



CLIMATE CHANGE



NEW PILLAR LAUNCH

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CONTEXT

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has named Iraq the fifth most vulnerable country in the world to climate change,¹ disproportionately affecting at-risk communities. Years of conflict, war, political instability, corruption and industrial pollution have additionally led to massive environmental decline. Desertification has affected 39% of the region, and 54% of agricultural land has been degraded due to dwindling river flow. Around 7 million Iraqis² to date are affected by drought, climate change, and an ever-growing risk of displacement. Furthermore, the World Bank predicts that Iraq could suffer a 20% drop in water resources by 2050.³

The situation is especially uncertain for the displaced and those still living in camps. The armed conflict in Iraq has displaced around 6 million people since 2014, of which 4.87 million have returned home. But at the start of 2022, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)⁴ reported that Iraq has 2.5 million people still in need of humanitarian assistance, including over one million IDPs who have not yet found a sustainable path back home. The latest data attained by KRG Ministry of Interior's Bureau of Migration and Displacement⁵ stated that around 665,000 IDPs and more than 248,000 refugees were settled in Kurdistan in 2022, with the region's 25 IDP camps hosting approximately 180,000 IDPs and 93,966 refugees. A further 154,468 refugees live amongst host communities. Within each of these communities, there remains a serious lack of local socio-economic integration opportunities and access to livelihood opportunities.



1 UNEP, Global Environment Outlook, 2019: <https://www.unep.org/resources/global-environment-outlook-6>

2 The Payne Institute for Public Policy - <https://payneinstitute.mines.edu/ending-gas-flaring-and-powering-a-sustainable-economy-of-the-kurdistan-region-of-iraq/>

3 World Bank, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/11/24/iraq-rising-fiscal-risks-water-scarcity-and-climate-change-threaten-gradual-recovery-from-pandemic>

4 OCHA overview on Iraq 2022, <https://www.unocha.org/iraq>.

5 Kurdish Regional Government, <https://gov.krd/dmi-en/activities/news-and-press-releases/2023/january/kurdistan-region-a-shelter-for-about-one-million-refugees-and-idps/>

There are clear links between Iraq's climate crisis and rising inequality and increased gender-based violence – with women and girls inevitably being the hardest hit. As the Baghdad Women Association's Policy Paper on Women and Climate Change⁶ says: "We can compare Iraqi women's situation to being in the middle of a sandstorm; they are being strangled in their rights and appear to be the most affected by the social and psychological implications of this change, with the resulting repercussions of women's loss of rural identity, as well as the increasing chronic diseases, food security problems, health services, and other services."

The paper adds: "In the first quarter of 2022, 1,138 cases of gender-based violence reached the association's centres in the targeted provinces of Anbar, Baghdad, Dohuk, and Nineveh, and from these cases, 295 were economic violence. More over half of the incidents included economic violence, with 170 cases related to climate change." A UN Women report⁷ also stated in February 2022 that climate change is a "threat multiplier", escalating social, political and economic tensions in conflict-affected settings, and exposing women and girls to all forms of GBV, as well as trafficking and early marriage.



Women, children, people with disabilities, and the elderly are particularly vulnerable to the catastrophic effects of climate-related disasters, such as floods, wildfires, severe droughts, extreme temperatures, and the consequences of rising sea levels and restricted access to food and water. Iraq's 2022 Humanitarian Needs Overview⁸ states that more than 82% of displaced people are vulnerable to food insecurity, and the pandemic has piled more pressure onto fragile food systems. With climate-based threats to traditional employment routes such as agriculture and farming, women face intense pressure to secure incomes for their families.

6 Policy Paper on Women and Climate Change, Baghdad Women Association, www.bwa-iraq.org.

7 How Gender Inequality and Climate Change are Interconnected: www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/explainer/2022/02/explainer-how-gender-inequality-and-climate-change-are-interconnected

8 Iraq Humanitarian Needs Overview 2022: <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-humanitarian-needs-overview-2022-march-2022>

This all occurs in an already socio-economically strained country. Iraq reported a record population of 41 million last year, and with a median age of 21 years, the poverty rate is 31%, and unemployment is 13%.⁹ Many Iraqis, especially younger generations, are putting their lives in the hands of traffickers, risking their lives in the hope of a better future. And while the autonomous region of Kurdistan is faring better than the rest of Iraq, it is not immune to rising poverty, lack of job opportunities and limited perspectives for youths.

Energy poverty and power shortages present another huge problem, exacerbated by excessive consumption and a lack of public awareness regarding energy conservation. With the scorching summer months soon to arrive, communities will once again face rolling blackouts due to a spike in demand in electricity for cooling, which overwhelms the government grid and energy supply. As the UN explains in SDG Goal 7:¹⁰ "Energy is central to nearly every major challenge and opportunity the world faces today. Be it for jobs, security, climate change, food production or increasing incomes, access to energy for all is essential."

With all of these factors creating a 'perfect storm', we believe it is imperative that Iraq and KRI address the root causes of climate change and develop policies to support those forced to migrate due to its harmful impacts. There is an urgent need for a multifaceted approach to tackle the threats outlined above, beginning with changes in the energy industry and building more climate-resilient communities. The Lotus Flower is keen to play a key part in contributing to such efforts, by empowering communities living in displacement to put valuable indigenous knowledge of the land to good use, while tapping into the enormous agricultural potential of the region.



Image by our Storytelling Sisters

9 The Payne Institute for Public Policy - <https://payneinstitute.mines.edu/tackling-energy-poverty-and-climate-change-through-sustainable-power-generation-in-the-kurdistan-region-of-iraq/>

10 UN SDG Goal 7, <https://sdg-tracker.org/energy>.

OUR RESPONSE

Ensuring climate justice and social justice are addressed is essential for fostering a more equitable, fair and sustainable future. As we move towards this, all communities - including those housing the most vulnerable populations - must have access to the necessary resources, information, opportunities and infrastructure to withstand climate-related impacts. The Lotus Flower has accordingly launched a new core pillar, **Climate Change**, in order to address crucial issues such as sustainable farming methods and livelihood resilience.

Not only is this pillar critically needed, but it will indirectly support the Lotus Flower's three existing core pillars: Education & Livelihoods, Health & Safety and Peacebuilding & Human Rights. As an example, there are clear links between climate change and public health, with detrimental effects including an increase in infectious diseases and cancer rates, plus impacts from extreme heat and man-made practices such as gas flaring, pesticide use, and other chemicals in the soil. Secondly, our new pillar will support our peacebuilding and rights efforts, since climate change creates conflict, forced migration and high competition for limited resources. Thirdly, our new climate pillar links to education and livelihoods opportunities through raising awareness and providing vocational training, job creation and enhanced food security.

To create stronger communities that are better placed to mitigate the impacts of climate change, it is essential that beneficiaries are involved in the planning and implementing of resilience measures. After all, they have valuable knowledge and experience of their local environment and needs. At the Lotus Flower, we always involve women and girls in project design and delivery, and through the various initiatives under this pillar we will ensure they are at the heart of implementation; by engaging the community to build grassroots livelihoods resilience, and facilitating sustainable practices in agriculture and conservation.



Sustainable Climate Policies and Community Engagement

Sustainable agricultural practices can help to conserve natural resources, increase crop yields, and improve food security for vulnerable populations. Climate change will continue to add more uncertainty with severe floods and droughts, amplifying the vulnerability of already at-risk communities in Kurdistan and Iraq. There is a need for cooperation at all levels of government, the private sector, and civil society in order to tackle the root causes of global warming and to mitigate its effects on communities.¹¹

Kurdistan has huge potential to harness natural resources and develop a sustainable, resilient economy through agriculture. This will help the government create jobs and promote economic growth, while helping protect and rehabilitate the environment, develop a green industry and economy, and fuel the journey towards a future with low fossil fuel energy dependency.

Critical to this will be the continuation of government efforts to enhance cross-collaborations between the private and public sectors, while ensuring best practice for the local fossil fuel industry. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Cabinet is investing heavily in agriculture as a form of economic diversification - including food security projects and the mass building of greenhouses which is creating thousands of jobs. This year, Kurdistan also plans to export its first agricultural, domestic produce abroad, mainly to Gulf region markets and eventually the EU. We believe it is therefore essential for the Lotus Flower to train women and other beneficiaries so that they are equipped and ready to enter the expanding agricultural workforce.



¹¹ The Payne Institute for Public Policy - <https://payneinstitute.mines.edu/tackling-energy-poverty-and-climate-change-through-sustainable-power-generation-in-the-kurdistan-region-of-iraq/>

CLIMATE PROJECTS

She Leads in Food Security

As part of the initial development of our climate change pillar, we established a project called She Leads in Food Security in early 2023. Its objective is to enhance the food security and economic status of IDPs, refugees and returnees in the Sinjar district of KRI through climate-smart agriculture and income-generating initiatives.

We decided to focus on food security and agriculture in response to a call for urgent action last year by both the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP).¹² In a joint statement on World Food Day in October 2022, the two agencies said: "Food is the path towards peace and as such, serious action must be taken immediately by the Government of Iraq and the International community to adopt climate smart food systems and long-term resilience building in order to ensure that Iraq and its people are able to navigate these testing times."

We also felt it imperative to harness the potential of the region - known as the Middle East's food basket - especially as near neighbours and regional partners such as the UAE are already engaging in agricultural trade for products, such as wheat, barley, fruits, and vegetables.

To launch the project, we organised 'training of trainers' (ToT) sessions, which led to 10 Female Community Food Security Ambassadors becoming local champions to raise women's knowledge of food security. The specialist training covered nutrition, food preservation, food wastage and composting, and was subsequently delivered to 400 women and youths at our in-camp women's centres.

This was followed by business training for 200 women and 50 men, using the Gender and Entrepreneurship Together (GET Ahead) program. A gender-sensitive training initiative, GET Ahead aims to remove the barriers women face in starting businesses, including a lack of entrepreneurial skills, low confidence and gendered norms.





As a pioneering 10-month pilot, this project is in partnership with CARE Iraq, and has been funded by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and is implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

Other activities include training workshops for youths on vegetation, plus training for 600 households on separating organic and household waste. As well as raising awareness of food security and climate adaptation and offering sustainable food income generation opportunities, the project seeks to create market linkages and opportunities for cross-learning. At the end of the intervention, 10 women will also be provided with business, financial and logistical support for three months, until they are fully equipped with the information and skills needed to run a business independently.



Jam Sisters

Another existing project which launched on International Women's Day in March this year, Jam Sisters is supporting a small group of women refugees in order to build food production skills and become financially independent. We identified this livelihoods opportunity as a way of supporting our existing 'Sisters' in an environmental context, which allows them to make use of informal work settings and unused land to support their communities directly with homegrown food supplies and create value chains.

Upon the opening of our dedicated 'Jam Factory', the four female participants have begun to make jams and preserves from local products, such as figs, apples, cherries and apricots, before selling them to local markets and the community. Through the initiative, they will manage the business and retain all profits to support themselves and their families.



In partnership with The Big Heart Foundation, the project provides a sustainable, income-generating opportunity for the women, while simultaneously promoting the importance of food security, local agriculture, and reducing wastage.

We believe Jam Sisters is one of the first livelihood interventions of its kind to be implemented for Syrian refugee women, and it includes business management and development skills training conducted by a specialist trainer. The project not only creates viable food income opportunities, but also improves awareness of climate adaptation. We are also preparing to expand Jam Sisters further, in order to benefit more women entrepreneurs and support local farming communities.

FUTURE PROJECTS

Earth Sisters

We are urgently seeking funding from organisations who can commit to helping us scale up our climate work in KRI under our new pillar. As part of this, we are initially looking for support to launch another extension of our 'Sisters' portfolio.

Aligning with SDG Goal 13 - to “take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts” - our Earth Sisters program will focus on building women and girls’ leadership and communications skills, and increase their confidence and resilience in pushing for climate protections. We anticipate training 50 Earth Sisters who will serve as ambassadors to increase community awareness of climate change, promote sustainable solutions and environmental adaptations, plus ideas around pursuing clean energy and biodiversity.

In similar ways to our existing, highly successful Peace Sisters program, the women will be trained to use their influence and grow their networks to push for structural change and play a part in shaping environmental policy, implementation and climate-planning.

Once trained, the Earth Sisters will choose and lead their own climate-related initiatives in the community - including activities such as recycling, 'green' cleaning and litter-picking campaigns, climate change awareness workshops and seminars (including in-person and on social media), tree-planting schemes, water conservation campaigns, GBV awareness sessions and capacity-building training in women's leadership, critical thinking and communications.



Image by our Storytelling Sisters

ABOUT US

The Lotus Flower is a non-profit organisation in Kurdistan, Iraq, focusing on empowering vulnerable women and girls. Our mission is to provide them with the necessary tools and resources to ensure their safety, encourage them to pursue education and help them become financially independent.

We also aim to promote active roles and leadership in all spheres of society, enabling them to bring about positive change in their communities. To date, we have positively impacted on 61,259 women, girls, and children and linked community members* through our centres in Kurdistan.

To date, we have provided much-needed livelihoods training, language courses, computer training, fitness and health support, and awareness sessions on women's rights and gender-based violence.

We aim to provide the foundation for women to rebuild themselves, their families, and their futures. We strive for a world where women are safe, free to access education, and are empowered to participate in their communities to drive social and economic change from within.

* Total reach is total participants – including women, girls, men and boys – in all programmes, not unique users, from March 2016-December 2022. This means that individuals participate in multiple programmes throughout the years.

Our centre locations in Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Rwanga

This IDP camp is home to approximately 15,000 individuals, mostly of Yazidi origin and from the Sinjar area.

Duhok

Our most recently opened centre in Duhok city mainly serves those living outside of camps, including Yazidis, Syrian refugees and host communities.

Domiz 2

One of the largest camps for Syrian refugees, Domiz 2 hosts more than 9,000 individuals.

Essyan

Another IDP camp, Essyan houses around 14,000 displaced people, of Yazidi origin.

Other locations in KRI

As of 2023, we also operate child-friendly spaces in Bardarash and Gawilan camps for Syrian refugees.

Additionally, we have a mobile team in Duhok City, Sumel, Akre and Zakho City to provide child protection and GBV prevention services to Syrian refugees, IDPs and host communities.

