

The Agha Khan Travel Grant
Amman, Jordan. Erbil, Iraq

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The AKPIA Travel Grant researched the following problem: Baghdad is facing an overwhelming amount of sub-standard IDP settlements that are rapidly turning into slums. Travel grant funds were used to speak to government and NGO representatives in Kurdistan and in Amman, and to serve as fieldwork for the thesis to follow regarding upgrading semi-durable IDP settlements in Baghdad.

The most recent war in Iraq has resulted in a large wave of internal and external displacement, with increased sectarian violence and ethnic tension. Subsequent conflict has exacerbated conditions within the nation and further increased displacement. Throughout the country, 1,332,382 Iraqis are currently displaced. Already operating on inadequate infrastructure due to a negligent dictatorship and consecutive wars, over 250 internally displaced person (IDP) settlements have peppered Baghdad's landscape and aggravated the capital's weak infrastructure. It is clear that the rapid rate at which informal settlements are being established exceeds the rate in which solutions are being provided.

Ten percent of Baghdad's constituency has left their place of origin to a location where their religion or sect predominates. The Ministry of Displacement and Migration (MoDM) has identified the main reasons for displacement to be ethnic and political conflicts, job opportunities, and security issues. Meanwhile, rural families have migrated in large numbers to the capital. The migration within and into the capital alone, which has a population of five million, has resulted in over 110,000 displaced families and 700,000 displaced people. To aggravate issues of displacement, displaced families are having severe difficulties in finding adequate and affordable shelter. Housing is a problem throughout Iraq, not only within IDPs. Presently, there is a shortfall of up to three million dwellings, this is considered to be a "crisis level" shortage by United Nations Development Group and World Bank standards.

The IDP issue is a macro problem that affects the community at large; it has led to security issues and has limited access to certain neighborhoods that are now considered difficult and dangerous. Likewise, local communities have been sorely stretched by the influx of IDPs.

More than half of the IDP families, an estimated fifty-eight percent, are displaced families with severe challenges and lack of access to adequate and affordable shelter. Providing secure and safe tenure is a top priority for the government. This is especially a concern for families that live illegally in public buildings, informal settlements, and make-shift constructions. These families are particularly vulnerable due to forced eviction and potential secondary displacement.

Furthermore, key challenges facing IDPs in settlements include unemployment and lack of social and family ties in new locations.

While current settlements are legally insecure, under-serviced by urban infrastructure, generally have unhealthy living conditions and can be physically unsafe, eighty percent of IDPs in Baghdad prefer to stay in-situ. They have adapted to an urban lifestyle and brought rural traditions to their new urban environment. Communities tend to be well organized and have established internal leadership for representatives to negotiate with authorities to receive essential services.

The organic nature of the informal settlements has resulted in user-initiated incremental housing processes. While houses are overcrowded and construction materials vary in durability and safety, the settlements are flexible and responsive to affordable housing processes. They allow families to extend themselves and improve their dwellings over time. With unstable incomes for many IDPs, this process is ideal.

Within the incremental housing model, each household plans and implements its housing provision according to their specific shelter needs and priorities over time. This provides a “pay as you go” model for housing. The sequential organization of a home divides the cost of construction for the unit over time based on the spatial needs of a user. It also delivers a basic housing unit in a limited timeframe.

Iraq’s government is currently searching for a solution to mitigate the IDP problem. With the compounded previous wars, severe internal strife, and a current lack of safety, Iraq is in a more challenging position now than it has ever been in responding to issues of displacement.

The National Housing Policy also realizes that there is a substantial unmet demand in housing. Constrained by various bottlenecks, the government identifies the ability to meet current housing demands as insufficient. The involvement of IDPs via a participatory incremental approach can respond to this portion of the policy directly.

With the AKPIA Travel grant, I was able to attend and participate in two UN-Habitat conferences as well as visit an internally displaced person settlement in Erbil. The conferences addressed the following topics: Implementing Durable Housing Strategies for IDPs and Informal Settlements and Urban Governance.