

UPHOLDING DIGNITY AND RESPECT IN DISASTER RESPONSE



RESPONDING TO EMERGENCIES IN IRAQ

The scale of suffering in Iraq during the ISIS insurgency prompted us to begin work there with our own teams, in an area where the church had very little presence.

In 2014, ISIS militants seized large swathes of Iraq, triggering a huge humanitarian crisis: more than 2 million people fled their homes for safer areas such as the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The extreme violence of IS meant that many people had experienced trauma and bereavement.

Tearfund was not working in Iraq at the time, although we had done so before, after the first Gulf War in 2001. But the scale of the suffering was enormous and, after considerable discussion and prayer, we felt compelled to respond. The local churches that existed – Orthodox or evangelical – lacked the necessary capacity to make a large-scale response so we chose to set up our own teams.

We began by collaborating with two fellow members of the Integral Alliance, a coalition of Christian relief agencies set up to coordinate needs assessment and responses. With colleagues at MedAir and Mission East, we carried out initial scoping work and shared assets and assessments, before setting up complementary projects.

Based in Erbil, we decided to focus on the more vulnerable informal camps, where most people were from ethnic and religious minorities, including Yazidi. We provided an emergency response built around shelter, water and sanitation, and distributions of cash and non-food items, then expanded into areas such as livelihoods, trauma care and peacebuilding.



📷 Children play in refugee camp in Northern Iraq. Photo: Stella Chetham/Tearfund

It was vital that our response upheld best practice as enshrined in international standards. We were also passionate that our Christian values should be evident, albeit in more subtle ways given the context.

One way we did this was through 'beneficiary accountability', which underlines humanitarian workers' responsibility towards beneficiaries, allowing the affected community to set their priorities and plan their recovery. We were a lead agency in using and promoting this approach, which is now mainstream. We hired dedicated officers whose role it was to ensure that beneficiaries knew what they were entitled to, why they had been selected and who was supporting them. We set up systems whereby people could leave feedback or complaints, and ran surveys to better understand their needs, situations and feelings. Above all, we treated beneficiaries with kindness and respect.

Likewise, international staff made every effort to be sensitive to local culture and religion. Team leaders explained the

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Tearfund values they expected the whole staff to uphold, including treating one another with respect.

An external evaluation found that beneficiaries were all complimentary about how support was distributed and felt they had been treated with dignity. One beneficiary, Afran*, said: 'You are giving us the respect and dignity to help ourselves. Life is difficult and it's hard to ask for help. You as an organisation made us feel comfortable and at ease.' Many local staff also said how much they had enjoyed working with Tearfund.



📷 Harbia and her three children. Photo: Stella Chetham/Tearfund

*name changed for security reasons

