Dear Reader,

We, the Iraqi youth, hope that you are well during this time of global crisis and emergency. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the lives of so many people around the world, especially youth. Globally depression and suicide rates have skyrocketed, as young people were isolated from schools, friends and family. Many young people have faced unemployment, along with many families who lost their incomes and livelihoods during the crisis.

Iraqi youth know what living in a state of emergency is like. During the time of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), more than 6 million people were displaced, and an estimated 4.1 million people, including 1.8 million children, needed humanitarian assistance in Iraq. After the conflict, when we returned to our communities, women and youth started working to rebuild and recover their communities. People were even more engaged than before the crisis.

Iraq was also severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with nearly 1.3 million confirmed cases and over 16,900 deaths. Many families suffered from financial issues and there were increases in anxiety, depression, substance abuse, domestic violence and suicide. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought people in many communities closer together. Iraqi youth worked in the community to provide people with food and money to help them meet their basic needs. Local NGOs, especially organisations helping families, women and children, provided online workshops and awareness campaigns, in cooperation with INGOs.

We want to ensure that there will continue to be co-operation and engagement after the COVID-19 pandemic ends, and that we will be supported to play a leadership role in recovering and rebuilding Iraq. To support this effort, we have shared with you below some of the needs of youth and their families, and how youth, NGOs, INGOs and government are working to address these needs in our communities. We have also shared with you some of our dreams, hopes for the future and how we recommend we work to achieve those goals. We hope that it will inspire you and that you will join us in making the future for youth in Iraq hopeful and inclusive!

Many thanks,

Iraqi Youth
“Letters to the Future” of youth civil society actors in Iraq

In a challenging context, where civic space is closed to youth participation, WarChild wanted to provide an opportunity for youth activists and civil society leaders to express their needs and concerns. WarChild UK, along with the active participation of 16 Iraqi youth activists from the Ninewa Region in Iraq, was able to create a motivating space that encouraged the sharing of their knowledge, information, and experiences in a constructive and positive way, as well as put forward ideas for what is needed to support youth civil society and social movements within the Kurdish Region of Iraq and Iraq in the future.

Through a creative “Letters to the Future” exercise, young people had the opportunity to share their reflections and dreams. Many Iraqi youth expressed concerns that they would not be able to stabilise and live their lives in Iraq. However, they also tried to encourage themselves to be hopeful for the future and to set goals related to education, travel and emigration. One participant wrote, “I am always looking to the future [...] and never surrendering to the circumstances and keep working on self-development to build a better future.” Many were still mourning the loss of friends and family members and feared that they would lose more loved ones: “I can't sleep at night and I am over-thinking about the dark future... I feel I am old and powerless,” said one participant.

Through the exercise, it became clear that the pandemic provided more opportunities for youth to be engaged in community service and to rebuild some of the social cohesion that had fallen apart as a result of the displacement and violence that had been occurring in Iraq since 2017. However, in terms of access to power and decision-making, youth do not have more access to decision-making beyond at the community level. As one young person said, “In the time of crisis, youth always come together and put their energies to spread hope and support without expecting any rewards.” Just like before the pandemic, youth continue to face many bureaucratic obstacles and barriers to being included.

Where youth organising has made a difference in Iraq

Women and youth advancing into decision-making roles in Iraq

During the conflict with ISIL, young women played multiple roles within their families and communities in order to help keep their families united and protect their children from being forcibly recruited, for example, they have been educators and leaders in de-radicalisation.
Since the fall of ISIL, women and girls continue to support their families and communities in the rebuilding effort. This includes women and girls being active in documenting and publishing abuses of women’s human rights online, as well as being involved in developing local organisations and women’s shelters to address the needs of women and girls who have escaped attempts of honour killings. Today, Iraqi women and girls are moving into leadership roles in several sectors, but especially in the civil society sector. This change has also been supported by men, who are increasingly accepting of women and youth participating in decision-making spaces and are listening more to their ideas. Iraqi youth involved as social workers, in national NGOs, and INGOs have been helping to raise awareness in communities about the important role that women play in public life.

Leading a community response through Youth Councils

After ISIL, several youth councils were formed. Most of these councils are not officially registered with the government, however, due to challenges in navigating the registration process and a lack of financial resources and support needed to fulfill government requirements. The youth councils have primarily focused on providing basic resources to families in need during crises by leading health initiatives, educational activities, and improving the community environment through rehabilitation of parks and streets.

Prior to and during COVID-19, despite their initiatives and interest, the youth councils have been limited due to barriers put into place by the Iraqi government. For example, there are policies that prohibit people without official registered organisations to gather in groups.

Some examples of the challenges and opportunities that youth councils experience include:

- Youth councils financially supported poor families and orphans with donations that they collected from individuals and the private sector.
- Youth council collected money to rebuild the dorms of the girls in University of Mosul which was partly demolished, but the government denied the youth participation in the building process.
- Youth organised to replant and clean up the urban areas and rehabilitate parks and streets, but were denied permission by the government even after completing the planning process and applying to the government.

“We can't always wait for the support to come from the donors. We always need to work on self-development, not just handouts.”
Recommendations from Youth for Bettering Iraq

These recommendations were derived directly from youth civil society actors during the “Letters to the Future” exercise, and they are geared toward bettering the prospects and the lives of young people and youth civil society alike.

1. Basic Needs Met
   - The government must develop a strategy to ensure food security
   - The government must support the development of safe and affordable housing for all Iraqi families
   - The job market must offer opportunities that can provide fair wages and work for youth
   - The government must ensure personal security for its citizens

2. Access to Health Care
   - The education system must provide mental health support to address issues of depression, anxiety and bullying
   - The government must provide public information about drug addiction
   - The government must provide access to drug rehabilitation centres
   - The education system must provide sexual reproductive rights education

3. Access to Fair Education
   - The government must provide all Iraqi children access to education
   - The education system has to provide opportunities for youth to start initiatives and build leadership skills
   - The education system must equip and empower the teachers and school counsellors

4. Support to Address Social Issues
   - The police must have a system for addressing violence related to race and religion, including online
   - The education system must address the issue of youth dropping out of school
   - The education system should provide support for youth facing violence in the home and in the community

5. Professional Development
   - The private sector should be engaged to create opportunities for students and new graduates
   - The private sector should provide students and new graduates access to paid internship experiences
   - The government should support vocational education and start-ups

6. Participation in Decision Making
   - The government must enable youth to hold gatherings of young people without bureaucratic challenges
   - The local governments need to make the process of registering an NGO more accessible
   - The local NGOs and INGOs need to create opportunities for youth to engage in the decision-making process
7. Stability

- Activities and opportunities for youth should have a framework that enables youth to be a part of decision-making.
- Local NGOs and INGOs should only design short term workshops that should be a part of a larger programme, so that youth will feel a sense of stability.

8. Independence

- The local NGOs and INGOs must engage youth in their communities in order to create sustainability even after a crisis has ended.
- Youth civil society wants to be able to build their own capacity and continuously develop themselves.

This spotlight chapter is part of the *State of Youth Civil Society* global, youth-led publication.