light-weight materials and be used to replace parts of the house, rather than adding or extending structures.

This level of intervention required only the permission of the landowner, and each beneficiary was required to provide testimony of the landowner's agreement, prior to implementing the project.

As this was a pilot-project, the team had to be careful when dealing with sensitive issues such as roofing in order to avoid repairs being re-categorised as requiring building permits. For example, replacing plastic sheets only required the permission of the owner, whereas adding roofing materials to a structure required an application to the municipality. Conversations with one local municipality in the planning stage indicated that any project involving distribution of CGI sheets would not be allowed and the item was dropped from the potential list of approved materials.

During the voucher distribution, beneficiaries were asked if they required technical or physical support



The project has been adapted by other humanitarian partners and replicated in Erbil governorate.
Photo: Jake Zarins/NRC

to make the improvements. The small minority that did require assistance were visited by one of two Repair and Maintenance Technicians. However, all of these households had already found other support before the technicians visited the shelter.

Each refugee household was given US\$ 500 in vouchers redeemable at pre-selected suppliers.

Beneficiaries were free to redeem the vouchers as they saw fit; however organisation staff on-site at the suppliers would question, for example, the intentions of a household purchasing only cement with their vouchers. The organisation placed no restrictions on beneficiaries paying with their own money for additional materials not on the approved list, though it was made clear that the organisation distanced itself from these actions.

Some potential beneficiaries were excluded as their landlords would not permit them to make improvements.

The amount of US\$ 500 was sufficient for the needs assessed, and was standardised across all beneficiaries to avoid disputes. Households that required additional support were referred to another organisation's cash-assistance project.

Beneficiary selection

A variety of criteria were used to select beneficiary households, including: house condition, economic vulnerability, social vulnerability, and/or physical vulnerability. In all cases beneficiary households had to meet two of the criteria, with one always being that of poor housing.

The project team visited close to 1,000 households during a 3-month

project assessment, and from that list identified 500 beneficiary households, based on social and economic vulnerability criteria.

Families that had built their own shelter had to be excluded from support since self-built shelters were seen to constitute a pull-factor away from camps. These families were put in contact with another organisation's cash-assistance programme.

Coordination

Six months after the project started, the Urban Working Group for shelter, in Duhok, was launched.

Before the creation of the group, the focus had almost exclusively been on supporting the camp population. Any coordination for non-camp interventions that did take place was largely done bilaterally between interested organisations. These bilateral discussions gave encouragement to other organisations to explore the possibilities of initiating projects outside of the camps, and the experiences of this project formed key discussions during the establishment of the Urban Working Group.

After the project had been running for a few months, more organisations initiated non-camp projects in a variety of sectors, as acceptance of such interventions grew.

Materials

The standardised list of permitted materials was finalised through focus-group consultations with the beneficiaries to ensure that the materials were appropriate.

Materials were sourced by the suppliers and collected by the beneficiaries at the point of sale. The project team was present at each of the suppliers to support households and ensure that the materials exchanged for vouchers were restricted to the permitted list.

In communities located far away from suppliers, each household was permitted to use US\$ 20 from the vouchers as a contribution towards transportation. While this amount was not enough for an individual household to transport all materials, the problem was solved by households pooling their money to rent larger trucks.

Identifying suppliers with both the capacity and interest to take part in the voucher distribution was challenging. Of the 12 suppliers approached for the tender process, only two participated. For a distribution of 500 households, two suppliers was sufficient; however additional suppliers would have offered households more choice, and potentially more competitive prices, as many beneficiaries reported that the prices being charged were higher than prevailing market prices.

Following the pilot, the project model was replicated but this time with engagement with the local Chamber of Commerce, and a comprehensive survey of nearly 80 shops in the local retail market was undertaken in order to widen the number of potential suppliers.

Wider project impacts

This project was one of the first shelter interventions in the urban areas of Duhok Governorate.

The ongoing lessons learned from this project form part of the KR-I-level discussions on approaches to sustainable support for Syrian refugees, particularly in light of the increasingly protracted nature of the conflict.

List of approved materials
Water tanks, pumps and pipes
Cement for flooring
Wall fixing materials
Plastic doors and windows
Plastic flooring /covering
Tool box
Metal bar for roofing
Fuel tank
Plastic sheeting
Window glass (installation included)
Water heater