



SHELTER SUPPORT TO RETURN PROCESSES IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

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Abstract

This advocacy note includes specific recommendations on how to support accelerating returns in light of COVID-19 context through encouraging transitional/temporary shelter options for families in camp locations who are returning to their Areas of Origin across Iraq.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges to Iraqis in general but even more so for those in protracted displacement. Restrictions on movement and loss of livelihoods/employment opportunities have fueled a wave of voluntary movement to areas of origin for those families hoping to regain access to their properties, lands and income generating activities and restoring normalcy. Only in the period June-July 2020, close to 3,000 IDP families (approximately 15,000 individuals) from camps and urban areas have returned to their Area of Origin (AoO) either to their own properties or into secondary displacement within the governorate of origin. While sustainable return process calls for a multi-faceted response from both humanitarian and stabilization actors, emergency measures could be implemented to support the return to normalcy, especially for those extremely vulnerable people returning to areas with heavily destroyed infrastructure and individual housing and without the resources to initiate repairs or rental agreements.

The departure of IDPs from camps also provides an opportunity to decongest and/or consolidate camps as a preventative measure for the spread of COVID-19 and improve currently crowded living conditions in some camps. Decongested camps are less prone to spread of infectious diseases, as they allow the respect of minimum preventive measures like social distancing, less sharing of washing and showering facilities, enhanced ventilation, better organized distributions without overcrowding and easier monitoring of quarantine/isolation protocols.

Ideally, camps should be used as a last resort to host displaced people, especially in the context of diminishing humanitarian funding for CCCM agencies, shelter and other sectors. Admitting new families or re-admitting previous residents should be handled with care – a balance between decongestion and health considerations for current residents and providing extremely vulnerable families from out of camps with adequate shelter and access to services should be maintained.

HOW TO USE THIS ADVOCACY NOTE

This document is meant to support the decision-making process on the use of tents from IDPs leaving formal camps. There is a different document outlining recommendations, risks and mitigation measures for the use of tents in the context of camp consolidation/camp closure which could be found [here](#).

USERS CONCERNED BY THE ADVOCACY NOTE

All recommendations in this advocacy note are to be considered by local authorities, camp management agencies, shelter and other humanitarian partners operating both in IDP camps and in areas of return. It contains recommendations which rest in public health consideration and has been designed in consultation with Health Cluster, CCCM Cluster and based on the knowledge and experience of Shelter Cluster and its partners. It also considers the declining resources and capacity of humanitarian shelter partners to support timely housing reconstruction in return areas and meet the needs of populations on the move.

Compliance with this advocacy note should take into account the local context, protection risks, the preference of beneficiaries and authorities' considerations.

1. FAMILIES DEPARTING FROM IDP CAMPS SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO CARRY THEIR TENT WITH THEM

Although not an ideal solution, tents can still offer temporary, emergency shelter for returnees which houses have been affected by the consequences of the conflict. Many areas across Iraq have witnessed heavy damage to residential buildings. After almost 3 years from the end of the conflict, reconstruction efforts have not been sufficient to meet shelter needs to many people. In particular, category 3 (structurally damaged) and 4 (destroyed) war-damaged shelter are beyond the scope, scale and resources of repair for humanitarian partners. Such long-term, costly reconstruction programmes shall be addressed by stabilization and development actors in support of the overall governmental effort to reconstruct its country. Those areas may present broader challenges though, directly impacting the capacity of families and international partners to start implementing shelter repairs – notably debris removal, ERW clearance, HLP barriers including secondary occupation of houses. Presence of ERW especially could cause loss of lives if people are not cautious when settling back in areas of origin. Hence, returning families shall seek the support of humanitarian partners to obtain accurate and up-to-date information on the situation in their area of origin, as recommended by the Protection Cluster and the Know Before You Go messaging¹.

Prevailing preference of beneficiaries indicate their will to take their used tents upon departure from camps. This would offer a second life to tents back in area of origin, eventually for storage/additional space or cut into plastic sheeting and be a valuable emergency shelter material (for instance to fence off a shelter or to close broken windows/missing doors). Furthermore, that would save costs to Shelter or CCCM partners related to the management of used tent including cleaning, storage, regular care, final disposal, etc. In light of COVID-19 risk of infection currently on the worst case scenario (community-based transmission), but also of other diseases (e.g. scabies) tents and any other item vacated by families leaving the camps and left behind require costly and timely interventions to ensure first in-depth cleaning (to fully remove dirt) followed by disinfection with chlorine-based water solution² before another family can move in/use those. Considering that many tents have been in use for long time and may be close to or have passed their lifespan, such thorough disinfection process required for public health purposes could further contribute to the wear and tear of the tent, making it non-reusable any longer.

¹ KBYG messaging of the Protection Cluster and the Return Working Group: <http://iraqrecovery.org/Files/28/56.pdf>

KBYG leaflet of the Protection Cluster and the Return Working Group: <http://iraqrecovery.org/RWG/Pages/27>

² Based on WHO "Environmental cleaning and disinfection in non-health-care settings in the context of COVID-19":

<https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/332096/WHO-2019-nCoV-Disinfection-2020.1-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (English version)

<https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/332096/WHO-2019-nCoV-Disinfection-2020.1-ara.pdf?sequence=12&isAllowed=y> (Arabic version)

Several elements should be considered when deciding whether families should be permitted to take their tent upon departure:

<i>Risk</i>	<i>Mitigation measures/considerations</i>
Tents can be misused or end up in the hands of military actors .	Tent ownership – tents currently installed in IDP camps across Iraq belong mainly to MoMD, UNHCR and a few other actors who are no longer operational (e.g. AFAD). Removing or spraying over agency logos is recommended.
Tents can be used to establish informal settlements or support secondary displacement .	A clear policy across Iraq is missing. Some authorities including governmental camp managers of some camps have allowed departing families to take their tents with them, especially in the context of the camp consolidation processes late last year. The Government Returns Committee may consider which Governorates are the most frequent people would return to and contact the Governor's Office for advice. Moreover, people living in sub-standard shelter in their area of origin shall be assisted by all stakeholders (humanitarian, government, development actors) to ensure return achieves minimum standards and thus remains durable.
Returnees arriving with tents into heavily destroyed areas might exacerbate tensions with non-displaced communities .	Some non-displaced communities might not have received any/enough shelter support and could have grievances against returnees arriving with good quality tents and other NFIs. Humanitarian partners working in such AoO should consider scaling up their support for the host community.
Some IDPs might destroy their tents prior to departure to receive a new one.	Camp management and shelter actors in camps should communicate clearly that they have low capacity to replace damaged tents and might set up rules where people are only allowed to take tents installed prior to a certain period (e.g. 3 months or passing 1 rainy season/winter).
AoO governorate might not accept the uncontrolled mushrooming of humanitarian tents .	Good coordination between authorities in the place of displacement and origin should resolve such concerns. This could also be done through humanitarian fora, Governments Returns Committee or Returns Working Group.

2. BENEFITS OF ALLOWING IDPS TO LEAVE CAMPS WITH THEIR USED TENT

FOR IDPS LEAVING CAMPS:

1. Displaced families returning to areas of origin have a place to live and resume normal activities, while full reconstruction of their damaged property can happen.
2. Tents can be re-used, re-purposed and in general represent an asset to the family.
3. Intention survey show that one of the top main reasons for the low rate of return is damage to property – having a temporary shelter to set up might facilitate returns

FOR CAMPS/CAMP MANAGEMENT

1. In view of the current COVID-19 pandemic and based on health protocols to ensure Infection Prevention and Control measures, vacated tents need to be cleaned thoroughly, fully disinfected by trained workers provided with Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs), before another family can move in. This activity is costly, timely, hence may turn into a sporadic practice. Public health risks for both workers handling the used tents as well as the new family moving into a non-washed tent are evident during the time of a pandemic.
2. Vacated tents tend to be vandalized or are quickly worn out if not used.
3. IDPs leaving with their tents will allow for sustainable decongestion/consolidation of camps in the long-run and alleviate the burden of service provision for local authorities, CCCM agencies and humanitarian partners of all sectors.
4. In cases where vulnerable families are admitted to camps and assigned a plot, they would prefer to receive a new tent, especially in the context of COVID-19 and other spreadable diseases prevalent in camps.
5. Giving old tents to returnees and replacing them with new ones in small numbers (rate of return) will make blanket tent replacement obsolete – camp shelter will be replaced incrementally rather than through large-scale, costly interventions which can disrupt daily life and create higher risks of COVID-19 spread.