Why has nobody come back here?

Monitoring physical and social conditions in places of origin to understand IDP return patterns in Iraq

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INTRODUCTION: DATA TO SUPPORT DECISION-MAKING IN AN EVOLVING DISPLACEMENT CONTEXT

The official end of the four-year ISIL conflict in Iraq in December 2017 led to a spike in the number of displaced people attempting return to their places of origin. IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) recorded 1.5 million returnees by January 2017, 3.4 million by January 2018, and 4.2 million by January 2019.[1] Less than two million people remained internally displaced by 2019. Some of the locations where families returned had recently been retaken by security forces, while others had been retaken earlier and experienced returns over the past four years. Overall, this manifested in differing levels of restoration of basic needs or conditions (including the re-knitting social ties) across locations in conflict-affected Iraq.

This new scenario, where more and more people sought return as the means for resolving their displacement, required a change in the nature of humanitarian and development interventions in Iraq. From an original focus on those still displaced, stakeholders needed now to scale up operations in areas of return. The question derived from here was how existing tools and data could support in tailoring policies and programming to emerging needs and challenges associated with return, making it a sustainable option for families deciding to do so. This need was not only for international stakeholders present in Iraq, but also for a national government which now had to re-establish governance across large swaths of territory after the conflict.

Relatively early on, data available on returns in Iraq was granular. More than 1,600 locations were monitored through key informants reporting the number of IDP families returning in each place.[2] This was used to prioritize funding and programs, focusing on those areas with higher numbers of returnees. The crude number of returnees however was not always the best indicator for needs, particularly because it alone does not provide any detail about how people are living, making it difficult to ascertain not only how sustainable return to a given location can be but whether or not it is a feasible option in the first place. Further insight was needed to understand why, by January 2019, about 20% of the locations monitored in Iraq had very few returns or no return at all. Indeed, comparing conditions people were going back to and conditions that were keeping people from going back could shed some light on how to contribute to making voluntary returns a feasible and sustainable option for IDPs. In other words, learning what makes a location conducive to returns.

With the aim to cover this data gap in Iraq's displacement crisis, Social Inquiry with the support of IOM DTM and the Returns Working Group developed a tool to evaluate how differences in return rates between locations could precisely be explained by differences in the physical and social conditions in them. This correlation between lack of returns and severity of conditions would be then translated into one operational instrument, the *Return Index*, and used to infer recommendations on what matters for people to return, how to address obstacles, and where geographically to focus. The fact that this tool was first

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[1] See IOM Iraq, Integrated Location Assessment III (Erbil: IOM Iraq, 2018). Available at:
http://iraqdtm.iom.int/Downloads/DTM%20Special%20Reports/DTM%20Integrated%20Location%20Assessment%20III/IOM%20-%20Integrated%20Location%20Assessment%20III%20-%20English%20-%20Digital.pdf

[2] See IOM Iraq Displacement Tracking Matrix's masterlist of returnees per location, currently updated twice per month. Available at: http://iraqdtm.iom.int/ReturneeML.aspx.

implemented in late 2018 and its field data updated every two months allows for a monitoring of changes and emerging dynamics in the drivers of severity for returns in Iraq.[3]

This paper seeks to explain the data framework developed as part of the *Return Index* and then point to some lessons learned with regard to how tools like this can be built and applied to inform decision-making in displacement contexts, taking the case of Iraq as the anchor.

WHAT IS THE RETURN INDEX AND HOW IT IS IMPLEMENTED?

In brief, the *Return Index* provides a means of measuring the severity of living conditions in locations of return. Two main building blocks are combined to generate this tool: (a) design and collection of indicators on physical and social conditions linked to the displacement context; and (b) quantitative analysis to generate and apply a *severity score* to each location based on the state of these indicators. The applicability of the index rests in its capacity to combine the data on these indicators at the very local level into a single numerical score that can be used to identify those locations or geographical clusters that concentrate a higher severity of conditions for returnees[4].

Design and collection of indicators

Severity of conditions is measured here through a set of indicators that aim to cover different circumstances likely affecting the long-term, sustainable reintegration of IDPs into their places of origin. This is heavily context-dependent, given that indicators must resonate with local dynamics inherent in the displacement crisis in order to be of any value. Thus, the process for developing the indicators for a post-conflict setting like Iraq needed to include not only context-relevant physical dimensions of recovery, such as the ability to restore an essential minimum of material wellbeing, but also, importantly, aspects related to social cohesion and security conditions as well.

Table 1 lists the indicators designed and applied in Iraq, grouped in the physical and social vectors mentioned above. These indicators were tailored for the data collection method used in Iraq, which consisted of interviews with key informants and community leaders in each of the 1,600+ return locations. This method was deemed to be the most effective and efficient to generate the level of detail necessary for analysis for such a large number of locations in a relatively short period of time and to monitor changes over time (household interviews at this scale would not be feasible). Despite these advantages, there are limitations to this approach in terms of what can be asked of and answered by one representative about a potentially large and diverse population in a given location. Furthermore, some relevant concepts are difficult to transform into measurable indicators. For example, barriers to return such as human rights violations, demographic change, or trauma experienced, although important in the context of Iraq, are not easy to convert into questions to ask to key informants due to their sensitivity and complexity and, in some cases, the personal nature of the responses.

Table 1: Indicator framework designed for the Return Index in Iraq

Indicators for physical conditions (infrastructure, services, livelihoods)	Indicators for social conditions (security, social cohesion, peacebuilding)
Residential destruction	Concerns on sources of violence
Access to primary schools	Concerns on mines
Access to primary healthcare	Multiplicity of armed actors
Electricity sufficiency	Presence of informal security forces

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[3] The reporting series are available at: http://iraqdtm.iom.int/ReturnIndex.aspx.

[4] This use of data and quantitative modelling is similar to the Proxy Means Testing (PMT) applied in humanitarian contexts to better target assistance such as unconditional cash distribution. The PMT relies on datasets with socio-economic information of potential beneficiaries to statistically predict household vulnerability, that is, identify those families above a minimum vulnerability threshold that would subsequently receive aid. See, for example, UNHCR Jordan, 'Vulnerability Assessment Framework: Baseline Survey' (Amman: UNHCR, 2015); Cash Working Group Iraq, 'Multipurpose Cash Assistance in Iraq: Vulnerability Assessment and Targeting Review' (Erbil: CWGI, 2019).

Water sufficiency	Restrictions on movement freedom
Access to civil servants	Day-to-day public tensions (social capital)
Recovery of agriculture	Community reconciliation needs
Recovery of small businesses	Illegal occupation of private residences
Employment access	Access to justice system
Availability of basic items in market	Existence of blocked returns

Modelling of a severity score per location

While the data measuring the state of each indicator in each location is in itself valuable as a baseline, it may represent too much information for stakeholders to have at hand in decision-making – especially with 18 indicators for 1,600+ locations. A solution implemented in the case of Iraq was to correlate these indicators in a multivariate analysis to understand how much each one contributed to making a location more or less conducive to receiving population returns. The main assumption for the analysis is that those locations that do not have returns are likely to lack adequate levels of services, livelihoods, social cohesion, and/or safety (the concepts presented in the framework in Table 1).

The use of statistical methods on top of the baseline data helps testing whether a relationship between lack of returns and severity of conditions exists: are there particular conditions on the ground that explain why a location is more likely to receive returns as opposed to remaining partially or completely empty? Are some conditions more likely to be found in those locations with full returns than in those with few to no returns? Indeed, having answers to these types of questions, knowing that some conditions (or indicators) may matter more than others in affecting returns, is an important in enabling more effective decision-making on solutions that facilitate voluntary and safe returns in a displacement crisis.

The multivariate analysis provides weights for each indicator, which give a measure of their respective relative impact on the likelihood of the location having returns of its displaced population.[5] These weights make it possible to rank indicators by their different levels of impact and to combine responses on the state of the indicators for each location into a single aggregated numerical index, where indicators with a higher impact receive a larger weight in the index composition. The index generated in Iraq ranges from 0 to 100, where 100 signifies that no basic condition is met for any indicator in that particular location – based on the logic of the model, this is the same as saying that a location with score of 100 is extremely unlikely to have returns. Figure 1 provides an example for a single location. In sum, the higher the index score in a location, the more dire the situation for any returnees residing there, potentially preventing further returns, or subjecting people to protracted poor conditions once they return, eventually pushing them to displace for a second time.

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[5] In technical terms, we conducted a logistical regression, with absence/presence of full returns in a location as dependent variable and the indicators' categories as explanatory variables, in addition to other location-specific control variables such as urban/rural. This gives results in odds ratios, which are used to generate weights to allocate a score proportional to them for those indicators deemed statistically significant. Those found to be statistically insignificant (i.e., they do not contribute to an explanation for the lack of returns) have a weight of zero.
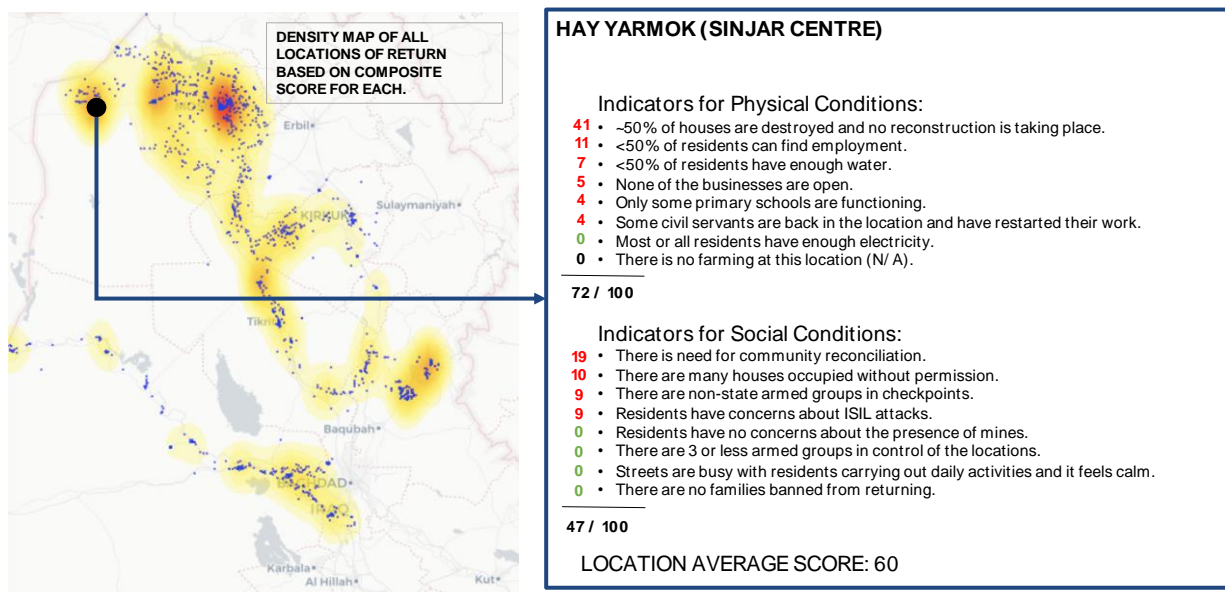
DENSITY MAP OF ALL LOCATIONS OF RETURN BASED ON COMPOSITE SCORE FOR EACH.

HAY YARMOK (SINJAR CENTRE)

Indicators for Physical Conditions:
- 41 • ~50% of houses are destroyed and no reconstruction is taking place.
- 11 • <50% of residents can find employment.
- 7 • <50% of residents have enough water.
- 5 • None of the businesses are open.
- 4 • Only some primary schools are functioning.
- 4 • Some civil servants are back in the location and have restarted their work.
- 0 • Most or all residents have enough electricity.
- 0 • There is no farming at this location (N/A).

72 / 100

Indicators for Social Conditions:
- 19 • There is need for community reconciliation.
- 10 • There are many houses occupied without permission.
- 9 • There are non-state armed groups in checkpoints.
- 9 • Residents have concerns about ISIL attacks.
- 0 • Residents have no concerns about the presence of mines.
- 0 • There are 3 or less armed groups in control of the locations.
- 0 • Streets are busy with residents carrying out daily activities and it feels calm.
- 0 • There are no families banned from returning.

47 / 100

LOCATION AVERAGE SCORE: 60

Figure 1. Example of the final scoring composition for one location in Iraq

LESSONS LEARNED IN APPLYING THE RETURN INDEX

An instrument such as the *Return Index* in a displacement crisis has immediate application in terms of supporting prioritization of geographical areas and interventions, monitoring periodically how well the most pressing needs are being addressed, and/or providing evidence for advocacy to ensure the most important (and sensitive) drivers of severity are taken into account, particularly when a discussion of such issues is absent. Some of these contributions are explored in more detail below in the form of lessons learned from applying this framework in Iraq.

1. Some conditions are more relevant than others in explaining returns

The results of the multivariate analysis confirmed that the likelihood of returns can be explained based on conditions on the ground – this is because most indicators utilized in Table 1 were indeed found to be statistically significant, thus validating their relevance in this context. In addition, the model also illustrated that some indicators have a higher impact on returns than others, that is, they matter more in making a location conducive for people to return. These findings form the base to justify constructing an index in which each indicator has a different score based on its relative impact. In practice, this is seen by comparing the odds ratio obtained in the statistical model, visualized in Figure 2. It shows that the main indicator affecting returns is residential destruction by far. The model estimates that locations with "at least half or more of houses destroyed" are 15 times less likely to have returns than locations with no destruction. Next in line is unemployment: displaced families are 10 times less likely to return to locations "where no residents can find employment" compared to locations with sufficient employment. This is why it is reasonable to use the results from this data analysis to assume that, if the house destruction indicator has an odds ratio of 15 and the employment indicator has one of 10, then the former should have a slightly larger weight (and score) in the index as its impact is larger.

Color-coding: ☐ Base condition ■ Negative condition

Regression with physical indicators (infrastructure, livelihoods and basic services)

Odds ratio (effect of the indicator on returns)

Indicator	Condition
Residential destruction	No house destruction
	Less than half houses destroyed but reconstruction ongoing
	Less than half houses destroyed and no reconstruction ongoing
	At least half or more of houses are destroyed
Employment access	Half or most residents can find employment
	Less than half residents can find employment
	No resident can find employment
Water sufficiency	Most or all residents have enough water for their needs
	About half or less residents have enough water for their needs
Recovery of agriculture	All or most land recovered
	Some or no land recovered
Electricity sufficiency	Most or all residents have enough electricity for their needs
	About half or less residents have enough electricity for their needs
Recovery of local businesses	Most or all businesses are restored
	No business is restored
Reincorporation of civil servants	Most or all civil servants are back
	Some or no civil servant is back
Access to primary essential services	No access issue neither in basic school nor health provision
	Access issue in basic school or health provision

Regression with social indicators (social cohesion, security perceptions and peacebuilding)

Odds ratio (effect of the indicator on returns)

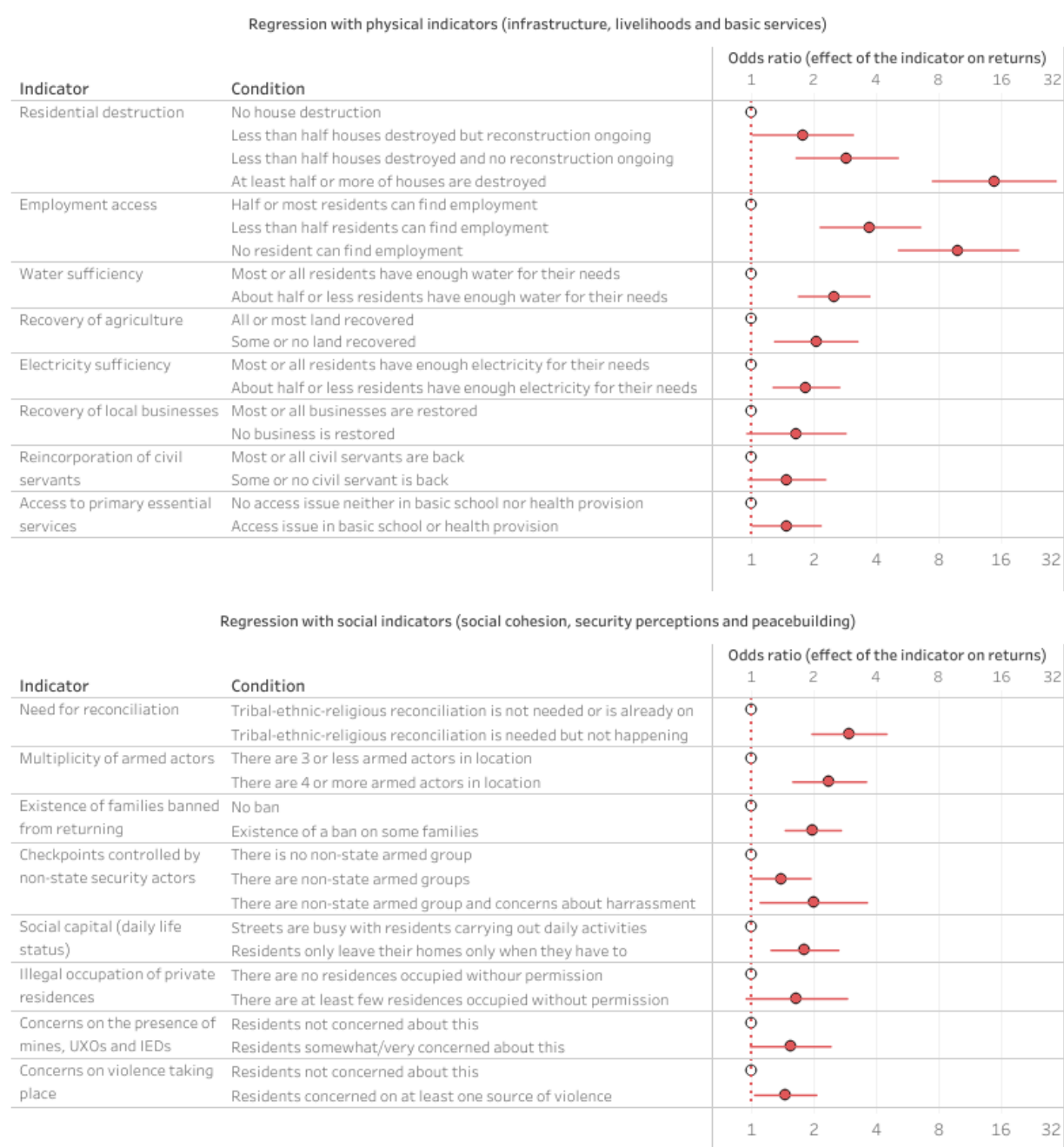| Indicator	Condition
Need for reconciliation	Tribal-ethnic-religious reconciliation is not needed or is already on
	Tribal-ethnic-religious reconciliation is needed but not happening
Multiplicity of armed actors	There are 3 or less armed actors in location
	There are 4 or more armed actors in location
Existence of families banned from returning	No ban
	Existence of a ban on some families
Checkpoints controlled by non-state security actors	There is no non-state armed group
	There are non-state armed groups
	There are non-state armed group and concerns about harrassment
Social capital (daily life status)	Streets are busy with residents carrying out daily activities
	Residents only leave their homes only when they have to
Illegal occupation of private residences	There are no residences occupied withour permission
	There are at least few residences occupied without permission
Concerns on the presence of mines, UXOs and IEDs	Residents not concerned about this
	Residents somewhat/very concerned about this
Concerns on violence taking place	Residents not concerned about this
	Residents concerned on at least one source of violence

Figure 2. Statistical results of the model that show the relative impact of each severity indicator on the likelihood of returns. The estimated odds ratio is interpreted as the strength of the relation between a given indicator (explanatory variable) and lack of returns (dependent variable). Odds ratio are always compared with their base condition (white circles in the figure). The interval shows the coefficient's 95% confidence interval.

Of particular note is that, after residential destruction and employment, those indicators that have less to do with material conditions and more with socio-political dimensions, including the need for community reconciliation, the presence of multiple security actors in the location, and existence of bans on the return of some families, are some of the most impactful indicators in relation to returns. This was an important finding because it helped in providing a further evidence base to start shifting the narrative in Iraq from a purely emergency context to one that required longer-term approaches with respect to ending displacement, among other strategic objectives. Iraq has a history of violence and competition between communities that predates the ISIL conflict itself, and this qualitative understanding of context needs to be incorporated into the formulation of solutions that bridge the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding nexus.

2. Importance of prioritizing the most severe geographical areas with an evidence base

Given the financial and material constraints that responses to displacement often face, it is necessary for stakeholders to rely on some criteria that allows for prioritizing where to allocate resources. To rapidly grasp what the *Return Index* revealed about the physical and social condition of each location with returns in Iraq, different categories of severity were built based on the location's score (calculated as indicated in Figure 1), ranging from high, medium, and low severity locations. In some governorates, one of every four returnees were coming back to locations that were categorized as having high severity conditions, that is, a high score. Information, however, may need to be more granular than that to support resource allocation to those areas that require particular attention. Figure 3 plots each location per district across a score axis, with those locations in higher severity at the right side of the axis and districts ranked from higher average severity at the top to lower severity at the bottom. Such data visualization allows for the identification of geographical hotspots or clusters of locations with particularly severe conditions, so that they can be monitored more specifically with respect to how they are evolving over time, what are the dynamics within them driving severity, whether they are being covered properly by relevant stakeholders, etc. In the case of Iraq, 20 hotspots are currently prioritized and monitored, with more specific analysis carried out in the form of features described in the other lessons learned below.
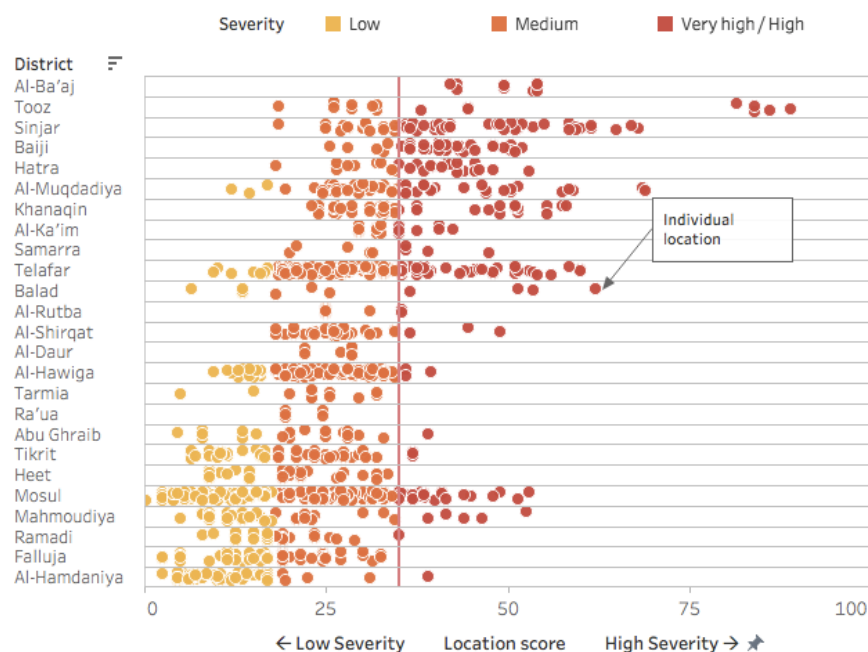

Figure 3. Ranking of return locations per district from high to low severity

3. Necessity of looking at the individual components behind the index score

In building an index of this nature, it is important to be cognizant of the limitations inherent in using a single numerical measure for severity. While the *Return Index* combines different and diverse indicators into one index to make findings easier to interpret, it is still necessary to understand context and keep in mind what is behind the score. In other words, understanding what indicator, or group of indicators, drives the severity score high in a particular hotspot is relevant for tailoring responses to needs in a given area. Drivers of severity are often localized and vary from area to area. This was seen frequently in Iraq. Figure 4 provides an illustration of one such example, where three neighbouring hotspots had differing drivers of severity: in Jalawla these drivers relate to social cohesion and security conditions, in Saadiya they relate to security conditions, and in Muqdadiya, security conditions and services.

The importance of this for policy and programming is straightforward: interventions in areas where the lack of essential services is the main driver of severity are likely to be different from interventions where social cohesion issues are at top. This helps in not only better focusing attention on hotspots but ensuring that the attention paid is on what is most important for each specific context.
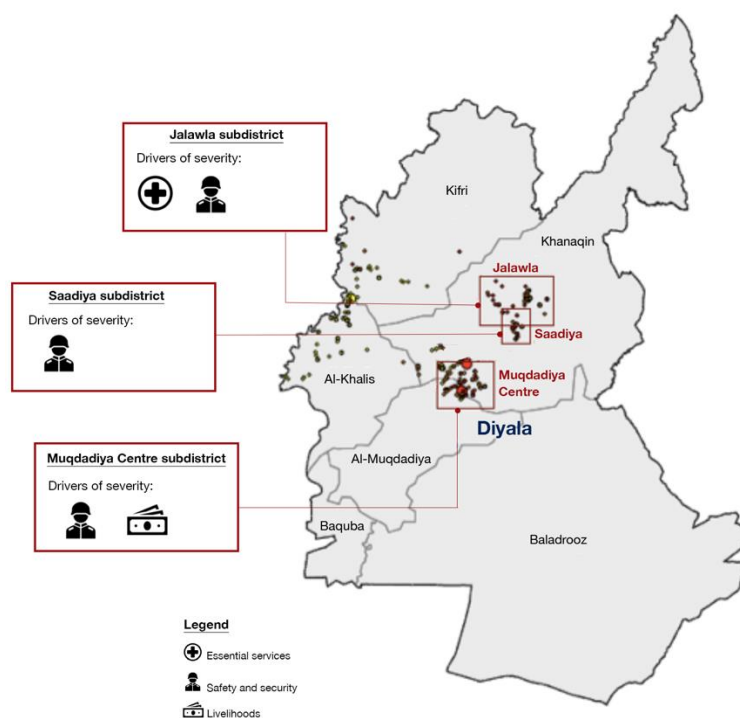
Figure 4. Disaggregation of the severity index into drivers in Diyala Governorate, Iraq. Note for the diagram: two other drivers of severity (house destruction and social cohesion) are not shown as they do not apply in the case of these hotspots.

4. Transposing data on severity conditions and stakeholder coverage helps identify the gaps in the overall response

This point and the next explore how data can assist in monitoring effectiveness of responses to a displacement crisis. One aspect of monitoring is to check that hotspots, for example, are particularly well covered by relevant stakeholders, including authorities and humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors. Thus, adding a second layer of data on top of the conditions baseline, that transposes the presence of such partners across these locations, helps in this direction. Measuring stakeholder coverage is not exempt from methodological issues in terms of what data to capture – from a crude number of partners present, to number of beneficiaries, to number of programs and allocated funds, etc. Each has pros and cons, and not all data is available and transparent. Any measurement of this nature is also likely to miss the *quality* of implementation as well as whether it is the *right* intervention for the context, two aspects not directly measurable in numerical terms.

In many crisis contexts, responses are often mapped in the form of a 3W framework, listing the partners operating (*who*), the specific geographical areas of operation (*where*), and the activities implemented (*what*).[6] This was applied in Iraq, where *Return Index* data for each subdistrict was crossed with a relative measurement of stakeholder coverage consisting of number of actors for every 10,000 returnees. Results from this exercise indicated that, in general terms, subdistricts with the highest severity were more well covered by stakeholders. Just a small number of hotspots had much lower stakeholder presence, which may link to greater instability in these areas making it risky to operate in.[7]

5. Moving from a snapshot of severity to working with a temporal comparison round after round to identify trends

The second aspect of monitoring involves ensuring the *Return Index* analysis is a dynamic exercise. This means not only collecting a baseline of conditions, but updating the conditions in each location regularly

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[6] In Iraq, this is done by OCHA through the humanitarian dashboard available at:
https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/iraq/2019-dashboard

[7] See IOM Iraq, Returns Working Group, and Social Inquiry, 'Special Brief: Actor Layer Mapping' (Erbil: IOM Iraq, December 2019). Available at: https://www.social-inquiry.org/s/IOM-Return-Index-Actor-Layer-Mapping.pdf.

through additional waves of data collection. This complements the geographical comparison with temporal comparison which helps tracking whether geographical hotspots are deteriorating or improving (potentially linked to effective stakeholder coverage), or whether there are new hotspots emerging as severity conditions change. This lays the basis for further investigation into changes in context, including changes related to policy and interventions. Data collection on these indicators in Iraq, for example, is conducted every two months.

CONCLUSION: WHAT NEXT FOR DATA-DRIVEN TOOLS?

In the context of Iraq, the *Return Index* has helped in shaping the priorities and funding for the 2019 humanitarian response in the country as well as furthering national and international strategies for ending displacement in the long-term, addressing the more structural and socio-political dimensions of it. Part of the reason for the uptake of such large-scale data across stakeholders was that it filled a gap in knowledge and information and, critically, data was processed, analysed, grouped, and disseminated in a relatively accessible manner. It is critical to recognize that differing levels of data literacy exist across the landscape of actors within a given displacement crisis. This then necessitates appropriate time, resources, and coordination allocated to explaining and interpreting data and a variety of mechanisms and platforms for making it available and easily usable at all levels of data literacy.

Beyond this, there are two emerging questions as a postscript for the application of tools and data analysis, such as the *Return Index*, for informing decision-making in displacement crises. First, how to better connect these tools with global frameworks, such as the *IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons* and the *Sustainable Development Goals*, and the conversations surrounding them. The driving principles of these frameworks are already implicitly incorporated into the design of the *Return Index*, given that the indicators forming the index were not developed in a vacuum but came from understanding of both context and existing normative models and standards. Most indicators are indeed designed taking into account overarching aspects of the latter including access and rights to material and social wellbeing. At the same time, tools like the *Return Index* can in turn help in further refining these frameworks to capture less tangible but critical socio-political dimensions that play an impactful role in helping to resolve displacement in a sustainable and rights-based manner. This includes allowing more space for discourse and input from the field in such fora as the recently formed Expert Group on Refugee and IDP Statistics and the UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Internal Displacement.

Second, how to make tools borne out of a specific context, such as post-conflict Iraq, applicable to other displacement settings without losing comparability. There is always a trade-off between grounding tools and indicators into the specific context on one side, in which case the instruments gain local applicability at the cost of not being able to operate across displacement crises, and generalizing them for broader contexts on the other side at the cost of losing the nuance that makes them relevant and more effective in the local context. However, it is possible to find a balance of both by ensuring that categories of indicators are broad enough to apply to a variety of context but can be verbalized to be relevant to dynamics on the ground with methodological and analysis approaches transferred rather than only specific tools and measures. This involves more collaboration, communication, and more than one type of data collection that includes an interplay of qualitative and quantitative approaches and an openness to working with both to generate data beyond the numbers.