Introduction

WFP seeks to connect with the communities it serves, and to better understand their needs in order to improve its service delivery. It is integrating these principles into its emergency response for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq, in the framework of “Accountability to Affected Populations” (AAP) and “Communication with Communities” (CwC).

What is CwC?

CwC is based on the principle that information and communications are critical forms of assistance, without which populations affected by emergencies cannot access services or make the best decisions for themselves and their communities. At the same time, CwC links to the idea that increasing dialogue with people complements accountability, monitoring, impact evaluation and further programming design. Affected populations thus become stakeholders in the assistance process.

WFP Community Consultations

As its pilot CwC intervention, WFP is carrying out a community consultations with IDPs living in both camp and non camp settings in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The consultations are intended to instigate a more inclusive and participatory approach to WFP’s assistance, allowing WFP to adjust its programming in light of the concerns and feedback from affected population. The consultations were also intended to inform WFP’s overall CwC strategy, by highlighting gaps and needs in information provision surrounding humanitarian assistance.

Profile of the participants:

- The 35 participants of the community consultations were selected to represent diverse profiles, and to help gauge the particular needs of vulnerable groups. The groups comprised 40% elderly men, 30% middle-aged and young men and 30% women. Of the 30% women, 10% were unaccompanied displaced women.
- The group was multi-faith, and involved Sunnis, Yazidis and Christians. Most came from northern Iraqi region, including urban areas of Mosul and Sinjar city, as well as from rural villages near Sinjar including Bashiqa.
- The displaced people receive either WFP Family Food Parcels, or WFP food vouchers. All had arrived in Duhok between July and September 2014, and had been receiving assistance from various organisations now for at least eight months.

Methodology:

The consultation was moderated by a Food Security Cluster officer in Dohuk, along with local WFP Programme Officers (male and female). As most participants spoke Arabic as a first language, the consultation was moderated in Arabic, and conducted with sensitivity to the religious and gender diversity of the group. The presence of local moderators allowed participants to interact successfully with each other and WFP.

The following themes were explored:
- Feedback on WFP’s assistance;
- Information dissemination and means of communication;
- Existing complaints and feedback mechanisms;
- Feedback on humanitarian assistance in general.

Access to Assistance

Did humanitarian assistance reach you at the right time?

On arrival in Duhok, members of the host community provided basic items including food, blankets, mattresses, and drinking water. Unable to bring basic supplies with them while fleeing from their homes, the displaced people needed food and non-food items (NFIs) to help them begin their new lives.

Community Consultations in Duhok

A pilot community consultation with internally displaced people took place in February 2015, in the Chaldean Centre for Culture and Arts in Duhok city, which is providing shelter to IDPs.
“We had various aid agencies coming and giving us different things like utensils, buckets, shoes, clothes, but we had no means to tell them about our special needs, especially for women with children,” said a woman displaced from Mosul.

Participants agreed that host communities were the first to provide them with food supplies. Beside host communities, local charity foundations provided assistance. This initial ad-hoc assistance included intermittent food supplies, and some NFIs.

UN agencies and other NGOs began providing assistance after IDPs had been registered. The IDPs were not told the names of the organisations, what their mandates were, or what kind of assistance they were providing.

“They were coming every day, some day we got warm clothes, and on other days only food, and more food -- aid providers came and are still coming, and not all of them give us a clear idea what they intend to do,” said a 68 year old man.

Despite the perceived lack of distinction between UN agencies, NGO and INGO partners, the IDPs appreciated the assistance they had received.

Feedback on WFP Food and Voucher Assistance

What do you think about the quality and quantity of the food you receive from WFP?

Although all the families were satisfied with the quality of oil and sugar in the food rations, some had complaints about other components.

Initially some did not have stoves to cook with, and so could not use the dry ingredients. Others were unaccustomed to making bread, and so were unable to use wheat flour from the ration. Some would have preferred higher quality bulgur wheat.

Do you prefer voucher assistance over food parcels? If so, why?

The families receiving food vouchers appreciated the efforts made by WFP. They found vouchers to be more reliable than food rations, allowing them to plan their diet.

Problems were reported in redeeming vouchers. They reported that some shopkeepers were not giving them receipts detailing the price of the food items they had purchased; rather were charged without any indication being given for the price of each item. Several people said that the shop charged IDPs using vouchers more than local customers. Voucher recipients had raised this problem to WFP’s cooperating partner, who took swift action in conjunction with a government price-monitoring committee, cancelling contracts with the offending shops.

Information Provision

Was the information about assistance provided to you clearly?

Ambiguity and lack of access to reliable information was identified as a major problem.

According to IDPs, they were not informed about the predictability of assistance, if it would be provided to them where they had settled, or if they would have to travel somewhere in order to obtain it.

“I was standing in a very long queue for hours, and when I got close to the front I realized that I was not registered on that particular desk. There was often no information to clarify where to go for what, and mostly we learn things through each other,” explained one woman.

Were you informed about the roles of assistance providers, objectives, and predictability of the assistance?

Participants had different levels of awareness of agencies’ roles, mandates, objectives and entitlements. Most were unsure what they would get from which organisation, and for how long it would be provided, revealing a clear gap in information provision mechanisms.

Whilst they understood WFP’s role, the relationship between WFP and the cooperating partner was not clear. WFP’s partner generally informed them about a food distribution three days in advance, via SMS or telephone call, but they were not aware that there was a pattern of distribution. Although participants were satisfied with the information provided and the notice period given before distribution, information about the predictability of assistance was found to be weak.

What other information would you like to have that you do not get now? How do you access news?

Participants wanted news about the areas they came from that are now under ISIL control. Although they had mobile phones, very few had Internet access, television and word of mouth were their primary means of gathering information. Although men could watch television at teashops, news shown in public places was usually in Kurdish, which excluded those who only spoke Arabic. Access to news through radio was also difficult, due to limited Arabic news available. Women had even less access to information, primarily getting news from male family members, and younger people in the camps who had sporadic access to internet.
Feedback and Complaints About Assistance

Do you have the chance to participate in the decisions that affect your lives? If not, how would you prefer to represent yourself and participate in these decisions?

Participants did not know how they could represent themselves and actively participate in the assistance process.

Do you know about existing complaint mechanisms? If so, to what extent do you trust them?

In a non-camp setting, the only complaint mechanism is the cooperating partner. Although most of them knew about hotline numbers, very few had ever made calls to lodge complaint. It was unclear for them whether making a complaint via the hotline would help them or not.

Most of them had seen complaint boxes, but had never seen anyone opening them to check the feedback. “They are like dead boxes,” said a man from Mosul. A lack of confidence in existing complaints mechanisms was apparent.

Have you been consulted before now on what your needs are or how it would be best to assist you? Do you ever have an opportunity to raise concerns or give feedback on how things are going?

For many participants this was the first time they had been formally consulted. “Nobody wants to listen to us, mostly they come to ask questions and leave,” said a 28 year old man. They were dissatisfied with feedback mechanisms, as there was no way to explain their specific needs, and what kind of assistance they would had preferred. Whilst they were consulted at various times, they were rarely informed about the objectives of the consultation, and did not find out if their feedback was taken into account.

Gender and Protection

Who in your household makes decisions over the use of cash, vouchers or food?

All of the families at the community consultation expressed that they relied on female family members to make decisions about food. Yet with regards to food assistance, men were better informed about distribution cycles and their predictability, and thus decision-making on food assistance fell to male family members.

Was assistance provided to you in a dignified manner? Did you have any safety concerns or experience any protection issues during distributions?

Most of the participants reported having no safety problems during distributions. But when asked specifically if they ever had been treated badly, or had felt cheated by shopkeepers when redeeming their vouchers, they reported problems.

For example, several reported being treated rudely at shops after they redeemed their vouchers and asked for a receipt. They also found that they were being charged more than local customers at the same shops.

Women were notably less vocal about protection issues, and it seemed that they were not completely comfortable with sharing their concerns in front of male participants. It is therefore recommended that separate consultations should be held about issues related to women, to ascertain if there are protection related concerns arising from distributions.

Recommendations

As a result of these community consultation, the following recommendations are proposed as short to long term responses. These should be enacted within three months.

Participants said they would like to see more community consultations. Ideally there should be a sustainable mechanism within communities to formally hold these sessions both periodically and if they are needed. Concerns and feedback raised should be communicated to the respective authorities.

To ensure that basic information needs are consistently met, WFP should develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to delineate ‘Minimum Standard Information Requirements’, to be displayed at distributions or voucher redeeming shops.

As participants demonstrated a distinct lack of confidence in existing complaints and feedback mechanisms, WFP should support and encourage cooperating partners to strengthen these processes, and to take prompt and considered action on complaints filed.

Special community consultations for women should be organized, in order to investigate more deeply into any protection and gender issues surrounding WFP assistance.

To facilitate regular community feedback on food assistance, which may prompt WFP to modify its food rations, food committees should be established in camps and other collective centres. This will help to address problems with food in a timely manner.