

Evaluation Report

*Strengthening Human Rights Defenders' Organisations
Working with Vulnerable Civilians in Iran and Iraq. (2017-
2020)*

Author: Amira Galal

Date: November 2020

Table of Contents

ACRONYMS	2
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	3
PROJECT BACKGROUND.....	7
EVALUATION METHODOLOGY	9
Limitations	10
FINDINGS.....	10
Project Design and Implementation	10
Relevance.....	11
Effectiveness, Efficiency, and Impact	12
Sustainability.....	20
CONCLUSION.....	20
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	21
ANNEXES	21

NOTE: This project was conducted in Iraq and Iran. But for security, details of the Iran project implementation have been redacted in this open-source document. For more details on Iran please contact the Minority Rights Group.

ACRONYMS

CEDAW	The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CERD	The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination
EIDHR	European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights
HRD	Human Rights Defenders
IS	The Islamic State group
MRGI	Minority Rights Group International
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
UNITAD	The United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
ToR	Terms of Reference

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report reflects the findings of an end line evaluation of Minority Rights Group's (MRG), *"Strengthening Human Rights Defenders Organisations Working with Vulnerable Civilians in Iran and Iraq"*, which ran from 2017-2020. However, for security reasons details of the Iran project's implementation and activities have been redacted.

The evaluation assesses the effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of MRG's interventions against its specified objectives. It also examines the project design and implementation against its recorded outcomes to determine the extent to which MRG and its implementing partners were able to support and develop human rights defenders ability to monitor and report on human rights violations against vulnerable civilians in Iraq, and advocate to domestic and international bodies for their protection.

The key interlinked, strategic areas of focus for the project are summarised, as follows:

- Objective 1: Protection of the human rights of vulnerable civilians (incl. women and minorities) in Iraq by strengthening human rights defenders. This was to be achieved by improving the capacity of human rights defenders' organisations, through training and small grants, to securely monitor and report human rights violations.
- Objective 2: Improved legal protection and support for HRDs experiencing intimidation and/or arrest. This was to be achieved by establishing legal defence units to connect activists under threat with human rights lawyers; establishing a hardship fund for local travel and other expenses to enable threatened activists and their families to access protection and support.
- Objective 3: Regular and reliable information on violations of the rights of women, minorities and other vulnerable civilians in Iraq reported quickly and transparently to local, national and international authorities and the media.
- Objective 4: Greater priority given to the protection of minorities, women and other vulnerable civilians by UN human rights mechanisms and in country plans drawn up by international agencies, national and local authorities, and/or other actors.

The evaluation was conducted by an independent external consultant over a two-month period and included: A comprehensive desk review of MRG and its partners' project-related documentation; a series of interviews and consultations with MRG and partners' staff working on the project, as well as with advocacy targets and independent experts. The consultant also conducted an online survey to collect feedback from MRG's small-grant beneficiaries in Iraq.

Field-based evaluative research was not possible in Iraq due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

An overview of contextual developments and consultations with experts indicate that this project was very relevant to both countries, despite the cultural and contextual variations between them.

Both countries have been undergoing a period of great upheaval. Iraqi human rights defenders have been left reeling from the extent of violations conducted by the Islamic State (IS) group until its defeat in 2017, compounded by political instability and mass protests sweeping southern Iraq.

Activists, as well as lawyers representing protesters, have been subjected to arrest, enforced disappearance and other forms of intimidation. Responding to protests in October 2019, the Iraqi authorities blocked access to the internet across Federal Iraq in apparent bid to stop reports of suppression circulating.

Authorities in both federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq are reported to "collectively punish" perceived ISIS affiliates and their families, stripping them of their properties and

assets and passing down death sentences, often after unfair mass trials. Meanwhile, ISIS continues to stage hit-and-run attacks, targeting civilian minorities and community leaders.

MRG's chosen interventions built on work conducted under the *"Protecting Human Rights of Vulnerable Civilians in Iraq"* project, carried out between 2013 and 2017, taking lessons learned and evaluation recommendations and applying them to this next phase.

Partners, as well as microgrant recipients, reported very positive and strong working relationships with MRG throughout the project and either expressed an interest in continuing to collaborate, or already have plans to continue working together.

Overall, the project met or exceeded most of its target indicators, with one exception that will be described below:

- Training sessions conducted by MRG's partners were considered highly successful, and participants appreciated being given concrete examples of how the Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights (Ceasefire) reporting tool could be used. Some stakeholders interviewed expressed concerns that training for Iraqi HRDs by MRG and other organisations had been so frequent that it became repetitive. However, others said it was important to refresh their knowledge. Moreover, high staff turnover within local organisations meant that institutional knowledge remained limited.
- Small grants to HRD organisations in Iraq received mostly positive feedback and all projects funded by MRG to increase human rights protections and monitoring at the local level were successfully implemented. However, survey respondents reported that the grant-sum was very limited and that they had received insufficient capacity building opportunities.
- The Ceasefire reporting tool was a great success in Iraq, with over 3,000 reports logged since its launch. Reports reviewed by the evaluator were relevant and detailed, suggesting that those using the tool had received training on its use. By the time this project started the Iraq tool was already fully operational and recording a good number of reports, partly due to its high visibility- MRG conducted a digital campaign geographically targeting people in Iraq.
- In Iraq, the hardship fund was more impactful than legal aid, as many activists were reluctant to take their cases to court for fear of retribution. Iraqi HRDs are often targeted without being detained and killings are usually extrajudicial.
- MRG reports on Iraq were of well-researched and high quality but had less impact than expected. This may be for a variety of reasons, including: The absence of a UN Special Rapporteur for Iraq, the lack of yearly reports by the UN Secretary-General, as is the case for Iran. Also, potentially due to the large number of international organisations operating inside Iraq, which means that there is more information available on all aspects of humanitarian, development and human rights response.

- MRG’s advocacy efforts have been successful and its participation in high-profile events in Geneva ensured consistent positive engagement with policymakers. Three UN resolutions were adopted, which were closely aligned with MRG’s key findings and recommendations, including: The establishment of the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da’esh/ISIS (UNITAD) investigative team in Iraq to support ISIS accountability and the renewal and an extension of UNITAD’s mandate to September 2020. However, due to the topical nature of these issues, it is difficult to say to what extent MRG’s advocacy impacted these resolutions. Eight other instances of UN bodies or mechanisms indicating greater priority for minority and women protection were also recorded that were much more obviously linked to MRG’s work.
- MRG’s engagement with UNITAD proved particularly positive. It was initially established through Security Council Resolution 2379 (2017), drafted by the UK Foreign Office, to support domestic efforts in holding ISISmembers accountable for crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide. MRG met with members of the UK FCO team during the drafting process to present findings from field visits, research and publications. MRG now remains on a list of international NGOs regularly invited by UNITAD to engage in roundtable sessions.
- Iraq adopted a much higher number of UN universal periodic recommendations to end violence against women (VAW) and impunity for attacks on minorities than recorded in 2014, displaying a much higher level of commitment to these issues than before. This is likely in part due to contextual changes after the defeat of ISIS and increased need to respond to grave violations against women and minorities while ISIS held vast swathes of Iraq.
- One of the targets MRG failed to meet was media engagement with its work, receiving only 54 mentions in comparison to its target of 90.
- An audience of over 20,000 received MRG’s reports and bulletins via email and social media, as well as over 500 stakeholders on Iraq received hard copies by mail. However, it is tricky to assess the impact of this without follow-up.
- MRG’s films on Iraq was very well produced and screened at five film festivals, with five more scheduled.

The project was found to be successful. It responded well to unforeseen challenges and displayed great flexibility. MRG’s choice of activities were well suited to the contexts and needs of both Iraq and contributed to very positive advocacy efforts in international fora.

MRG has exerted efforts to ensure maximum inclusivity, although key informants suggest that engagement with local partners needs to be more localised, responding to ubiquitous sectarian and ethnic divisions that can sometimes lead to a misplaced sense of “missing out”.

Additionally, MRG's media engagement strategy requires revising to reflect changes in the overall media environment that responds better to short-form information, rather than longer reports.

The project's outcomes have the potential to resonate long after its completion. There is great scope for further engagement with women and minorities in Iraq, especially in the light of recent protests that may prompt the government to implement further reforms.

Future projects may address issues identified surrounding media engagement, on-the-ground coordination and more localised networks, as well as more focused capacity building for microgrant recipients.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Minority Rights Group's (MRG) "Strengthening Human Rights Defenders' Organisations Working with Vulnerable Civilians in Iran and Iraq," was implemented in coordination with the Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights (Ceasefire), the Asuda Organization for Combating Violence against Women (ASUDA), as well as UNHCR as an associate partner. It aimed to strengthen and defend the capacity of human rights defenders' organisations to monitor and report human rights violations against vulnerable civilians (including women and minorities) in Iraq and to advocate for increased protection by local, national and international actors.

The project included capacity building for local partners, legal aid and grants for threatened or targeted human rights defenders, microgrants grants for local organisations, documentaries, research and publications analysing violations reported and verified, linked with national and international advocacy.

This work was supported by the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and was carried out over 42 months, ending 30 June 2020. The project was implemented in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as well as Baghdad, Maysan, Babel, Al-Qadisiyah, Anbar, Kirkuk, Nineveh, and Basra governorates.

The project built on the successes of MRG's previous project, "Protecting Human Rights of Vulnerable Civilians in Iraq," conducted between 2014 and 2017.

Iraq continued to witness unparalleled level of human rights abuses at the hands of the so-called Islamic State (IS) group, which has further compounded existing sectarian divisions. Both the human rights ministry and ministry of women's affairs were abolished in government reforms in August 2015. The non-observance of international humanitarian law norms places civilians at risk generally and fosters impunity, while a legacy of authoritarianism has left civil society relatively un-developed and fragmented.

Despite the defeat of IS at the start of the project's implementation, the group has continued to target minorities in hit-and-run attacks, mostly targeting community leaders and security forces.

The war against ISIS caused the worst displacement crisis in Iraq's history, with some six million people (around 15 per cent of the population) driven from their areas of origin¹, which has driven sectarian-fuelled efforts towards demographic change. Various sectarian militias have been allowed to operate with impunity amidst government instability, and HRDs are being targeted on an unprecedented scale, which has partly contributed to anti-government protests (alongside economic downturn and political factors) and subsequent crackdowns across southern Iraq.

As such, building on its previous programming with ethnic and religious minorities, women, and other vulnerable groups on civilian-led human rights reporting, MRG and its partners carried out work across the following interlinked strategic objectives:

Objective 1: Strengthened ability of human rights defenders' organisations in-country to monitor and document serious violations of the rights of vulnerable civilians (including women and minorities) in a secure way. Built on the existing Iraq online reporting tool, created under a previous EU action, which was upgraded and further expanded, specifically upgrading the security features and data management functions of the tool. HRDs were trained on the tool and the project aimed for at least 75 per cent of those who attended workshops to report using knowledge and skills gained to undertake monitoring and documentation. Additionally, it aimed for at least 200 HRDs to upload reports of violations using the tool.

Objective 2: Improved legal protection and support for HRDs experiencing intimidation and/or arrest. Through a network of lawyers, the intervention aimed for at least 30 HRDs and/or their family members to receive representation or advice; 25 HRDs and/or their families to benefit from hardship fund grants; and improvement in the outcome of at least 10 HRD cases including release, acquittal or protection from harassment.

Objective 3: Regular and reliable information on violations of the rights of women, minorities and other vulnerable civilians in Iran and Iraq reported quickly and transparently to local, national and international authorities and the media. Strengthened capacity of existing networks of civil society organizations and civilian activists, including those representing the interests of vulnerable women, minorities, and IDPs through microgrants. Published periodic

Iraq Displacement Figures Drop Below Two Million for First Time Since 2014; Nearly Four Million Have Returned Home (2018) Available: <https://www.iom.int/news/iraq-displacement-figures-drop-below-two-million-first-time-2014-nearly-four-million-have>. Last accessed 14th November 2020.

bulletins on the human rights situation as pertains to vulnerable women, minorities, and IDPs in English and Arabic and produced two documentaries, with targeted media launches.

Objective 4: Greater priority given to protection of minorities, women and other vulnerable civilians by UN human rights mechanisms and in country plans drawn up by international agencies, national and local authorities, and/or other actors. Carried out annual advocacy meetings with government and opposition representatives, parliamentarians, and international agencies on the ground to promote civilian protection. Held annual international advocacy missions UN human rights mechanisms (Geneva), and EU (Brussels) to brief international actors on the human rights situation in Iraq and advocated for international agencies to approve country plans or commitments to devote increased priority to the rights of minorities and women in Iraq, as well as for UN bodies or mechanisms to adopt resolutions devoting greater priority to protecting the rights of minorities and women in Iraq.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The evaluation comprised both qualitative and quantitative methodology to assess the project's relevance, effectiveness, efficacy, impact, and sustainability.

Evaluation activities included:

- Desk Review of Documentation (see below).
- Online Survey of MRG microgrant recipients.
- Key Informant Interviews with MRG, Ceasefire, ASDUA, and CSHR.
- Key Informant Interviews with advocacy targets and independent experts.

The desk review entailed reading through and analysing the following MRG project documents:

- Project Proposal, Workplan, Monitoring and Evaluation Plan and Budget.
- Interim Narrative Reports.
- Activity Completion Tracker.
- Human Rights Bulletins.
- Human Rights Reports.
- MRG-produced Documentaries.

The online survey, developed by the evaluator, focused on microgrant recipients' satisfaction with the support received and the impact it had on their beneficiaries. The survey, developed via Google Survey, was sent to all microgrant recipients by the evaluator along with regular follow-up messages. To ensure confidentiality of respondents, all responses were sent directly to the evaluator.

Key informant interviews consisted of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders conducted by phone or online communication platforms as needed.

Interviews were held with MRG staff related to this project. These were all conducted by phone or Skype and are detailed in the annexes.

Limitations

Certain evaluation methods were precluded due to restrictions on travel to the target countries caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The greatest obstacle to carrying out this evaluation came in terms of reaching stakeholders and gaining their consent to participate in this work, within the required evaluation timeframe. Responses from Iraq-based and international UN and policy officials were limited, possibly due to multiple reporting deadlines that usually fall in autumn, when the evaluation was conducted.

The evaluator worked through MRG's contact list as well as utilising own networks to reach out to relevant contacts. However, there was a low response rate, even after follow-up. Iraqi policymakers either declined to participate or did not respond to requests for interviews. This was not surprising, given the current wave of protests in the country.

FINDINGS

MRG has a strong track record of human rights programming and advocacy across Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region, with both local civil society and policymakers in addition to links with international community on these issues as relates to minorities, women and other vulnerable groups. This makes MRG and its partners very well placed to carry out the highly coordinated, nuanced, and sensitive work necessary to build civilian-led human rights monitoring and reporting networks in sensitive contexts and to broach discussions at the international level on the use of such methodologies in the pursuit of accountability.

Project Design and Implementation

Overall, the project was well designed to match the objectives set out in the proposal. The design built on lessons learned from the implementation of "Protecting Human Rights of Vulnerable Civilians in Iraq," for instance encouraging greater cross-identity human rights documentation and reporting, reaching out beyond minority and women's organizations to capture greater diversity of IDPs and host communities, for instance Anbar, affected by conflict.

The project also narrowed down its focus on building the capacity of HRDs who were able to work with communities in areas that could not be reached by MRG or its implementing partners. This approach allowed the organisation to target a much wider geographic area.

The project implementation was able to keep quite closely to its timeline, despite marked changes to the political context both in-country and internationally.

MRG's advocacy efforts were well targeted on an international level, engaging existing information needs of international policy makers.

The complementary skills and expertise of MRG's partners on the project was overall quite appropriate to the programme. Asuda demonstrated high levels of professionalism in documentation and successful implementation of the project. However, some key informants said that MRG should consider working with HRD organisations inside federal Iraq as they believed a Kurdish organisation did not have as much influence as local ones due to sectarian, cultural and linguistic differences. One key informant working in federal Iraq, as well as others, had not heard of MRG's training courses or microgrant initiatives and said:

“Often Iraqi and Kurdish organisations only target an in-crowd, people and organisations within their own networks, meaning that many others get overlooked. Overall, not just in the human rights sector, international organisations must work on diversifying their networks”.

It is worth noting that MRG has only recently started developing its visibility strategy, as it has aimed always to highlight the work, efforts, and voices within the country rather than its own. Implementing partners are not required to provide overt visibility to MRG during training sessions, only to acknowledge it as a donor.

Asuda has demonstrably exerted efforts to conduct training sessions individuals and organisations across the country, as well as outreaching through their legal defence unit. For example, they conducted a three day visit to Karbala to establish a referral system for violations. Similarly, visits were made to other central and southern areas of Iraq to build its networks and mitigate any issues regarding community acceptance.

However, Iraq's ethnic and sectarian tensions, as well as the ubiquitous politicisation of many local CSOs and NGOs, may well negatively impact perceptions of local organisations operating “outside of their areas”. Many INGOs face similar problems, even in staffing their own organisations.

Additionally, all independent experts consulted had not heard of Asuda and some perceived its emphasis on gender-based violence to be “irrelevant” to the wider needs of HRDs. Such a sentiment is driven by a fairly common misconception that women's rights are somehow separate or secondary to other human rights concerns, and advocates for “special” treatment. Additional efforts by local and international actors should continue to be exerted to correct this.

Partners suggested that a possible area for development is to promote greater interaction between partners. Even if working in different countries, partners can benefit from exchanging lessons learned on best practice, organisational capacity building, engagement with harder-to-reach communities and solutions to crosscutting challenges.

Relevance

The project was very relevant to the Iraqi context. Iraq qualifies as among the most difficult human rights contexts: In Iraq, although civil space is now shrinking again due to the

dominance of militias; and women's rights and minority rights defenders in particular face threats, harassment and periodic assassination attempts. As one key informant stated:

“Previously, killings used to be more randomised or targeted against specific sectarian groups. But now, HRDs and journalists are more frequently the target due to their criticisms and because they do not necessarily identify strongly with a sectarian group that will offer them protection. Often HRDs may not be Muslims, or are non-practicing, so when defending human rights, they do not frame it within a religious perspective, and this makes them easy targets. Absence of rule of law, prevalence of militias, the government’s lack of control of weapons all contribute to this. There are no constraints. All HRDs killed never had any proper investigation into their killing and families received no information on how to access justice”.

Following the defeat of ISIS, HRDs uncovered a huge catalogue of violations against minorities and vulnerable groups across the country, including the uncovering of mass graves. Meanwhile, despite the group’s defeat Iraqi, KRG and other paramilitary forces continued to mount small-scale military operations, including air strikes, as well as extrajudicial killings, targeting ISIS remnants and perceived affiliates, especially in the Sunni majority governorates of Nineveh, Diyala and Anbar.

In this context, the aims of this project, providing HRDs with the skills and platforms needed to document and report violations and connect them to international frameworks for human rights protection and the rule of law remains essential.

Effectiveness, Efficiency, and Impact

Strategic Objective 1: Strengthened ability of human rights defenders’ organisations in-country to monitor and document serious violations of the rights of vulnerable civilians (including women and minorities) in a secure way.

-Effectiveness and Efficiency: Exceeding the stated target for this strategic objective, 108 HRD activists received training during the action (56 women, 52 men). This included 24 Iraqi HRDs who attended an Asuda-led two-day workshop in Sulaimaniyah in July 2017, and seven Iraqi HRDs who attended an MRG training session in Tunis in May 2017. In September 2018, 23 Iraqi HRDs attended an Asuda-organised workshop in Sulaimaniyah, 10 attended an MRG training workshop in Tunis in April 2018; followed by a further eight in September 2018. Additionally, two Iraqi activists who attended previous MRG training sessions in Tunisia also participated in Geneva in November 2018. A further Iraqi HRD received training in Geneva in November 2019 and 20 HRDs participated in an Asuda-led workshop in December 2019 in Sulaymaniah. All participants who completed the training evaluation surveys stated that their knowledge of human rights, monitoring and advocacy skills had increased, to varying degrees.

Some 281 HRDs directly reached through the project reported monitoring, documenting and reporting violations. Additionally, 183 HRDs reached through online network-building activities have since submitted reports of violations using the tool.

The Iraq interactive reporting tool set up in 2016 was upgraded. By the conclusion of the project, 3130 HRDs uploaded reports of violations using Ceasefire online reporting tools. A check on 13 November 2020 (after the project end date) showed that reporting from Iraq was very high, with 3,308 violations reported.

The achievement of this strategic objective also included the administration of 11 microgrants. Although the original target was 15 grants, the lower number is due to the higher budget conceded to each one to help ensure the success of activities planned – this design change was duly reported to the donor (the EU) ahead of time and approved. The evaluation criteria to select grantees resulted in good geographic coverage of human rights projects, with projects in governorates that otherwise would be difficult to access. The organisations represented a wide variety of interests, ranging from women’s rights, to youth concerns, and minority rights. Many of the grantees are well-known in Iraq.

Target	Completion
At least 75% of HRDs who attended workshops report using knowledge and skills gained to undertake monitoring and documentation.	96% of those surveyed reported either an increase or significant increase in their knowledge of monitoring and documentation. 100% reported the skills gained were beneficial to their work.
Secure interactive web reporting tool is created and maintained for Iraq with ongoing technical support and coaching.	Iraq interactive reporting tool is operational and has been upgraded.
At least 200 HRDs upload reports of violations using the Ceasefire reporting tool	3,130 HRDs have uploaded reports of violations using Ceasefire online reporting tools.

-Impact: Workshop evaluations indicated a high level of satisfaction with the skills and knowledge delivered during the training sessions. Most participants reported that their ability to conduct monitoring and documentation had either increased or significantly increased. Notably, all participants reported that the skills gained were beneficial to their work. All participants attending workshops on advocacy and community mobilisation in Tunis reported now having a better understanding of how to perform these functions, as well as improved knowledge of United Nations mechanisms and the Human Rights Council.

However, several key informants in Iraq noted that they had not heard about these opportunities (Sulaimaniyah, Geneva and Tunis) and did not know where they were advertised or how participants were selected. This led them to question how inclusive these

workshops and courses were and several reported that such opportunities tended to be targeted to a relatively tightknit circle of organisations and suggested that such advanced training opportunities should be shared more widely to ensure a greater reach.

Checks on the Ceasefire tool after the conclusion of the project indicate that it is still widely used in Iraq and highlights its long reaching impact.

Strategic Objective 2: Improved legal protection and support for HRDs experiencing intimidation and/or arrest.

-Effectiveness and Efficiency: This intervention exceeded the target numerically, however there was an interesting variation in how legal protection and support for HRDs was received in the two different contexts.

The number of Iraqi HRDs receiving legal support in itself exceeded the numerical target, including: A member of the Kaka'i minority of Kirkuk who was repeatedly threatened by Shi'a militias, the head of a tribal unit in Mosul arrested on the accusation of supporting Sunni tribes in the city, two environmental activists, a children's education advocate, and others who had been outspoken about judicial corruption, government corruption and government human rights abuses. The cases also included several activists attacked for association with a new political party and activists targeted for their participation in Baghdad, Karbala, Najaf, Dhi Qar, Diwaniya and Basra protests.

Iraqi HRDs were nervous to seek out legal protection as for the most part, they were commonly targeted more by threats from armed groups and powerful individuals and did not wish to refer matters to the Iraqi or Kurdish legal systems for fear of extra-judicial reprisals. One key informant noted:

"Iraqi HRDs face threats outside of the legal system and the consequences of standing up to this will also be outside the system. Perpetrators [of extrajudicial attacks] are rarely identified, let alone brought to justice".

Limited uptake of legal aid in Iraq may have been further compounded by social attitudes to gender, which led many women to turn down the opportunity of taking further action, initiating legal proceedings or accepting legal representation.

Target	Completion
At least 30 HRDs and/or their family members receive legal representation or advice through legal defence unit.	174 HRDs (81 women/93 men) have received legal representation/ advice.
25 HRDs and/or their families benefit from grants from hardship fund.	87 HRDs and/or their families have benefited from hardship grants.

Improvement in the outcome of at least 10 HRD cases is achieved, including release, acquittal or protection from harassment.	Improvement in the outcome of 35 HRD cases.
--	---

-Impact: Overall, 35 of those who received legal support from the legal defence units in Iraq benefited from an improvement in the outcome of their cases. In Iraq this included: Temporary suspension of a death penalty for a juvenile offender, charges being dropped against a wrongly accused activist, reparations issued for a persecuted HRD, protection from threats and harassment of a human rights NGO director, obtaining a medical certificate confirming domestic violence, which allowed lawyers to file a criminal court complaint of assault against abuser, and the release of a tribal leader arrested for supporting Sunni tribes in Mosul. Additionally, several activists were able to resume their activism after receiving legal support.

Strategic Objective 3: Regular and reliable information on violations of the rights of women, minorities and other vulnerable civilians in Iraq reported quickly and transparently to local, national and international authorities and the media.

-Effectiveness and Efficiency: Targets linked to this objective were largely met or exceeded, with only media coverage of report findings falling short.

Researchers and relevant stakeholders within the policy sphere (both in-country and internationally) all reported being familiar with MRG’s work in this regard.

MRG seems to have utilised its networks both in-country and internationally to inform bulletins, which has positively impacted the program’s efficiency in producing results. Partners on the ground reportedly contribute with substantial amounts of information in the drafting of bulletins. The organisation decided to restrict the number of publications released per year compared to the previous Iraq programme, in order to maximise the quality and impact of the findings. The achievement of this strategic objective also included the administration of 10 microgrants.

Target	Completion
At least six periodic bulletins published on the human rights situation affecting vulnerable citizens in Iraq and Iran (in English, Arabic and Farsi).	Six human rights bulletins (three on Iraq in Arabic and English and another three on Iran in Farsi and English were produced and launched).

10 HRD organizations are able to implement new monitoring and advocacy projects after receiving a capacity-building grant.	Some 8 Iraqi HRDs implemented projects after receiving a capacity-building grant.
800 key stakeholders (incl. local, national, and international organisations and agencies) receive a copy of one of the human rights bulletins published during the project.	An audience of 20,000+ received a copy of at least one bulletin via email and social media, as well as 500+ stakeholders on Iran and 500+ stakeholders on Iraq who received a hard copy by mail.
At least 90 items of media coverage for findings mentioned in the human rights bulletins.	54 items of media coverage generated for human rights bulletins.
Two documentary films published and screened highlighting human rights issues facing vulnerable citizens in Iran and Iraq.	One film on Iraq and another on Iran were produced. Iraq film was screened online, at in-country events and five film festivals. The Iran film premiered at one film festival and is due to be screened at five more.

-Impact: Each report aimed to be launched ahead of discussions of related policy issues. In general, policy stakeholders showed a great deal of interest in the reports based on MRG’s own internal reporting.

However, reception was not the same for each bulletin, in some cases due to the timing of the launch clashing with other high-profile events or holidays. In general, media stakeholders displayed greater interest in MRG’s reports on Iran, again likely due to the limited information on the country.

MRG’s inability to reach its target of at least 90 items of media coverage for findings mentioned in the human rights bulletins indicates a need to review MRG’s media engagement strategies. Interviews with key informants suggest that social media engagement is a key development need, as well as adapting report findings into more user-friendly, less time-consuming formats such as infographics. Positive media engagement with MRG’s documentaries suggested that this type of multimedia formatting is most impactful. Additionally, MRG’s communication and programme staff need to work even closer together to ensure journalists’ feedback is received by staff working on project design, in addition to involving the communication team in the design of the project’s media engagement plan and assigning a greater part of the budget to developing more varied communications means and exploring more creative ways of working with the media.

In the evaluation survey, Iraqi microgrant recipients reported a high level of satisfaction in the support received from MRG, including capacity building, which some MRG staff reported may not have been delivered to a high enough standard due to time constraints. The most common criticism focused on the grant sum, with 60 per cent of respondents reporting that

it was not really sufficient to cover their projects' needs. In terms of impacts, respondents reported that they felt their project impacts had benefited from the grants:

"The financial grant, although extremely limited, enabled us to work on changing something simple in the minds of the students. It also gave our organisation skill on covering sectarian-related topics. Achievements from that project contributed to further projects later".

Another organisation reported:

"Through this project, approval was obtained from the Ministry of Construction, Housing, Municipalities and Public Works, with the support of the political leadership and local governor, to establish the Sabeen-Mandaean Forum [in Al-Maysan], which had been put on hold due to the lack of government funding since 2012. The forum was finally established in 2018 and has enriched the cultural life of the province and is the first initiative of its kind in central Iraq".

Grant recipients tended also to have benefitted from MRG training workshops, allowing for participants to put the skills learned into practice and to share more widely with others in their communities. However, this may also have reinforced perceptions among some smaller local NGOs that training events and microgrants (despite being publicly advertised in the case of Iraq <https://www.facebook.com/minorityrights/posts/1899842000086943>) were restricted to a select group of organisations and lacked inclusivity. This is perhaps indicative of a need to build local NGOs' fundraising capacity and knowledge of where to look for funding and training opportunities.

Grant recipients indicated they would like to receive follow-up on the implementation of their projects and more concerted capacity building opportunity. Regular follow-up could be helpful in informing the design of future training opportunities and microgrant initiatives.

Strategic Objective 4: Greater priority given to protection of minorities, women and other vulnerable civilians by UN human rights mechanisms and in country plans drawn up by international agencies, national and local authorities, and/or other actors.

-Effectiveness and Efficiency: A number of advocacy missions to Geneva were conducted over the course of the project. MRG's advocacy was particularly strengthened by the consistent in-country presence of MRG's UN advocacy consultant, and as such MRG has strong networks in the international diplomacy centre.

MRG has successfully leveraged these networks to support targeted and high-quality reporting on specific interest areas, making MRG's bulletins and reports particularly effective. Moreover, the timing of their release, usually in anticipation of significant policy and diplomatic milestones and decisions, has contributed to their success.

MRG and its partners also contributed through establishing networks of HRDs and activists that could contribute to the advocacy events and were able to bring to the advocacy capitals

several members of Iraq's civil society. Partly as a result of this, as well as due to MRG's own bulletins, international and national policy stakeholders have been incorporating the rights and protection needs of vulnerable populations in their reports and statements (e.g., UNDP Iraq's country program 2016-2020, statement by OHCHR Deputy High Commissioner, etc.), often asking MRG to contribute. This has helped in meeting the targets set out under this objective.

MRG supported advocacy efforts for greater accountability led to the establishment of Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD) in September 2017. It had been specifically advocating for an international mechanism to support the accountability process for serious violations committed in Iraq (including through statements made at the UN Human Rights Council).

Another notable impact followed the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination's (CERD) Q&A with MRG and Iraqi NGO representatives. CERD directed questions to the Iraqi delegation addressing several issues flagged by MRG during the Q&A. The CERD deliberations and negotiations with the Iraqi delegation demonstrated a clear influence of participating NGOs in setting priority areas of concern for ethnic, racial and ethnoreligious minorities in Iraq.

In its concluding observations on the combined 22nd to 25th periodic reports of Iraq, published in December 2018, the CERD closely mirror issues raised by MRG in its parallel report to the committee, specifically on minorities and disputed territories in Nineveh, public and political participation, the marginalised communities of Black Iraqis and Roma, Faili Kurdish citizenship, and lastly a specific mention of "information provided by civil society" regarding the risk of statelessness of minority children in displacement – a concern expressed in MRG's report to CERD.

Similarly, many issues raised by MRG in its shadow submission and in meetings in Geneva were mentioned in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women's (CEDAW) concluding observations on the 7th periodic report of Iraq. Staff reported that following the Q&A with the committee, MRG was sought out and invited to submit further information to the CEDAW Special Rapporteur on Iraq. The information informed questions which were put to the Iraqi Delegation by CEDAW the next day.

In Iraq, the anti-discrimination bill received a first reading in parliament and remains on the agenda, despite recent political upheaval and protests. Domestic advocacy in Iraq was likely slowed due to political instability and the difficulty of getting civil society into domestic policy maker spaces. MRG could address this by having a more systematic in-country presence. Key informants also suggested that indirect advocacy via local authorities, and tribal, religious and community leaders was generally the most effective route.

MRG has struggled in getting local HRDs to international policy events and meetings, due to challenges involved in securing visas. The COVID-19 pandemic indirectly helped support this, as in 2020 Iraqi HRDs were able to join the Committee on Enforced Disappearances meeting online. It could be worth advocating for greater, and more inclusive, participation from in-country HRDs via online platforms- particularly as a last resort. Although, the disadvantage of that is that it precludes private lobbying.

Target	Completion
Six international advocacy missions by HRDs to UN / international capitals (three per country).	Eight international advocacy missions to the UN in Geneva.
Three international agencies approve country plans or commitments to devote increased priority to the rights of minorities and women in Iran and Iraq.	Eight examples of a country plan/commitment to devote increased priority to the rights of minorities, women and HRDs in Iran and Iraq.
UN bodies or mechanisms adopt at least six resolutions devoting greater priority to protecting the rights of minorities and women in Iran and Iraq.	Three UN resolutions adopted: Security Council Resolution 2379 (2017) authorizes an investigative team in Iraq to support ISIS accountability (UNITAD). Human Rights Council Resolution A/HRC/37/L.39 (2018) extends mandate of Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran SC/RED/2490 (2019) renews and extends mandate of UNITAD to September 2020. There are also eight other instances of UN bodies or mechanisms indicating greater priority for minority and women protection.

-Impact: It is difficult to establish a clear and direct cause-effect relation from MRG's advocacy work and policy in relation to Iran and Iraq, especially given that resolutions adopted were already prominently on the agenda. In general, attention paid to vulnerable populations in Iraq has grown due to the massive displacement caused by ISIS. However, dwindling financial support for humanitarian organisations in the country has taken Iraq out of the international spotlight and protests sweeping the country has delayed the implementation of many advocacy efforts.

Iraq adopted a much higher number of UN universal periodic recommendations to end violence against women (VAW) and impunity for attacks on minorities than recorded in 2014, displaying a much higher level of commitment to these issues than before. This is likely in part due to contextual changes after the government declared defeat of ISIS and

increased need to respond to grave violations against women and minorities while ISIS held vast swathes of Iraq.

MRG and its partners could benefit from formally engaging with existing humanitarian clusters in Iraq, especially protection, as this may enhance advocacy efforts further, contribute to MRG's information networks and give the organisation greater visibility.

Additionally, MRG would benefit from developing its own independent networks of community stakeholders who often have more impact on domestic policy makers than local HRDs.

Sustainability

This tried, tested and refined project design met or exceeded nearly all of its targets, navigating contextual differences and challenges effectively. The interventions outlined still have the capacity to reach beyond this project alone, as in Iraq the human rights situation has deteriorated somewhat due to civil unrest and unstable governance. It would be advisable for future projects on Iraq to focus more on engaging domestic policy makers.

Further engagement with local actors in Iraq will help in furthering the knowledge of human rights monitoring and reporting to ordinary citizens who may be affected by violations.

CONCLUSION

Overall findings indicate that this project was highly relevant to the Iraqi context. Additionally, the formation of a new government in Iraq offers an opportunity to engage with a new administration, anxious to make sufficient reforms to abate protests taking place across the country.

Forced returns of IDPs are on the uptick in Iraq and it is likely that human rights violations will escalate as host communities respond to the return of individuals perceived to be affiliated with the IS group and/or religious minority groups whose lands and property has been reallocated, and other groups pushing back against demographic changes taking place in areas that had witnessed the worst violations such as Nineveh.

MRG's project design was appropriate for the objectives, building on previous work in Iraq. The project implementation was able to keep as closely as possible to its timeline even with sudden changes within the context. Moreover, MRG was noted to respond to contextual changes with appropriate project adaptations, thereby maintaining its relevance despite the fluctuating circumstances and challenges.

MRG was able to strategically position itself to respond to growing information needs and maintain a consistent position in terms of factual knowledge, expertise and advocacy on Iraq. Additionally, partners as well as microgrant recipients reported having very positive and strong working relationships with MRG throughout the project, and further collaborations are already in motion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The evaluation findings indicate that there is an evident need for such work.

The following recommendations should be taken into consideration in designing and implementing programming to build on the solid foundations established with this project:

MRG should consider whether it would benefit from a stronger field presence in Iraq and should position itself to conduct its own monitoring of project implementation and progress. Additionally, this would be useful in building up larger networks in-country, coordinating with other organisations to maximise resources and avoid duplications.

MRG should consider involving more localised Iraqi networks and organisations to operate in federal Iraq. Systemic ethnic and sectarian tensions in Iraq can make operating in areas other than an organisation's home base challenging.

Key informant reports that they had not heard of training opportunities offered either by MRG or Asuda indicates that MRG needs to shift its outreach to target a wider range of organisations.

Increased efforts should be made to engage media outlets in its work, using more innovative means of engagement- particularly on social media, which many journalists rely on for potential scoops.

Local stakeholders suggest that international organisations should focus on engaging community leaders in domestic advocacy efforts, as this has been found to be more impactful.

There is a need for greater and more sustained follow-up with training participants and small-grants recipients. Regular follow-up would help to determine where individuals and communities have gaps in knowledge and implementation.

There is a need for greater coordination with organisations based in Iraq, including international human rights and INGOs. Increased engagement with humanitarian clusters and working groups could ensure a maximisation of resources through collaborative work and avoiding duplications.

ANNEXES

Annex 1: A full list of interviewees is listed in the table below.

Name	Position	Location
Claire Thomas	MRGI Deputy Executive Director	Phone

Mays Al-Juboori	MRGI Civilian Rights Officer	Phone
Carl Soderbergh	MRGI Director of Policy and Communications	Skype
Samrawit Gougsa	MRGI Communications Officer	Phone
Glenn Payot	MRGI Geneva Representative	Skype
Mark Lattimer	Ceasefire Executive Director	Skype
Miriam Puttick	Ceasefire Civilian Rights Officer	Skype
Arez Muhammad	Asuda Deputy Director	Skype
William Spencer	Institute for International Law and Human Rights	Zoom
Khaled Zaza	Zaza Consulting	Zoom
Jameel Salah-al-Din Jameel	Iraq Peace Forum	WhatsApp
Faisal Abdallah	Iraq Human Rights Commission	WhatsApp
Sura al-Rawi	Baghdad Women's Association	WhatsApp
Yasmine Abou Mansour	OHCHR	Skype
Ciaron Murnane	OHCHR	Skype
Rachel Thompson	Information, counselling and legal assistance, NRC	Skype

Annex 2: Online questionnaire for microgrant beneficiaries

Beneficiaries of MRG's Small Grants

Please note: All answers will be reviewed by an external evaluator. The information you provide is confidential and will not be shared with any identifying information to MRG staff or anyone else.

Name of Organisation:

Brief Description of the Project:

How useful was the small grant you received from MRG? (Rate 1-5)

Do you feel the grant was sufficient to cover the project's needs? (Rate 1-5)

How useful was the capacity building and technical support provided? (Rate 1-5)

Rate the impact of the grant on helping you reach your targeted beneficiaries (Rate 1-5)

Rate the impact of the grant on your work today (Rate 1-5)

Describe what impact the grant has had on your work today.

Any other comments.

Annex 3: Interview Questions

Project staff

Many thanks for taking time out of your schedule to participate in this interview. My name is Amira and I have been hired as an external consultant by Minority Rights Group to evaluate the project, *“Strengthening Human Rights Defenders’ Organisations Working with Vulnerable Civilians in Iran and Iraq”*.

This interview is in relation to the evaluation to see how the project performed during its implementation. I hope today to learn your thoughts and feelings on the work of the project and ideas for improving this project.

All the information you provide here is confidential and anonymous. Your inputs will be included in a larger report to help MRG and its donors to design and implement future projects meeting the needs of people in this regard. If you are ready, may we proceed?

1. Please describe the project, your role and how you contributed to it. What activities were you a part of?
2. Could you describe how the project was developed? How were the interventions chosen? How did MRG choose its partners and beneficiaries?
3. Do you think the project was implemented at the right time and was appropriate to the context?
4. Do you think it was relevant to the real needs of vulnerable groups in both countries? How so? Do you think it was relevant to the needs of direct project participants, including partner organizations, local CSOs, and policymakers? How so?
5. Did the project meet the expectations of project participants? Why or why not?
6. What activities were you able to meet and why? What were the most positive aspects of these activities? For partners? Legal aid/ microgrant recipients? Why?
7. What, if any, aspects of the project did you find innovative? Why?
8. What activities and objectives were not met and why?
9. What were the main issues, challenges and obstacles in project implementation that you faced? How you able to overcome them? If not, why not?

10. How did project design, implementation, and priorities adjust as the context changed after 2017? How well do you think the project and partners adapted?
11. MRG has highlighted the impact of security on the project implementation. Could you please describe its impact? Was this the greatest challenge from your perspective?
12. Please describe MRG's relationship with its main partners during this project. How well did you feel MRG and partners worked together? Do you feel this engagement helped in furthering their capacity as human rights actors and defenders in Iraq? Why or why not?
13. To what extent did you feel legal aid and microgrants assist HRD in both countries? How much impact has this work had on the communities you have worked in for this project?
14. To what extent did capacity building and microgrants have an effect in helping organizations develop their own monitoring, reporting, and advocacy capabilities? Can you provide examples? How much impact has this work had on the communities you have worked in for this project?
15. How well do you think policymakers, international community, and media received MRG reports, film, and bulletins? What impact do you think this reporting has had on the human rights landscape in Iraq? What else is needed in your work to improve on this? Can you provide examples of direct or indirect changes that took place as a result of such work?
16. How do you think monitoring and evaluation was done in the field?
17. How would you rate the overall project implementation and success? (1-5)
18. What would you have changed with respect to this project, in terms of design or implementation? What else is needed to best meet stakeholder and beneficiary needs?
19. How sustainable is a project like this going forward? What are your recommendations for a similar future project?
20. Please let me know if there is anything else you would like to add.

Partners

Many thanks for taking time out of your schedule to participate in this interview. My name is Amira and I have been hired as an external consultant by Minority Rights Group to evaluate the project, *"Strengthening Human Rights Defenders' Organisations Working with Vulnerable Civilians in Iran and Iraq"*.

This interview is in relation to the evaluation to see how the project performed during its implementation. I hope today to learn your thoughts and feelings on the work of the project and ideas for improving this project.

All the information you provide here is confidential and anonymous. Your inputs will be included in a larger report to help MRG and its donors to design and implement future projects meeting the needs of people in this regard. If you are ready, may we proceed?

1. How long have you been working with your organization and in the field generally? Please describe your work with your organization?
2. Please describe your thoughts on the importance of this project given its time of implementation in Iraq. Do you think it was relevant to the real needs of vulnerable groups? How so? Do you think it was relevant to the needs of direct project participants, including partner organizations, local CSOs, and policymakers? How so?
3. Please describe the Ceasefire project and your role within it? What components, activities, tasks were you a part of?
4. Do you think you were able to deliver as part of the project in terms of meeting expectations of project participants? Why or why not?
5. What activities were you able to meet and why? What were the most positive aspects of these activities? For MRG? For microgrant recipients? Why?
6. What if any aspects of the project did you find innovative? Why?
7. What activities do you think you were not able to meet and why?
8. What were the main issues, challenges and obstacles in project implementation that you faced? How you able to overcome them? If not, why not?
9. How did project design, implementation, and priorities adjust as the context changed after 2017? How well do you think the project and partners adapted?
10. Were you provided with appropriate training and tools to carry out your work as part of this project? Please explain. How well were you able to use the online platforms developed for monitoring and reporting?
11. Please describe your relationship with MRG and other partners during this project. How well did you feel MRG and partners worked together? Do you feel this engagement helped in furthering your capacity as a human rights actor and defender in Iraq? Why or why not?
12. To what extent do you feel legal aid and small grants benefited human rights defenders?
13. To what extent did you feel the microgrants had an effect in helping organizations developing their own monitoring, reporting, and advocacy capabilities? Can you provide examples? How much impact has this work had on the communities you have worked in for this project?
14. How well do you think policymakers, international community, and media received MRG reports, film, and bulletins? What impact do you think this reporting has had on the human rights landscape in Iraq? What else is needed in your work to improve on this? Can you provide examples of direct or indirect changes that took place as a result of such work?

15. To what extent has this supported the establishment of a functioning network of CSOs monitoring and reporting human rights violations in Iraq? Why or why not? What else is needed to improve on this?
16. How do you think monitoring and evaluation was done in the field?
17. How would you rate the overall project implementation and success? (1-5)
18. What would you have changed with respect to this project, in terms of design or implementation? What else is needed to best meet stakeholder and beneficiary needs?
19. How sustainable is a project like this going forward? What are your recommendations for a similar future project?
20. Please let me know if there is anything else you would like to add.

Independent experts

Many thanks for taking time out of your schedule to participate in this interview. My name is Amira and I have been hired as an external consultant by Minority Rights Group to evaluate the project, *“Strengthening Human Rights Defenders’ Organisations Working with Vulnerable Civilians in Iran and Iraq”*.

This interview is in relation to the evaluation to see how the project performed during its implementation. For background, this project sought to develop innovative ways to allow real-time, civilian-led reporting of human rights violations affecting human rights defenders in the country with a particular focus on those in conflict and difficult to access areas.

The project included capacity building for local partners, learning by doing through small grants, research and publications analysing violations reported and verified, linked with national and international advocacy. Key products include six bulletins, two films, and the Ceasefire online reporting tool.

I hope today to learn your thoughts and feelings on the work of the project and ideas for improving it. All the information you provide here is confidential and anonymous. Your inputs will be included in a larger report to help MRG and its donors to design and implement future projects meeting the needs of people in this regard. If you are ready, may we proceed?

1. Please describe your work in/on Iraq. What do you do and how do human rights, particularly with regard to vulnerable groups, factor into it?
2. How aware were you of this project or any of its products before today?
3. Please describe your thoughts on the importance of this project given its time of implementation. Do you think it was relevant to the real needs of vulnerable groups and conflict affected communities? How so? Do you think it was relevant to the needs of your work in this regard? How so?

4. Do you think there is a reliable and credible network of local civil society organizations monitoring and reporting on human rights violations in Iraq? Have you ever interacted with such a civilian-led network in your work in/on Iraq? If so, please explain. If not, why not?
5. What factors would constitute reliable and credible human rights monitoring and reporting in this context to you? What else is needed to further build this capacity here?
6. How have the bulletins and film of the Minority Rights Group influenced your work? [If positive response] How has it shaped what you/your agency is doing/planning? [If negative response] Why not? [For all responses] What more can be done to bring human rights issues to the fore in your work? What about the reporting across the Ceasefire project website and social media platforms?
7. How sustainable is a project like this going forward? What are your recommendations for a similar future project?
8. Please let me know if there is anything else you would like to add.