

 Iraq

Community-based protection committees and remote engagement through WhatsApp Business

By Ali Mohammed Sadeeq, Protection Officer at Oxfam

Meet Hassan,¹ an Oxfam volunteer

It is hot and there are many children playing. The sandstorms are challenging the stability of the tents, but fails to defeat the hope rooted in the eyes of over 10,000 internally displaced people (IDPs). Most of them are women and children residents in Hamam Al-Alil camp 2, located just outside Mosul, in the North of Iraq. They were forced to leave their homes, their lives and their memories behind because of the last conflict, with ISIS. Hassan is one of the hundreds of young people who fled to the camp.

'My only dream is to return to my house, friends and life that I lost due to the last conflict,' he said.

Before ISIS took over the city of Mosul, Hassan and his family were living in the east side of Mosul and he was a student. Not long after that, Hassan was forced to drop out of school due to a worsening security situation.

'It was a terrifying time for me and my family to live under ISIS control; human rights were meaningless at that time,' said Hassan.

During the Iraqi military operation to retake Mosul city, Hassan and his family fled to Hamam Al-Alil camp 2; he and his family have now spent nearly three years in the camp. The family's house was destroyed in the last conflict, so they could not return to where they came from.

'When we arrived at Hamam Al-Alil camp 2, we found ourselves alone. There were a lot of IDPs and strange people around us from different areas, it was really unsettling and terrifying' said Hassan.

Oxfam's protection team formed a community-based protection committee (CBPC) for male youth in Hamam Al-Alil camp 2, to increase the representation of young people and highlight their issues and concerns.

¹ Name has been changed to protect the person's identity.

As a CBPC member, Hassan was trained on protection principles by Oxfam's protection team. This training aimed to improve the knowledge and skills of committee members on protection as a concept, approach and as a practice. It also covered humanitarian principles.

Hassan was very active in identifying and referring protection cases to Oxfam's protection team, and he participated in many activities such as disseminating information and running awareness-raising sessions.

'One day when I was talking to my friend Kareem, he told me that Oxfam had a community committee for male youth to raise our voice. It was a wonderful idea to me. I said to myself, "finally we have found someone who is willing to listen to us in camp 2, and this is our time to raise our voice";' Hassan said.

Remote community engagement during COVID-19

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Oxfam's protection team were able to conduct face-to-face meetings and trainings for CBPC members in the camp. However, lockdown in the camp prevented us and other NGOs from accessing Hamam Al-Alil camp 2. We were concerned that protection risks could increase due to the lack of NGOs on the ground. At this critical stage, Oxfam's protection team decided to operate remotely with CBPCs to be closer to the IDP community, as well as to maintain a channel through which the CBPC could raise the community's protection concerns for Oxfam to advocate on. To do this, Oxfam's protection team created WhatsApp Business groups for male and female members of the CBPCs.

Oxfam's protection team used safeguarding and safe programming mitigation measures to prevent and mitigate the risks related to sexual exploitation and abuse as well as data protection.

Hassan was an active member of one of these CBPC WhatsApp Business groups, and actively provided the protection team with updated information on concerns related to women and children. He also referred protection cases to Oxfam and other NGOs.

'The WhatsApp group is very useful for us as IDPs here in the camp, at a time when we are all so disconnected and isolated from one another due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The WhatsApp group was the only communication channel for us to raise our concerns and voice. At the same time, we were able to work closely with Oxfam's protection team to address the protection concerns in the camp.'

'The WhatsApp group helped CBPC members get to know each other better and made us more comfortable talking to each other about our concerns. [It] enabled us to have some awareness sessions related to protection and COVID-19, and to disseminate this information within our communities. At the same time, the group helped us to stay in touch with Oxfam's protection team and raise our immediate concerns to make the world outside know about our situation in the camp. We felt that we are not alone,' Hassan said.