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We are very grateful to all the young people who participated in this valuable research. We deeply appreciate the diverse experiences and perspectives that they shared, which form the basis of this report.

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Foreword

With 60% of the population under the age of 25, young Iraqis play a pivotal role in the current and future peace and prosperity of their country. This demographic is at the heart of the British Council in Iraq, working alongside a diverse range of Iraqi partners to build connections, understanding, trust and opportunities through our cultural relations work. We do this through developing education partnerships, supporting English language teaching, learning and assessment, through arts, cultural development and exchange.

One of the main aims of this report, and our approach to developing it, is to support greater voice, visibility and understanding of young Iraqis today, building on 84 years of engagement in enabling them to thrive and make a positive contribution to their communities. Many of these active and inspirational young people have steered this research throughout the process and I express our deep gratitude to all those who took part in this study. Their voices are critical to shaping the future and the deep insight they have provided is invaluable.

The research aims to reflect and represent the breadth of the different lived experiences of Iraqi young people from across the country. This diversity is reflected in the report itself and I encourage readers to engage in the nuance within it. We hope that this report has helped to capture views which might otherwise be unheard and helps to contribute further to discourses that embrace Iraq's rich diversity.

There are, however, some common themes that are shared by young Iraqis from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. Firstly, this is a generation that seems very pragmatic, concerned primarily with financial independence to raise and provide for their family. This pragmatism informs their engagement in civic and political life and their views on global concerns, and where they see the need for change. The challenges they face in securing financial security and meaningful work are complex and multifaceted, but there is strong sense of optimism about their futures and the potential for positive change.

The optimism and pragmatism that the research indicates is an encouraging foundation for all those with a shared interest in supporting a peaceful and prosperous Iraq, and this is second main aim of this work: the contribution this report can make to constructive dialogue and positive change.

Our research partners present conclusions and recommendations, relevant to all with a stake in young people's success, and our hope is that this research is a starting point for further discussion on the areas that young Iraqis have identified as priorities. By bringing the right people together to generate a constructive discourse on the aspirations, opportunities and challenges facing young people today, we can drive opportunities for young Iraqis to fully realise and unleash their potential.

At the British Council, we are committed to making our contribution, working with Iraqi and international partners and from a starting position of mutual support, an appreciation of what are significant challenges but equally of the substantial opportunities of making positive change. Being part of a global initiative, this research also helps to build an understanding of young Iraqi priorities in a global context. I expect many of these will be shared by their peers globally, and equally, many of the lessons and learnings can also draw on the experiences of others.

We hope that this research gives us all the opportunity to stop, think, re-evaluate, and most importantly, listen to and collaborate with young people directly to explore a more sustainable and successful future. My thanks to all those involved in the design and development of this report, and to everyone who engages with and uses the insights in the report to inform their own plans and actions, in ways that work with and for young Iraqis and the generations that follow.

Ben Lawton

Director, British Council Iraq

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Executive summary and recommendations

This report explores the perspectives and experiences of young Iraqis as part of the British Council's global Next Generation research initiative. Through consultations with 1,300 young people aged 18-30 from diverse backgrounds, we aimed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the Next Generation's views. The study sheds light on how young people in Iraq navigate their daily lives, envision their futures, and perceive the state of their country.

The research involved a thorough examination of existing literature, a nationally representative quantitative survey, and qualitative sessions including individual immersion sessions and group deep dives. Throughout the project, input from key stakeholders and youth representatives was gathered through a Next Generation Youth Advisory Board and youth engagement studio sessions.

The research was commissioned by the British Council and conducted by M&C Saatchi World Services with the help of local partner, Thinkbank, and with the input of the British Council team and the Youth Advisory Board.

Summary of findings

Young people are balancing traditional values with the realities of modern life, but there is optimism for the future.

Defined by a collectivist culture, family is a traditional value of Iraqi society, and remains a central aspect of many young Iraqi's lives.[1] Nearly two-thirds of young people (63 per cent) cite family as the biggest influence on their views, and almost three-quarters (73 per cent) consider family members the most trusted sources of information. In line with this, having a family and stable relationship is a key goal for most young Iraqis. Over two-thirds (66 per cent) pointed to family-related factors as pivotal to their personal success and happiness.[2]

However, the realities of modern life are impacting the realisation of these values. Financial security is the top factor for success for young people (44 per cent), with attaining financial security seen as a prerequisite for achieving personal goals such as marriage and starting a family. Poverty, defined as when an individual's material resources are not sufficient to meet their minimum needs (48 per cent) and unemployment (45 per cent) are perceived as the most pressing global challenges. Furthermore, a need for more employment opportunities (52 per cent) is identified as the top personal challenge by young people. This means that the goal of access to financial security (and thus a family) is not without its challenges. Despite these economic considerations, optimism in the country's future is relatively high, with young people feeling particularly optimistic for their future careers (54 per cent) and quality of life (51 per cent). This suggests that despite

current difficulties, there is a strong belief in the potential for positive change and progress, albeit tempered by a large degree of pragmatism. Young people are clear on what they need to achieve this future, including improvements in the education system, and an enabling employment and entrepreneurship environment, explored in the following sections.

Young Iraqis see education as pivotal for societal change but alignment with real-world employment is needed.

Iraq's education sector has also been severely impacted by conflict, displacement, and the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in damaged infrastructure, low teacher training investments, and disrupted learning processes[3]. The educational system's focus on theoretical knowledge and exam grades, rather than practical skills and student interests, inadequately prepares students for the labour market. Improvements in the curriculum (23 per cent) and the quality of teaching (29 per cent) are seen as key by young people. Addressing these issues requires systemic reforms to enhance the quality and relevance of education to better align with market demands.

Poverty and poor quality of life further exacerbate educational challenges, leading to high dropout rates and limited educational attainment, especially in rural areas. Financial constraints and limited opportunities are primary reasons for discontinuing education, with economic pressures often pushing young men into employment prematurely (11 per cent). Gender-specific barriers, including societal and family pressures (15 per

cent), notably hinder young women's educational progress. Despite these obstacles, most young people recognise education as a crucial tool for societal change (77 per cent) and personal growth (70 per cent). However, they feel that the current education system does not adequately prepare them for real-world employment, with only around a third (36 per cent) reporting preparedness, emphasising the need for greater attention to practical skills and career guidance within the current Iraqi education system.

Young Iraqis express a strong desire for skill development in areas like communication, creativity, problem-solving, and digital literacy, which are critical for modern employment, although there are urban/rural variations. They also highlight the importance of learning multiple languages, particularly English (80 per cent), to enhance employability and engage with global cultures. To bridge the gap between education and employment, a holistic approach is necessary.

Unemployment is a major challenge for young people, whereas for those who are employed, low wages and poor working conditions are primary concerns.

Almost three in ten young people (28 per cent) reported currently being unemployed, largely in line with recent 2023 statistics from the World Bank at 32 per cent[4]. Youth employment in Iraq has been noted to be significantly higher than the national average and that of the MENA region[5]. Young men in this research are

significantly more likely to be in paid employment than young women, who are far more likely to be homemakers, especially in rural areas. The pressing need for more employment opportunities, which 52 per cent of young people identify as their biggest challenge, is exacerbated by corruption and nepotism within the state apparatus. Many young Iraqis perceive public sector jobs as inaccessible without connections, while competition for private sector jobs remains intense.

Among employed youth, the most popular sectors include industry, education, professional activities, construction, and agriculture. However, many young people wish to work in different sectors, such as education, gas, oil, and energy, indicating a mismatch

between their current employment and their career aspirations. The limited job market, coupled with a nascent, underdeveloped private sector, offers few meaningful alternatives for young people.

Young Iraqis face numerous challenges in the workplace, including low wages, long hours, and unfair treatment. Low wages are a significant issue for over half of respondents (56 per cent), particularly in peri-urban areas (60 per cent) and the Kurdistan Region (69 per cent). These challenges vary by location and minority status. Urban youth are more likely to face unfavourable working environments and limited career growth opportunities than rural youth. For disabled young people, challenges related to mistreatment and discrimination in employment are more acute, as opposed to common issues for those without disabilities, like low wages and corruption. Despite these obstacles, young Iraqis exhibit high levels of resourcefulness and entrepreneurial ambition, with many seeking alternative forms of employment, such as starting their own businesses and digital employment.

Entrepreneurship offers an alternative to employment, but barriers, especially for young women, persist.

Young people are seeking out alternatives to traditional employment, with six out of ten respondents (60 per cent) expressing an interest in entrepreneurship, viewing entrepreneurship as a solution to the need for more employment opportunities in the labour market and an alternative pathway to self-sufficiency. Promisingly, entrepreneurship presents a key opportunity to include women in the workforce as there is equal appetite for entrepreneurship amongst both young men and women. Additionally, 59 per cent of disabled young people express an appetite for entrepreneurship, viewing it as an alternative employment pathway that allows for adaptation to their condition. Urban residents (62 per cent) show a higher interest in entrepreneurship compared to their rural counterparts (52 per cent), with those in the Kurdistan Region (76 per cent) being particularly keen on starting a business compared to those in North/Western Iraq (46 per cent).

Nevertheless, the primary barrier to entrepreneurship was access to startup funding. While male respondents are more likely to cite funding access as a barrier (44 per cent) than females (33 per cent), it remains the predominant concern for both genders. Women identify

1 Hassan, S. (2015). Change in scores of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions in Iraq by using Individual Level of Measures, a case study of Iraqi Kurds. Change, 7(9), 212-225.

2 Combined statistic of living with a family/Having a family (34 per cent) and getting married/stable relationship (32 per cent).

3 World Bank (2021). Iraq: An Urgent Call for Education Reforms to Ensure Learning for All Children and Boost Human Capital.

4 World Bank (2023). Unemployment, youth total (% of total labour force).

5 International Labour Organisation. (2022). Iraq Labour Force Survey 2021. https://www.ilo.org/publications/iraq-labour-force-survey-2021.

societal constraints (17 per cent), such as family concerns about communication with others, as a significant barrier to entrepreneurship, compared to only three per cent of males. This is true also with societal pressure from family and relatives (30 per cent) which is the second top personal challenge overall, but particularly among young women (35 per cent) compared to men (24 per cent). This pressure often revolves around expectations to marry young, disproportionately affecting young women in marginalised communities.

Desire to emigrate among young Iraqis has increased since 2020.

Young people see emigration as vital for personal and academic development, broadening perspectives, opportunities, and allowing cross-sharing of cultures. Just under half (48 per cent) of young Iraqis would consider moving abroad, with young people from the Kurdistan Region more open to relocation than those in North/Western Iraq. This is a marked increase from previous years, with only two in ten young Iraqis reportedly thinking about emigrating from Iraq in the British Council MENA Youth Survey in 2020. [6]

Canada tops the list of preferred destinations at 16 per cent, followed by Germany (11 per cent) and France (eight per cent). Whilst young people are facing significant challenges in employment opportunities, the top reason these countries are attractive is for their language and culture (30 per cent), reflecting the Iraqi reverence for culture and cultural heritage[7]. Education opportunities closely follow (25 per cent), then employment (15 per cent), and quality of life (13 per cent). Immediate steps for those considering emigrating include focusing on academic excellence, saving money, and building networks through part-time work and online courses.

Climate change is a significant issue, but everyday pressures like unemployment and security overshadow climate concerns.

Unemployment (45 per cent), poverty (48 per cent) and extremism and violence (32 per cent) remained significant global concerns among young Iraqis, stemming from reflections on security issues faced by previous generations in Iraq and discussions about their own futures. There is a clear urban and rural divide on perspectives on global challenges, with urban residents more likely to identify a broader range of global issues, including drug abuse/drug trade, health crises and pandemics (e.g., COVID-19), and erosion of religious values compared to their rural counterparts.

While 44 per cent of young Iraqis express concern about the environmental impact of climate change within their country, only 24 per cent identify it as the most urgent global challenge. Young Iraqis are aware of climate change and its impact on their lives. They acknowledge the interconnectedness of climate change with other pressing issues such as employment and poverty. Air pollution (15 per cent), extreme heat (12 per cent), and desertification (nine per cent) emerge as the most significant climate concerns among young Iraqis. Rural residents particularly highlight desertification (19 per cent) compared to their urban counterparts (six per cent), aligning with research on the disproportionate impact of desertification in rural areas[8]. Water-related issues closely follow (20 per cent) as key climate concerns, with young Iraqis emphasising drought (nine per cent), water scarcity (seven per cent), and flooding (five per cent), and the impacts on livelihoods, access to drinking water, and agriculture as specific concerns connected to the water crisis.

Young Iraqis are disillusioned with the political process, but this does not stop them from making their voice heard.

Half of the sample of young people (50 per cent) believe it is important to engage in national politics, but this varies by region. This aligns with views on climate change mitigation, where young people thought that national (27 per cent) and local governments (20 per cent), should be responsible for action. Among those interested in politics, 20 per cent want their views reflected in political discussions. However, almost four in ten (39 per cent) do not plan to increase their political involvement, something which relates to a disillusionment with the political process. Young people recognise the importance of being politically engaged but are sceptical about the electoral process due to perceptions of unfulfilled promises and systemic issues. In response to this, protest and social media are seen as powerful ways for Iraqi youth to voice concerns and mobilise for change, but some young people hold reservations regarding their security and safety expressing their views online.

Recommendations

The below recommendations are a starting point for all those that are invested in supporting young Iraqi's in overcoming the challenges outlined and attaining the aspirations shared in Next Generation Iraq.

Education and employability skills:

- Build clearer connections between secondary school outcomes and labour market opportunities.
- Provide opportunities for young people to develop job-oriented skills and gain practical work experience.
- Promote quality vocational/technical training routes.
- Address young people's concerns of career readiness.
- nvest in teacher education and leadership.

Entrepreneurship and employment:

- Develop the ecosystem to support young people's entrepreneurial energy and aspirations.
- Improve fairness and transparency in the workplace and accessing the workplace.

Inclusion and accessibility:

- Enhance accessibility in public spaces, workplaces, and educational institutions and accessibility to opportunities and services.
- Enhance inclusion through more consultation and adaptation/adjustments to ways of working.
- Develop specific strategies and approaches to improve opportunities for specific circumstances within Iraq.

Climate action, resilience and greener futures:

- Enhance climate change and sustainability awareness through education.
- Engage young Iraqis involved in environmental advocacy and decision-making on climate action and environmental protection.
- Mainstream climate and environmental sustainability within existing industries and investing in green entrepreneurship.

Constructive, youth-friendly political and civic engagement:

- Create more opportunities for young people to engage with politics and increase youth representation, voice and impact.
- Address concerns with online safety and trustworthiness.

6 British Council. (2020). Youth Perceptions of Hope, Opportunity and Trust in the Middle East & North Africa.

7 Rasheed, Q. (2015). 'The importance of cultural heritage in Iraq', UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000233703

8 Norwegian Refugee Council. (2023). Inadequate and Inequitable: Water scarcity and displacement in Iraq. https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/inadequate-and-inequitable-water-scarcity-and-displacement-in-iraq

Introduction

The British Council's flagship Next Generation series aims to understand the needs, potential, and aspirations of young people globally, and seeks to analyse the conditions that support young people and allow them to reach their potential as fulfilled, productive, and active citizens.

Iraq is blessed with a young and aspiring population. With 60 per cent of Iraqis under 25 years of age and among a growing labour force, there is great potential for them to become the backbone of the economy and fulfil their own aspirations and those of the country. However, the combination of low levels of enrolment and graduation and a labour market that struggles to meet growing demand for employment, means that the benefit of this demographic gift is yet to be fully realised[9].

Against this backdrop there is a real opportunity for organisations – such as the British Council in Iraq – who are dedicated to supporting and engaging its vibrant and growing youth population. Iraqi youth, as we see through a plethora of activist organisations, have serious potential to be agents of positive and meaningful change. With the right level of guidance and support, alongside structural changes, the long-term value they represent to Iraq cannot be underestimated.

So, what are the barriers? And what change do they desire? Faced with numerous challenges that have hindered their social, political, and economic inclusion, young Iraqis have taken it upon themselves to ensure that their voices are heard through popular pressure, working to increase political awareness, engaging with civil society, and through entrepreneurship.[10]

Yet there is much work still to be done. The discontinuation of the humanitarian cluster system and the transition away from a post-conflict context towards durable solutions, stabilisation, and sustainable development reflects a new period for Iraq. However, the humanitarian situation continues to be characterised by instability, protracted internal displacement,

insufficient public services, as well as inadequate shelter and housing[11]. Endemic corruption, a restricted civic space, and limited access to justice have further disengaged some Iraqi youth. [12]

Moreover, the grievances that left Iraq at the centre of sectarian conflicts have not yet been resolved, while the impact of climate change becomes ever more pronounced across the region. Therefore, the next few years will be pivotal in determining if Iraq's future trajectory and efforts have been made to bring youth to the forefront of events. In February 2024, Iraq's Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani unveiled a 'Youth Ambassadors' programme, a government initiative connecting young people with policymakers for more effective policy making. [13]

Iraq is undergoing significant transformation, and young people have demonstrated a strong desire for progress and change despite scepticism regarding the direct impact of their civic and political participation. [14] Access to reliable information, greater employment opportunities and top-class education, empowering young people to make active, meaningful, and informed decisions are both crucial and feasible to achieve. [15]

Next Generation Iraq thus provides an excellent, timely opportunity to uncover the experiences, motivations, and aspirations of young Iraqis. Since 2009, the Next Generation research programme has equipped not just the British Council, but national governments, multilaterals, youth-focused non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) operating in a diverse set of countries, to understand the needs and aspirations of young people. Next Generation Iraq also provides young people with a platform to tell their own stories in their own voices to better shape the policies intended to support them.

Specifically, the research explored:

- Values and influences: What cultural, societal, and familial elements shape the values and beliefs of young people in Iraq? How are these values reflected in different areas of their lives?

- Youth voice: To what extent do young people in Iraq feel empowered to engage in decision-making processes that impact them? Are their voices acknowledged and considered by their communities and society? How does this intersect with marginalised voices in society, such as disabled young people, young women and those who are internally displaced? What opportunities do they have to drive change?

- Key concerns and challenges: What are the most urgent challenges facing young people in Iraq today? How do these issues affect their daily lives and their prospects? How do they perceive and manage these issues?

- Support and solutions: What types of support and assistance do young people need from their immediate environment and the wider Iraqi society to achieve their aspirations? What solutions do they suggest for overcoming the obstacles they face in reaching their goals?

In the context of Next Generation Iraq specifically, based on the landscape analysis and initial discussions with stakeholders, there was a particular focus on matters relating to climate change and environmental crises, barriers affecting marginalised voices and their role in their communities, and the impact of social media for young people and their ability to express their views, youth voice and choice.

9 ILO Working Paper (2023). The Cost of Inaction: Education Deprivation in Iraq and the Potential of Social Protection to Reverse It.

10 Chatham House (2022). The aspirations and disillusionment of Iraq's youth. https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/aspirations-and-disillusionment-iraqs-youth.

11 International Organisation for Migration. (2024). Iraq Crisis Response Plan 2024. https://crisisresponse.iom.int/response/iraq-crisis-response-plan-2024.

12 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2022). Youth in Iraq. https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/20070-20230223.pdf.

13 Iraqi News Agency. (2024). Prime Minister's Advisor: Training youth creates future leaders with influence. Prime Minister's advisor: Training youth creates future leaders with influence " Iraqi News Agency (ina.iq).

14 Chatham House (2022). The aspirations and disillusionment of Iraq's youth. https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/aspirations-and-disillusionment-iraqs-youth.

15 Meften, A.Q., FES MENA youth study: Results analysis. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Iraq Office, December 2022. http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/20070-20230223.pdf

Report Overview

The next sections will discuss the methodology used, the analytical framework, and provide a brief overview of the young people in this research. The report is organised into four key sections. It begins with Chapter 1, which provides an in-depth look at the demographic profiles of young Iraqis today, exploring how their beliefs, values, and practices shape their current lives and future aspirations.

In Chapter 2, we set the scene for the lived experiences and perceptions of global and personal challenges faced by young people in Iraq, detailing what they feel they need to overcome these obstacles. Chapter 3 then examines the educational, employment, and civic pathways available to young Iraqis, highlighting the barriers and enablers they identify within these areas.

Finally, Chapter 4 concludes the report by combining our insights with ideas from young people and translates them into practical policy recommendations for change. Throughout the report, we provide an intersectional analysis of demographic differences among key groups, including gender, disability status, region, urbanity, and employment and education status.

Methodology

Landscape analysis

To firmly ground the research in existing knowledge and work on the attitudes, aspirations, and behaviours of young people in Iraq, including differences by ethnicity, gender, disability, socio-economic grouping and by geography, we conducted a rapid literature review and three key informant interviews with young leaders. Key studies, reports, and commentary were consulted, such as – but by no means limited to – the World Bank's 2020 Iraq: Engaging Youth to Rebuild the Social Fabric in Baghdad, UNICEF's 2022 Recovering learning: Are children and youth on track in skills development?, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung's 2022 Youth in Iraq, and British Council's Youth Perceptions of Hope, Opportunity and Trust in the MENA region, 2020[16]. We also leveraged findings from our partner, Thinkbank's Annual Panel Survey, which tracks socio-political trends, employment, conflict-related and other youth issues annually[17].

National representative quantitative survey

Informed by the evidence gaps and insights from the Phase 1 Landscape analysis, the national survey captured key data points on young people's outlooks, priorities, aspirations, and perceived barriers to success.

With our local partner Thinkbank, we conducted a mixed-method Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) and face-to-face Computer Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI) approach sample survey. Our sample size is n-1,268 respondents, which includes a national sample of n-1,000 and a separate boost sample of n-200 with marginalised youth groups. This sample size provides accurate national estimates with a margin of error of under +/- five per cent at 95 per cent confidence level. Most of the sample (60 per cent) was conducted using CAWI (n-837) targeting urban young people online, with the boost sample and rural sample conducted face-to-face (n-431). Trim weighting was applied to ensure final data was nationally representative for ethnicity, religion, disability, and displacement.

Politics continues to be a very polarised and a sensitive topic in Iraq; due to this, nine questions related to voting that are standard to Next Generation research were excluded from the survey. Despite these limitations, the remaining questions provide valuable insights into youth perceptions and attitudes towards political engagement.

16 World Bank. 2020. Iraq: Engaging Youth to Rebuild the Social Fabric in Baghdad https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/12/02/iraq-engaging-youth-to-rebuild-the-social-fabric-in-baghdad, ; UNICEF. (2022). The Education Commission and UNICEF Education and Adolescent Development Programme Group. https://www.unicef.org/reports/recovering-learning.; Meften, A.Q., (2022). 'FES MENA youth study: Results analysis'. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Iraq Office, http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/20070-20230223.pdf.; British Council. (2020). Youth Perceptions of Hope, Opportunities and Trust in MENA

17 Thinkbank. (2021). Iraq Consumer Panel Survey. thinkbankiraq.com/iraq-consumer-2020/.

Qualitative deep dive

Immersion sessions

Building on the insights gleaned from the previous phases and the themes identified for further exploration in the Youth Engagement Studio Sessions (see below), 12 one-on-one immersion sessions were conducted with young people aged 18-30. These sessions included young women living in rural areas, ethnic and religious minorities, and internally displaced people across Iraq. The purpose of these one-on-one sessions was to delve deeper into sensitive topics in a space where participants felt more comfortable sharing their real perspectives. This included a participatory photography pre-task exercise that was examined further in the discussion. This ethnographic approach emphasised building trust and understanding between researchers and participants and the pursuit of a holistic understanding of participants as situated within their cultural context.

Group deep-dives

To complement the individual immersion sessions, we conducted six group deep dive sessions with specific segments of Iraqi youth to support the exchange of ideas among young Iraqis. Through the sharing of thoughts and experiences, participants created a synergistic effect that led to a deeper understanding and more comprehensive insights. The deep dives leveraged a combination of direct questioning, vignettes, and the participatory action research (PAR) approach to produce valuable insights into the lives and perceptions of young people in Iraq.

Youth engagement studio sessions

We also hosted youth engagement studio sessions, guided workshops in which young people themselves came together to interrogate the research stimulus and findings collaboratively. These workshops helped iterate the insight generation process by putting back the collaborative outputs and recommendations into research for further refinement, testing and validation. They consisted of eight participants: four young researchers from British Council's previous programme in Iraq, and four youth leaders who are active in different sectors, such as peacebuilding, entrepreneurship, climate, and women's rights. We included young leaders from minority backgrounds, such as Turkmen, Christian and Yazidi. Workshops were led by a senior youth moderator from Thinkbank's moderation team with at least five years of experience

in leading participatory workshops with young people aged 18-30.

Youth Advisory Board (YAB)

Based on a stakeholder mapping exercise conducted as part of the inception phase by Thinkbank and M&CSWS, in collaboration with the British Council, key stakeholders were identified and onboarded to the Youth Advisory Board (YAB). These stakeholders included key youth networks, young leaders, youth activists, government partners, policymakers, and development actors with high degrees of interest and influence over youth issues. Throughout the research process, consultative workshops were held with the YAB at two key junctures to get their input and feedback on the findings. The YAB acted both to guide and sense check the research throughout.

Analytical framework

This Next Generation study goes beyond gathering young people's perceptions; it aims to explore the interconnected nature of profiles, perceptions, and pathways for young people. It begins with Profiles to understand who young people in Iraq are, what their values and beliefs are towards societal dynamics and national identity, and how they access information.

Transitioning to youth Perceptions, the report sheds light on their attitudes towards global issues, personal challenges, disability as a prevalent area in Iraq, as well as how they exercise their voice on climate. This understanding serves as the foundation for navigating the various pathways available to young people for personal and professional growth.

Finally, the analysis progresses to Pathways, building upon the insights gleaned from perceptions, and exploring education, employment opportunities, and civic engagement of young people in Iraq. By analysing the institutional frameworks and infrastructure supporting youth development and the potential barriers, it highlights the critical role played by factors like digital literacy, education, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement in empowering the youth.

Young people in this research

For the purposes to this research, 'young people' and 'young Iraqis' are defined as those who are 18 to 30 years old, currently living in Iraq. The nationally representative survey covered ten governorates in Iraq, to ensure representations of three geographical regions of Iraq:

• Northern and Western governorates

• Southern governorates, plus Baghdad

• Kurdistan Governorates

The sample contains quotas reflecting national statistics for characteristics of age group and gender, with characteristics such as marital status, disability, or socio-economic status according to natural fallout. Specific governorates were selected to represent ethnic and religious diversity, major conurbations, distinct rural cultures, centres of religion and recent political unrest. For regional analysis, the following groupings were made:

Table 1: Regional groupings

Area	Area Province
Northern and Western governorates	Ninawa
	Al Anbar
	Salah ad Din
	Kirkuk [18]
Southern governorates, plus Baghdad	Al Basrah
	Dhi Qar
	An Najaf
	Baghdad
Kurdistan Governorates	Arbil
	As Sulaymaniyah

Throughout the report, references to areas of Iraq made for analysis are under the following shorthand labels: 'Northern/Western Iraq', 'Southern Iraq' and 'Kurdistan Region'. Any significant variations by province are explicitly noted where relevant.

Throughout the report, references to income levels for analysis are based on the categorisation below: 'lower income bracket', 'middle income bracket' and 'upper income bracket'.

Table 2: Income bracket categorisation

Income bracket category	Monthly income
Lower Income Bracket	0 - 499,000 IQD
Middle Income Bracket	500,000 – 999,999 IQD
Upper income bracket	1,000,000 IQD or more

18 The ethnically mixed Governorate of Kirkuk was included to allow for some representation of Kurdish youth from outside the Kurdistan Region.

1. Profiles

Understanding the demographic profiles of young people in Iraq is fundamental for developing comprehensive strategies to address their diverse needs. Iraq's demographic landscape is complex, shaped by factors such as conflict, displacement, and a significant population of disabled persons. Embedded within this context are deeply ingrained cultural values like family, generosity, and humility, which continue to influence the identities and experiences of Iraqi youth[19].

As they navigate traditional expectations and modern lifestyles, young Iraqis are also increasingly engaged online, reflecting both the opportunities and challenges of an evolving digital landscape. Against this backdrop, this chapter examines how Iraqi youth's values, beliefs, and demographic characteristics intersect with their digital profiles, shedding light on experiences in both the physical and virtual world. Through a comprehensive exploration of these interconnected aspects, this chapter aims to provide insights into the multifaceted lives of young people in Iraq and inform strategies for supporting their holistic development.

19 Embassy of the Republic of Iraq. (2024). Iraq's Art and Culture. https://www.iraqiembassy.us/page/art-and-culture#:~:text=There%20are%20many%20values%20that,women%2C%20especially%20those%20with%20children.

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Photo credit: Khezez/Pexels

1.1   Demographic profiles

Iraq's demographic landscape is uniquely characterised by a significant population of internally displaced persons alongside one of the largest populations of disabled persons globally, reflecting the enduring impact of conflict, displacement, and humanitarian crises on the country's social fabric[20]. In addition to the three major groups – Sunni Arabs, Shia Arabs, and Sunni Kurds, themselves minorities in certain geographic areas – there are many other minority ethno-religious groups, including Turkmen Shias, Shabak Shias, Yazidis and Christians. [21]

Iraq is one of the most youthful countries in the world. 60 per cent of Iraqis are currently 25 years or younger, with a population growing at 2.5 per cent a year, faster than the 1.3 per cent World Bank average for the MENA region[22]. Most young Iraqis were therefore not born during the Saddam era and are too young to remember the 2003 US-led invasion. Together they represent a diverse patchwork of identities, beliefs, experiences, and perceptions which are crucial to understanding the makeup of modern Iraq.

Key findings:

- In recent years, Iraq has faced a substantial influx of internally displaced persons and returnees due to decades of conflict, humanitarian crises, and climate change. Over one million Iraqis remain internally displaced, while five million IDPs have returned to their areas of origin. 12 per cent of the Next Generation sample were returnees, and five per cent were internally displaced.
- In 2019, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stated that Iraq has one of the largest populations of disabled persons in the world. As such, young disabled persons were included as part of the boost sample in the Next Generation survey, making up 12 per cent of the overall sample.
- Most young people (57 per cent) lived in urban areas of the country, 22 per cent in rural areas and 21 per cent in peri-urban areas. Iraq has faced significant

urbanisation over the years as a result of displacement, resulting in challenging living conditions.

- Most of the sample lived in Southern Iraq (52 per cent), followed by North/Western Iraq (30 per cent), and finally the Kurdistan Region (18 per cent).

1.1.1   Significant population of internally displaced persons

Iraq has experienced significant demographic shifts due to decades of conflict, displacement, and humanitarian crises. [23] In recent years, the country has faced a substantial influx of internally displaced persons and returnees, adding layers of complexity to its demographic landscape. [24] Additionally, natural hazards like floods, droughts, and earthquakes frequently displace people from their homes. [25] Over one million Iraqis remain internally displaced, while five million internally displaced people have returned to their areas of origin. There are 25 internally displaced persons' camps in the Kurdistan Region, hosting around 180,000 individuals.[26]

Many young Iraqis have experienced displacement multiple times, disrupting their education, livelihoods, and social networks. [27] To ensure that their voices are heard, this study purposively sampled young people who are either internally displaced, or are returnees. As such, 12 per cent of the sample are returnees, and five per cent are internally displaced.

While some internally displaced people remain displaced in the long-term, others are able to return home, with a clear difference found between rural and urban settings and regional groups. In our sample those living in rural areas are more likely to be returnees (21 per cent in rural vs ten per cent in urban), and North/Western Iraq has the highest percentage of returnees (33 per cent or 82 per cent of all returnees in the sample) and internally displaced people (ten per cent or 61 per cent of all internally displaced people in the sample).

Looking at their demographic differences, internally displaced people exhibit significant differences when it comes to their age, relationship statuses, and geography. Internally displaced people are overall older than the rest of the populations with 65 per cent falling into the 25-30 age bracket compared to 48 per cent of those who are not. They are less likely to be single (34 per cent vs 59 per cent) and more likely to be married (56 per cent vs 35 per cent). Annex Two provides an overview of the key issues affecting young people who have been internally displaced in our survey.

1.1.2   Iraq has one of the largest populations of disabled persons in the world

Another particularly salient aspect of Iraq's demographic profile is the prevalence of disability among young people. In 2019, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stated that Iraq has one of the largest populations of disabled persons in the world. [28] The country's notable rate of disability stems from various factors such as conflict-related injuries and a need for greater healthcare, rehabilitation and support services. [29] Disabilities can further compound the challenges faced by young people, hindering their ability to access education, employment, and social inclusion. [30] Given this context, disabled young people were included as part of the boost sample in the Next Generation survey, making up 12 per cent of the overall sample. Significant issues affecting disabled young people are explored further in Annex Two. For example, the absence of an enabling environment and accessibility for disabled persons in employment was cited as a key issue. As such, pathways like entrepreneurism are increasingly seen as a viable path for disabled persons, with almost six in ten (59 per cent) disabled young persons reporting an interest in starting a business in the next five years.

20 International Organisation for Migration. (2021). Persons with disabilities and their representative organisations in Iraq: Barriers, Challenges, and Priorities. https://iraq.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1316/files/documents/OPDs%20report%20English.pdf.

21 International Organisation for Migration Iraq. (2019). Understanding Ethno-Religious Groups in Iraq: Displacement and Return. https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/understanding_ethno-religious_groups_in_iraq.pdf

22 UNICEF. (2019). MENA Generation 2030. https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/4141/file/MENA-Gen2030.pdf.

23 Courbage, Y. (2022). 'The recent Iraqi demography: Between demographic transition and ethno-confessional differences'. CFRI. https://cfri-irak.com/en/article/the-recent-iraqi-demography-between-demographic-transition-and-ethno-confessional-differences-2022-06-27.

24 Internal displacement monitoring centre. (2023). Country Profile Iraq. https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/iraq/; An internally displaced person is one who has been forced to leave their home in Iraq and still live within Iraq. A returnee is someone who has returned to Iraq after having lived abroad or they have returned to their home after being internally displaced.

25 Internal displacement monitoring centre. (2023). Country Profile Iraq. https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/iraq/.

26 UNHCR. (2023). Iraq Operation. https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/irq#:~:text=Over%201%20million%20Iraqis%20remain,1%2C%20hosting%20around%20180%2C000%20individuals.

27 Norwegian Refugee Council. (2022). Iraq: Repeated displacement causes trauma among a third of children. https://www.nrc.no/news/2022/september/iraq-repeated-displacement-causes-trauma-among-a-third-of-children/#:~:text=IRAQ%3A%20Repeated%20displacement%20causes%20trauma%20among%20a%20third%20of%20children.-Published%2006.&text=One%20in%20three%20children%20who,Refugee%20Council%20(NRC)%20shows.

28 International Organisation for Migration. (2021). Persons with disabilities and their representative organisations in Iraq: Barriers, Challenges, and Priorities. https://iraq.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1316/files/documents/OPDs%20report%20English.pdf.

29 International Organisation for Migration. (2021). Persons with disabilities and their representative organisations in Iraq: Barriers, Challenges, and Priorities. https://iraq.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1316/files/documents/OPDs%20report%20English.pdf.

30 UNHRC Iraq. (2022). On International Day of Persons with Disabilities, the UN calls for strengthened efforts to ensure an inclusive society in Iraq. https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/international-day-persons-disabilities-un-calls-strengthened-efforts-ensure-inclusive-society-iraq-enarku.

1.1.3 Navigating gender realities

For young women, there has been progress on women's rights in Iraq, but further work is needed for gender equality. According to UN Women Iraq data, 28 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 years old were married or in a union before the age of 18. [31] Additionally, women and girls aged ten+ reportedly spend 24 per cent of their time on unpaid care and domestic work, compared to four per cent spent by men. [32] From the sample size of 1,268 young people in the Next Generation survey, 49 per cent were males and 51 per cent females to ensure gender balance. Qualitative discussion also guaranteed representation from young women, with the inclusion of women only group discussions. Annex Two explores the variations by gender, and the issues affecting young women in Iraq today.

1.1.4 Increasing urbanisation

Most young people in our sample (57 per cent) lived in urban areas of the country, 22 per cent in rural areas and 21 per cent in peri-urban areas. This is aligned with broader patterns of urbanisation in Iraq which has witnessed significant urbanisation since the 1930s, where only 25 per cent of Iraq's population previously lived in urban areas. This figure rose to 71 per cent of the overall population in 2020 due to rural to urban migration, forced migration, and internal displacement due to conflicts and war. [33] Of the 71 per cent of Iraqis residing in cities in 2020, most were poor, unemployed, and experienced water, electricity, and housing shortages. [34] The effects of this on young people is further explored in Chapter 2: Perceptions 'Access to basic services'.

Most of our sample lived in Southern Iraq (52 per cent), followed by North/Western Iraq (30 per cent), and finally the Kurdistan Region (18 per cent). The extent of the population living in rural areas was uneven throughout the regions, with the Kurdistan Region having a larger proportion of respondents in rural areas (30 per cent vs 19 per cent in Southern Iraq and 24 per cent in North/Western Iraq) (see Figure 1). Details on variances by urban/rural and by region are explored in Annex Two.

31 UN Women Data. (2022). Women Count: Iraq. https://data.unwomen.org/country/iraq.

32 UN Women Data. (2022). Women Count: Iraq. https://data.unwomen.org/country/iraq.

33 Hassan, M. K. R. (2023). Factors Affecting Urbanisation in Iraq: A Historical Analysis from 1921 to the Present. Urbanisation, 8(1), 61-78. https://doi.org/10.1177/24557471231169386.

34 Fordham, A. (2021). In Iraq's 'dire' economy, poverty is rising—and so are fears of instability. NPR.

Figure 1: Percentage of young people in the sample by urbanicity and region
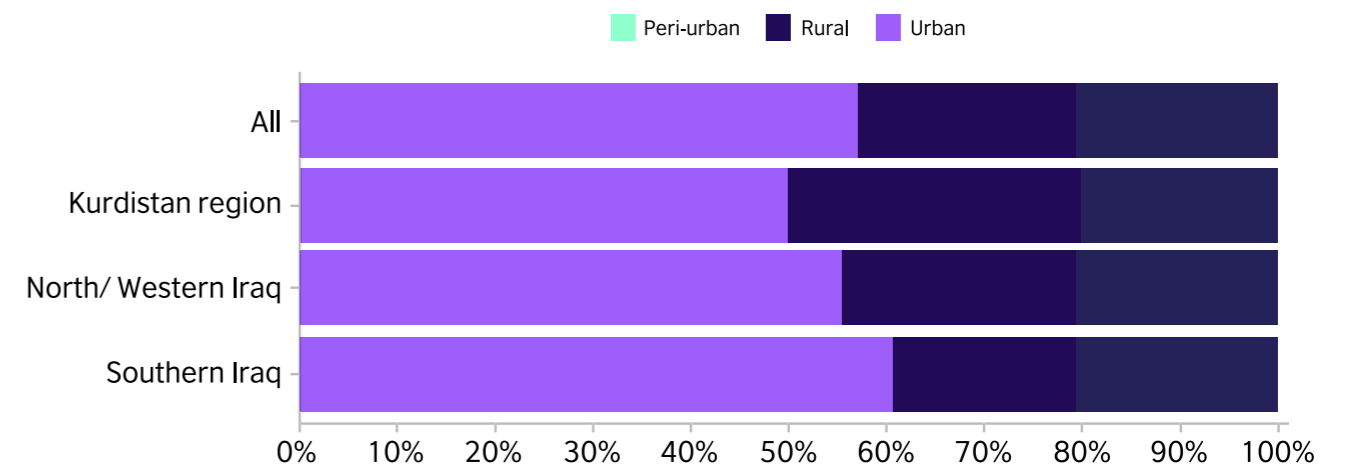
1.1.5 Mixed educational and employment profiles

n terms of the employment and educational profiles of young people, only 13 per cent are in full-time employment. Just under a third (31 per cent) of young people are currently students, with two in ten (24 per cent) unemployed and looking for a job (Figure 2).

There are high levels of educational attainment across the sample, with one-third (33 per cent) achieving bachelor's degrees or equivalent. Only nine per cent of young people received less than primary education, with 19 per cent having completed post-secondary non-tertiary level (Figure 3).

Efforts to address the needs of young people in Iraq must consider these demographic complexities and disparities. Stakeholders, including government agencies, humanitarian organisations, and civil society, should collaborate to develop holistic interventions that promote education, employment, social inclusion, and gender equality, ensuring that the voices and concerns of all young Iraqis, including disabled persons and young women, are heard and addressed effectively. Annex Two provides useful overviews of the key issues affecting these key segments of society, to allow for targeted interventions.

Understanding the demographic profiles of young people in Iraq is intricately connected to their values and beliefs, as these factors shape their identities, experiences, and perspectives within the cultural, social, and religious contexts of the country. The next section explores how these values and beliefs manifest.
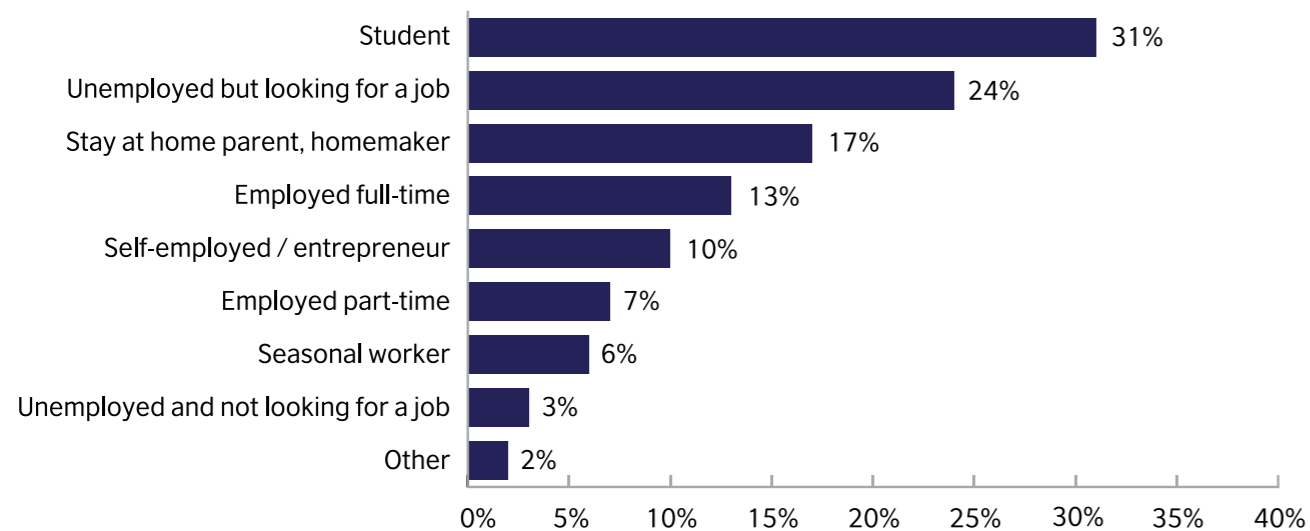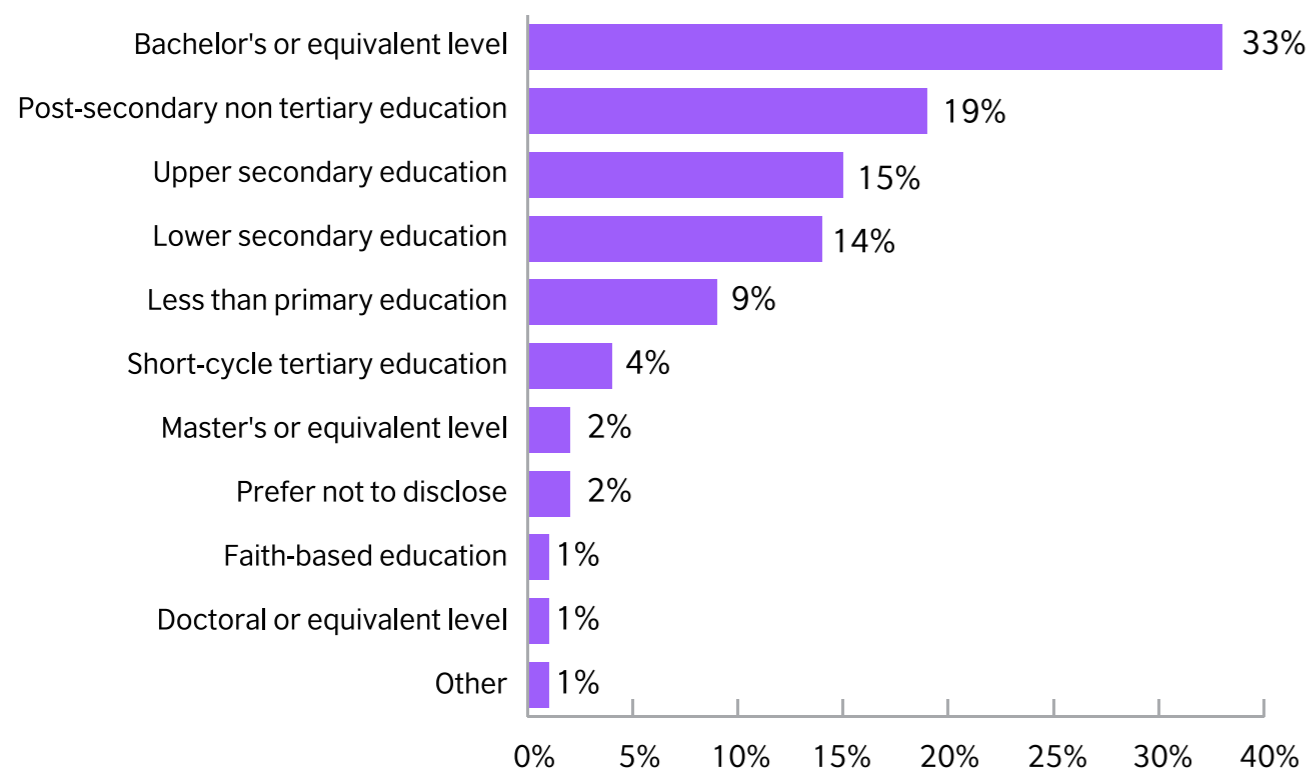
Figure 2: Percentage of young people by occupation

Figure 3: Percentage of young people by educational attainment

1.2   Youth beliefs and values

Iraq has one of the world's oldest cultural histories and boasts a rich heritage. [35] Values like family, generosity, and humility are key to the Iraqi identity. [36] Connected by cultural heritage, a common culture and a common history, people in Iraq have a strong sense of belonging in society. Indeed, 'within the context of self-discovery in Iraq, cultural heritage has helped to define who Iraqis are, where they are now, and who they were in the past'. [37]Defined by a collectivist culture, young people in Iraq are striving to balance these traditional values with the realities of modern life, navigating the challenges and opportunities of a rapidly changing world while maintaining a strong sense of community and identity.[38]

Key findings:

- Financial security (44 per cent), living with or having a family (34 per cent), and having a stable relationship (32 per cent) were the top three factors for young Iraqis when considering personal success and happiness. However, preferences varied by region.
- Family is incredibly important to young Iraqis in various ways. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (63 per cent) cited family as the biggest influence on their views, with differences observed across regions.
- Aside from financial security and family, travelling (31 per cent) and having a wide array of life experiences (31 per cent) were also considered significant factors for happiness by young Iraqis. Gender differences were observed, with women (36 per cent) valuing travelling more than men (27 per cent), while men placed greater emphasis on experiencing a variety of life experiences.
- The majority of young Iraqis are proud to be a citizen of Iraq, with only eight per cent reporting that they were not proud of their nationality, a sentiment which was highest in the Kurdistan Region (22 per cent). National pride among young Iraqis is
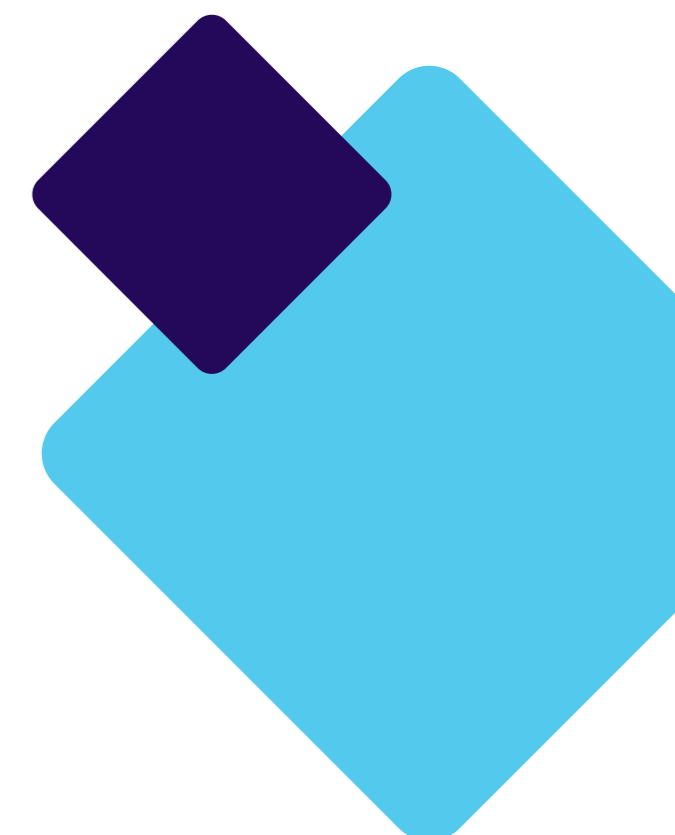
associated with various cultural aspects, including language (37 per cent) and history (23 per cent).

1.2.1   Family holds a crucial role for young Iraqis, but future aspirations to have their own family is contingent upon achieving financial security

In Iraq's collectivist society, individuals often perceive themselves to be members of a 'group', be that a family, extended family, or extended relationships. These groups typically expect strong loyalty, offering individuals a sense of belonging, protection, and unity in return. [39] This means that family is a central aspect of many young Iraqi's lives. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (63 per cent) noted that family was the biggest influence on their views, though this was lower in Southern Iraq (58 per cent) compared with other regions (the Kurdistan Region - 74 per cent, and North/ Western Iraq - 68 per cent) (Figure 4).

35 Embassy of the Republic of Iraq. (2024). Iraq's Art and Culture. https://www.iraqiembassy.us/
page/art-and-culture#:~:text=There%20are%20many%20values%20that,women%2C%20
especially%20those%20with%20children.

36 Embassy of the Republic of Iraq. (2024). Iraq's Art and Culture. https://www.iraqiembassy.us/
page/art-and-culture#:~:text=There%20are%20many%20values%20that,women%2C%20
especially%20those%20with%20children.

37 Rasheed, Q. (2015). 'The importance of cultural heritage in Iraq', UNESCO. https://unesdoc.
unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000233703.

38 Hassan, S. (2015). Change in scores of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions in Iraq by using
Individual Level of Measures, a case study of Iraqi Kurds. Change, 7(9), 212-225.

39 Hassan, S. (2015). Change in scores of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions in Iraq by using
Individual Level of Measures, a case study of Iraqi Kurds. Change, 7(9), 212-225.

Figure 4: Who influences your views the most
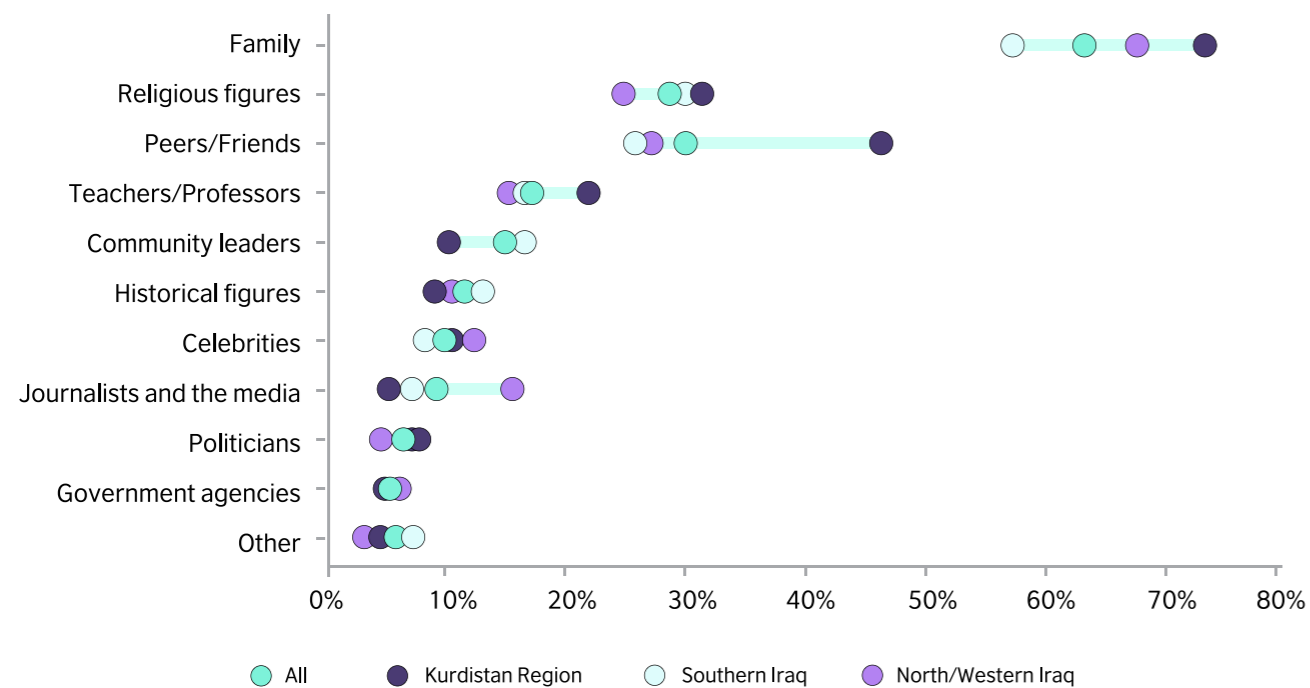
Family is also seen as a major goal for young Iraqis, viewed as a source of happiness, fulfilment, and stability by over half of respondents (56 per cent). [40] However, desires to start a family are tempered by aspirations for economic security and personal goals such as education and employment. For example, the top three factors for personal success and happiness among young people are financial security (44 per cent), living with or having a family (34 per cent), getting married or having a stable relationship (32 per cent) (Figure 6). This aligns with the Hofstede assessment of the Masculinity vs. Femininity scale of Iraqi society. [41] Iraq's score indicates the existence of cultural values such as competition and success, achievement, and control balanced with the more consensus-oriented values of Iraqi society.

Young people in focus group discussions and priority mapping exercises (see Figure 5) identified financial stability as the main barrier to starting a family, particularly for young men who are waiting until they can afford to leave home.

'A shortage of financial resources can act as a barrier for individuals in pursuing relationships and marriage with the ones they love. Financial constraints may hinder people from fulfilling their desire to build a life together, as they may face challenges in affording essential expenses such as housing, healthcare, and daily necessities. …. In such circumstances, individuals may find themselves postponing or forgoing marriage until they feel more financially secure.' (Male Respondent, Dhi Qar).

'Perhaps some individuals aren't financially secure or emotionally prepared for marriage. Nowadays, some girls may marry without asking for much, which can make things easier for the boy. However, it's important for boys to realise that marriage brings expenses and responsibilities.' (Female Respondent, Kirkuk).

However, importantly, young people are optimistic about the likelihood of achieving these aims, with 67 per cent of young people believing that getting married or having a stable relationship was achievable, and 80 per cent thinking that living with or having a family was achievable.

Figure 5: Priorities exercise and translation (Male Respondent, Al Anbar).

	المستقبل	السنة القادمة	الآن

Now/Presently	Next year	Future
"Earning enough money to secure my future"	"Growing my businesses [business]"	"Creating [having] a family."
"Marriage"		
"Traveling to other countries"		

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40 Referring to living with or having a family, and/or getting married. This was not uniformly distributed across Iraq. For example, living with or having a family was more important to those in the Kurdistan Region in northern Iraq (47 per cent) than this in southern Iraq (30 per cent) or those in North/Western Iraq (34 per cent).
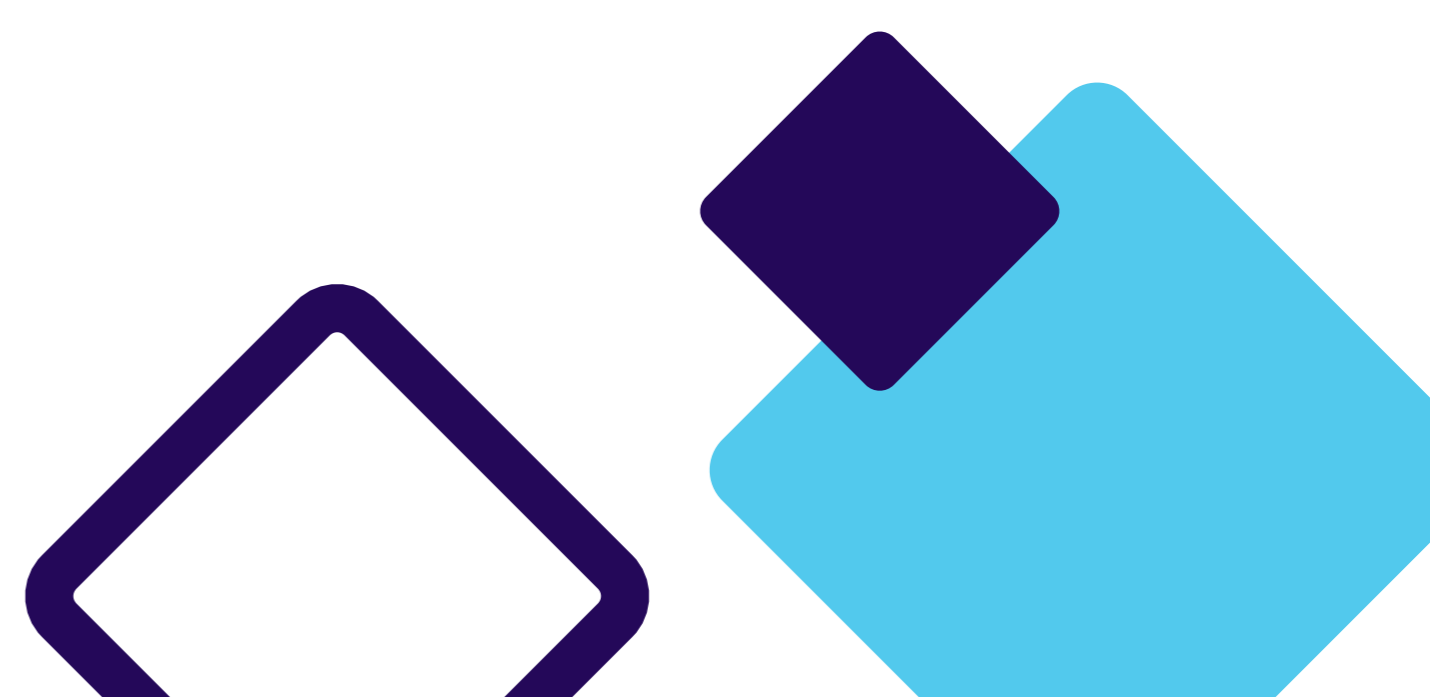
41 The Culture Factor. (2024). Country Comparison Tool. https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-tool?countries=iraq.

1.2.2 Young people value diverse life experiences and personal ambitions

While young Iraqis embody many of the historic cultural values of past generations, they are also living in an era where they can experience improved access to travel, foreign commodities, and a rapidly evolving digital landscape. Exposure to modern influences that may challenge the traditional values of their parent's generations undoubtedly plays into shaping their desires for the values outlined below.

More broadly, travelling (31 per cent), having a wide array of life experiences (31 per cent), living independently (29 per cent) and job satisfaction (29 per cent) are also important factors for young people (see Figure 6).

Young women (36 per cent) are more likely to aspire to travel than young men (27 per cent). However, the inverse was true for having a wide array of life experience. Over a third (35 per cent) of men reported this as important, compared to 27 per cent of women. There are also differences between those living in urban areas, 34 per cent of whom said having a wide array of life experiences was important compared to 22 per cent of those in rural areas. This shows that people in urban areas seem to be exposed to a wider range of experiences or values than their rural counterparts.

However, young people are keenly aware of the need for financial security before they can pursue these endeavours and raised these issues during focus group discussions and the priorities exercises, where travel was often categorised as a future aspiration, with financial security being their primary focus (see Figure 7). Further, one-third of young people (33 per cent) felt that travelling was not achievable for them, highlighting the need for more opportunities for young people to be able to achieve financial security.

'My goal is to accumulate sufficient savings to secure my financial future while dedicating the remainder to travel and participation in exhibitions that enhance my skills and expertise in my profession.' (Female Respondent, Baghdad).
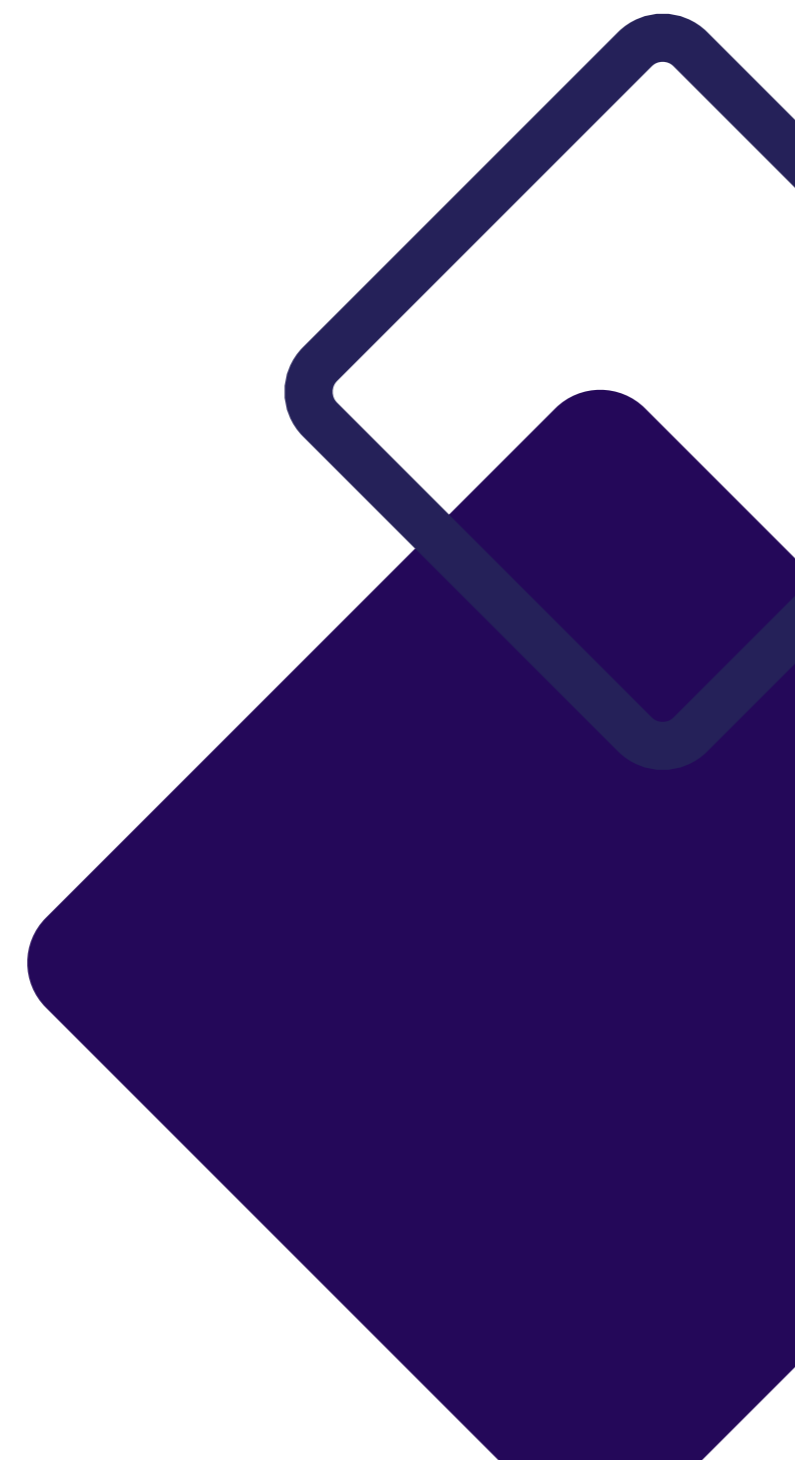
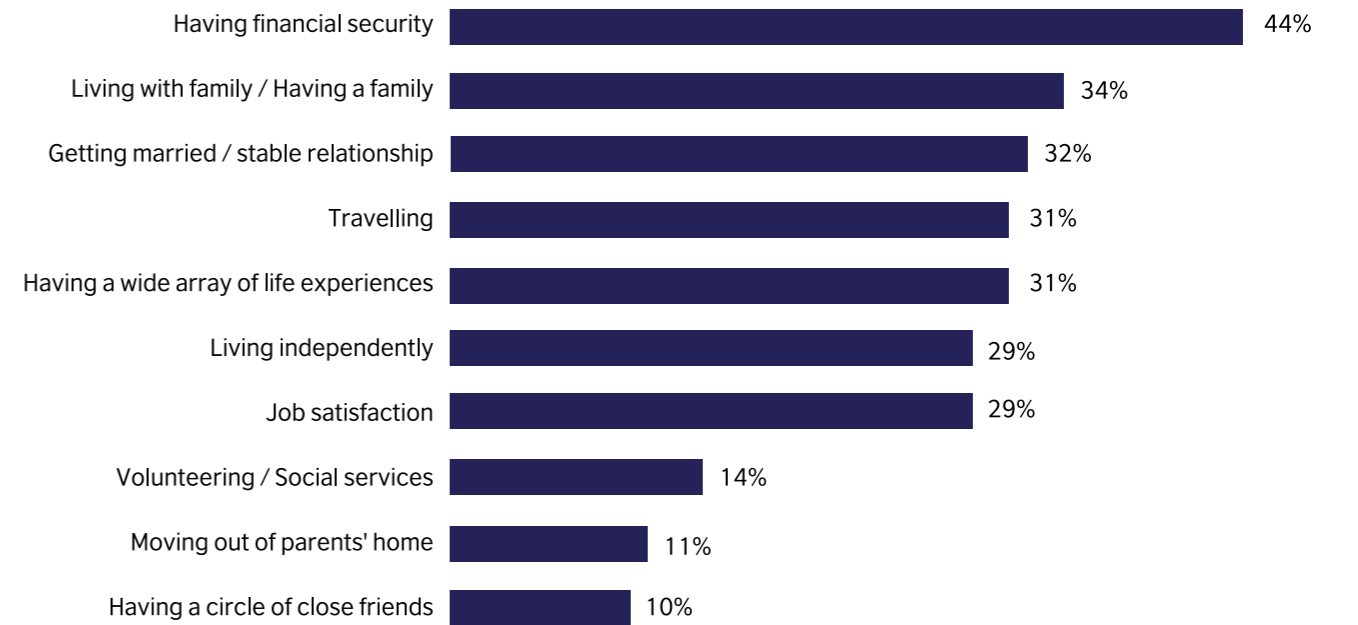Figure 6: Percentage of factors important to personal success/happiness

Factor	Percentage
Having financial security	44%
Living with family / Having a family	34%
Getting married / stable relationship	32%
Travelling	31%
Having a wide array of life experiences	31%
Living independently	29%
Job satisfaction	29%
Volunteering / Social services	14%
Moving out of parents' home	11%
Having a circle of close friends	10%

Figure 7: Priorities exercise and translation (Male Respondent, Baghdad).

Now/Presently	Next year	Future
"Enjoy life"	"Graduating from college [university]" "Working" [Employment]	"Traveling outside of Iraq"

This highlights the balance young people are trying to strike between their aspirations and practical realities. Additionally, the differences observed based on gender and urban-rural divide suggest that tailored approaches may be needed to support young people in fulfilling their aspirations while addressing their unique

1.2.3 Young people are proud to be Iraqi and of their cultural heritage, but this fluctuates across regions and outlook on life

When considering how young people feel about the country they live in, 88 per cent of young people expressed a variety of sources of pride, as detailed in figure 8. Language, history, and religion in particular were expressed as key aspects young people are proud of as part of their citizenship. Southern Iraq was more likely to be proud of language (41 per cent) and history (29 per cent, especially compared to the Kurdistan Region at five per cent) than other regions. Female respondents (ten per cent) are slightly more inclined to associate 'your family' with pride in their citizenship compared to men (six per cent).

Further, there are links between levels of pride and one's outlook on life. For example, young people are less likely to be proud of their citizenship if they are pessimistic about their future career (19 per cent compared to four per cent of those that are optimistic), quality of life (22 per cent compared to two per cent for those that are optimistic), and local community (19 per cent compared to two per cent for those that are optimistic). Despite this, overall, young people remain relatively optimistic about the future of their personal hotographs shared during key informant interviews by

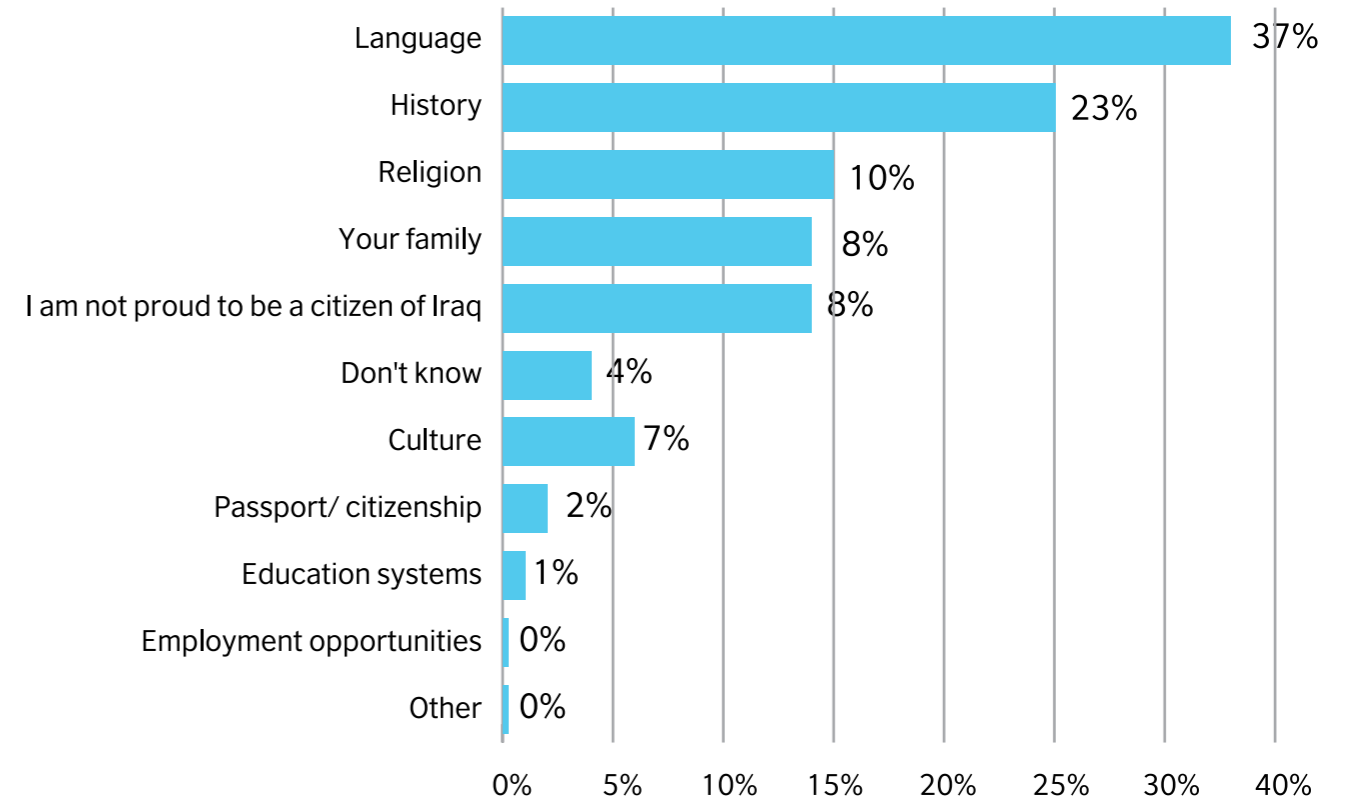Figure 8: Reasons for being proud to be a citizen of Iraq.

Reason	%
Language	37%
History	23%
Religion	10%
Your family	8%
I am not proud to be a citizen of Iraq	8%
Don't know	4%
Culture	7%
Passport/ citizenship	2%
Education systems	1%
Employment opportunities	0%
Other	0%

Figure 9: Percentage of young people who reported levels of optimism or pessimism

	My future career	My quality of life	My country	My local community	The global community
Very pessimistic + Pessimistic	20%	21%	27%	28%	28%
Neutral	26%	28%	29%	34%	38%
Very optimistic + Optimistic	54%	51%	44%	38%	35%

Neutral   Very optimistic + Optimistic   Very pessimistic + Pessimistic
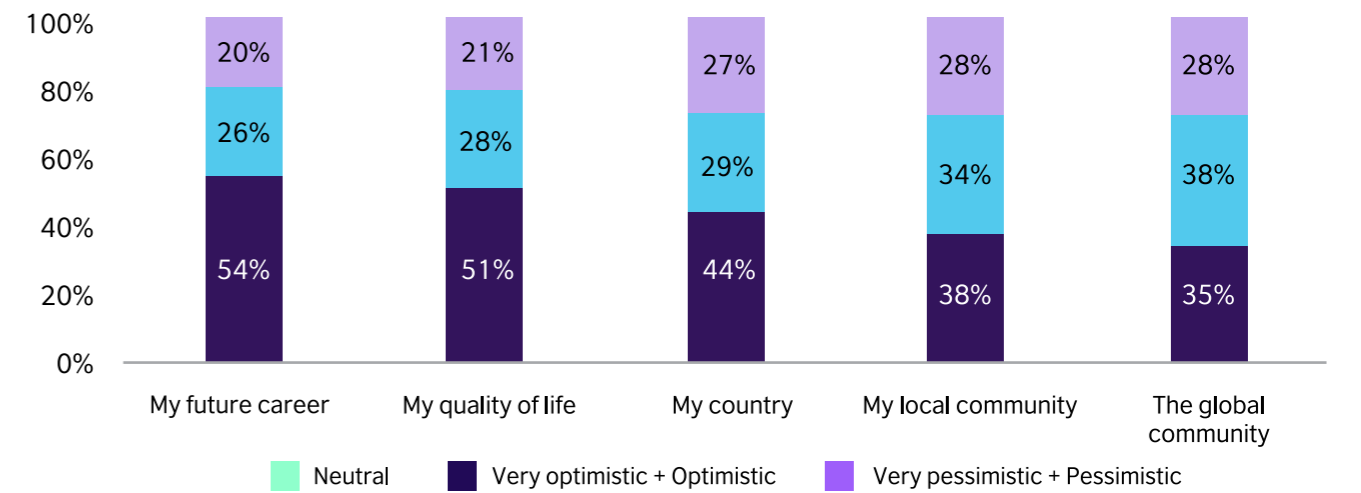
young Iraqis highlight various aspects of their history and culture that contribute to their pride, ranging from architectural landmarks to admiration for those who fought during conflicts in Iraq.

'I am proud of the Central Bank building. It's the tallest in Iraq and was designed by the famous architect Zaha Hadid.' (Male Respondent, Baghdad)

'I chose the first photo which is the Martyr's Monument that honours our soldiers. I am always proud about our valued soldiers who sacrificed their life for the sake of Iraq and our children. We should always remember them and narrate the stories of their bravery to our kids.' (Female Respondent, Baghdad)

I am proud to be a Yazidi and this temple represents the history and heritage of our valued grandparents and our holy religion.' (Female Respondent, Ninawa)[42].

Whilst family holds immense significance for young Iraqis, their aspirations, and the views on the feasibility of having their own families is tied closely to financial security. Despite economic considerations, confidence persists regarding achieving these goals in the future. Optimism in the country's future is relatively high, with young people feeling particularly optimistic for their future careers and quality of life, suggesting, despite current difficulties, there is a strong belief in the potential for positive change and progress, albeit tempered by a large degree of pragmatism.

Photograph 1: Central Bank

Photograph 2: Martyr's Mount

Photograph 3: Temple

1.3   Young people's digital profile

Iraq's digital landscape has been steadily growing, with increasing use of e-commerce, banking, ride-hailing, and other digital solutions. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for digital transformation, prompting businesses and the government to improve infrastructure and expand internet access. [43] Despite challenges in infrastructure and digital literacy, Iraq offers significant opportunities for digital growth. As of January 2024, there were 36.22 million internet users, meaning that 79 per cent of Iraqi's were online (a 2.3 per cent increase from the previous year). [44] Below we explore young people's digital profile, and how they interact online.

Key findings:

- Social media is the primary source of news and current events among young Iraqis (64 per cent), followed closely by television (43 per cent).
- However, access to social media is not uniform, with lower uses of social media for news among internally displaced people and disabled persons. Despite its widespread use, trust in social media remains low at 24 per cent.
- Family members are the most trusted sources of information among young Iraqis, with 73 per cent considering them trustworthy. This is followed by teachers/professors (64 per cent), religious leaders (60 per cent), and peers/friends (48 per cent), reflecting the traditional value held in interpersonal relationships.
- Digitisation represents key opportunities for young people, particularly in supporting learning, youth voice, and entrepreneurship, but digital skills and literacy remains relatively low in the MENA region, particularly among young women.

1.3.1   Young Iraqis heavily rely on social media and online sources for news, but trust and digital literacy remains low

Social media is the most common source of news and information about current events among young people. [45] Almost two-thirds (64 per cent) said that social media is a source of news and current events for them, and online sources are used by 78 per cent of young people, though this is lower in rural areas (66 per cent) compared to urban areas (80 per cent).

However, use of social media for news is not equal. Notably, internally displaced people (46 per cent) are less likely to use social media than people not displaced (65 per cent). This is likely due to infrequent internet access and the unaffordability of internet packages for some internally displaced families. In 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the lack of internet access was noted to be the largest impediment to children's learning for those who were internally displaced. [46] Additionally, people with disabilities (52 per cent) are less likely to choose social media than people without disabilities (65 per cent).

There is a gap in both data and humanitarian programmes focused on digital inclusion for young disabled persons in Iraq. The absence of accessible digital platforms limits their participation in online discourse. [47] However, further research is needed to understand this issue fully.

42 The Yazidis are a religious minority group, primarily residing in Northern Iraq. See UK Parliament. (2023). UK acknowledges Yazidi genocide by Daesh/Islamic State. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/uk-acknowledges-yazidi-genocide-by-daesh-islamic-state/.

43 Kapita. (2023). Digital Solutions reshaping Iraqi Consumer habits and redefining the future. https://kapita.iq/content/issue/rise-digital-solutions-reshaping-iraqi-consumer-habits-and-redefining-future

44 DataReportal. (2024). Digital 2024: Iraq. https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-iraq.

45 For a breakdown on young people's online habits, see Annex Three.

46 International Organisation of Migration Iraq. (2023). Access to durable solutions among IDPs in Iraq: six years in displacement. https://iraqdtm.iom.int/files/DurableSolutions/20221181458543_iom_Access_to_Durable_Solutions_Among_IDPs_in_Iraq_Six_Years_in_Displacement.pdf.
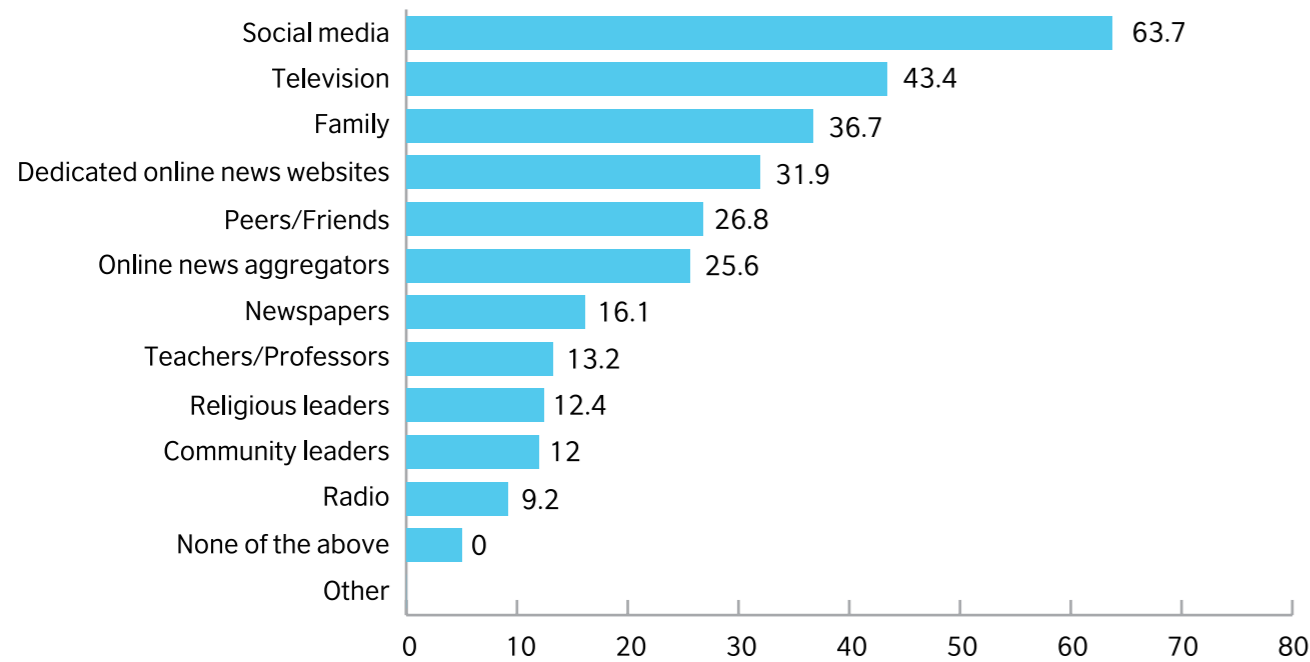
47 International Organisation of Migration Iraq. (2021). Fact Sheet: Accessible documents for persons with vision impairments and persons with low vision in Iraq. https://iraq.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1316/files/documents/accessible-documents-factsheet.docx.

Figure 10: Percentage of young people getting their information on current events by source

Source	Value
Social media	63.7
Television	43.4
Family	36.7
Dedicated online news websites	31.9
Peers/Friends	26.8
Online news aggregators	25.6
Newspapers	16.1
Teachers/Professors	13.2
Religious leaders	12.4
Community leaders	12
Radio	9.2
None of the above	0
Other	

Figure 11: Percentage of use and trust of sources for news and current events

Source	Use as a source	Trust
Social media	64%	24%
Television	43%	49%
Family	37%	73%
Dedicated online news websites	32%	34%
Peers/Friends	27%	48%
Online news aggregators	26%	43%
Newspapers	16%	41%
Teachers/Professors	13%	64%
Religious leaders	12%	60%
Community leaders	12%	46%
Radio	9%	42%

■ Use as a source   ■ Trust

Despite the widespread use of social media, trust in these platforms remains low, with interpersonal relationships being the most trusted sources of information, reflecting Iraq's traditional collectivist values. For example, only 24 per cent of young people trust social media (Figure 11). In contrast, family is the most trusted source of information for young Iraqis (73 per cent), followed by teachers/professors (64 per cent), religious leaders (60 per cent), and peers/friends (48 per cent). This trust in family and close personal connections highlights the enduring importance of these relationships in shaping young Iraqis' perspectives and reinforces the influence of familial While trust in social media was not explicitly addressed

in qualitative discussions, young Iraqis did discuss the opportunities and risks associated with it. They recognise its benefits, such as facilitating learning, raising awareness of issues, and enabling entrepreneurial ventures. However, improvements in digital literacy need to be made to ensure these opportunities are harnessed. For example, Iraqi women's digital knowledge and skills are the lowest among neighbouring countries, with World Bank and Iraq Ministry of Planning data showing that 96 per cent of Iraqi women do not know how to use computers or other smart devices, and that digital literacy is highly uneven across the country. [48]

Additionally, without smart and sensitive use of social media and digital literacy, young Iraqis remain vigilant about its negative implications and potential pitfalls.

'Social media presents both positive and negative aspects, depending on how you choose to engage with it. It can be a valuable tool for learning and expanding your knowledge, but it also carries the risk of connecting with negative influences that may lead to trouble.' (Female Respondent, Kirkuk).

Young Iraqis navigate a complex landscape shaped by demographic diversity, economic challenges, and a rich cultural heritage. With significant proportions of internally displaced persons and disabled persons, there is a strong need for inclusive interventions that address their distinct barriers to education, employment, and digital access.

48 This is also an issue globally, as around six in ten (59 per cent) of young people aged between 15-24 in recent UNICEF research 'Recovering Learning', need to acquire the digital skills to perform basic computer-related activities. See UNICEF. (2022). Recovering Learning: Are children and youth on track in skills development?. https://www.unicef.org/reports/recovering-learning; Oleiwi, Fatimah Neamah. (2024). Digital Illiteracy: Isolated Iraqi Women From the Outside World. Ouraq., https://www.ouriraq.org/article/digital-illiteracy-isolated-iraqi-women-outside-world.

1.4 Conclusion - Profiles

In summary, the demographic profiles of young people in Iraq paint a complex and multifaceted picture. Previous studies conducted on behalf of the United Nations and International Organisation for Migration (IOM) noted significant populations of internally displaced persons, disabled persons and a highly migratory but largely urban population. [49] Our study sample incorporates these diverse socio-demographic groups across gender, age, location, urbanity, disability, migration, and social class characteristics. For example, five per cent of the sample includes internally displaced people, 12 per cent returnees, 12 per cent of young disabled persons, 57 per cent live in urban areas, and 51 per cent are women.

This diversity is reflected in the beliefs and values of young people. Overall, financial security, family, travelling and having a wide range of experiences are core elements for personal success and happiness for Iraqi youth. Nearly half of young people (44 per cent) identify financial security as key to their personal success and happiness. This was relatively consistent across demographics, except for internally displaced people who are less like to say this is important (31 percent)

and returnees who are more likely to say it is important (53 percent). However, this focus on financial security is not for its own sake and has links to other key factors for personal happiness such as family, travelling, and enjoying various life experiences.

Young people think that financial security is a key factor for starting a family, which is a key element in their pursuit for personal fulfilment. Indeed, living with or having a family (34 per cent) and getting married or having a stable relationship (32 per cent) are the second and third most common factors for personal success and happiness. Familial ties are especially important to young people in the Kurdistan Region, where 47 per cent consider living with or having a family as important and almost three-quarters (73 per cent) selected family as the primary influence on their views.

Beyond financial security and family, travelling and having a wide array of life experiences (both 31 per cent) are also considered significant factors for happiness by young Iraqis. Young women (36 per cent) are more likely to aspire to travel than young men (27 per cent), and those living in urban areas are more likely to say that having a wide array of life experiences is important (34 per cent) compared to those in rural areas (22 per cent). As above, young Iraqis highlight the need to achieve financial stability before having these experiences. Indeed, 33 per cent of young people felt that travelling is not achievable for them, highlighting the need for more opportunities for young people to achieve financial security.

Despite anticipating challenges to achieving their goals, young people are optimistic about their future career (54 per cent), their future quality of life (51 per cent), and their country (41 per cent). Indeed, most young Iraqis are proud of their country, with only eight per cent saying they are not. There are some regional differences around notions of national identity and belonging, with a significant minority of young people in the Kurdistan Region the least likely to be proud to be Iraqi (22 per cent say they are not proud). However, overall, young people have an optimistic outlook on life and the future, but this is tempered by an understanding that achieving the desired changes will take both time and effort.

Our findings also show high levels of digitisation amongst young people. Online sources are used by 78 per cent of young people as a primary source of news and current events, with social media being the leading channel. As expected, social media use varies considerably across youth groups, with internally displaced young people (46 per cent), those in Southern Iraq (59 per cent), disabled persons (52 per cent), and those in rural areas (51 per cent) the least likely to use social media. While, young Iraqis recognise the benefits of social media, they are also aware of its risks and the need for improved digital literacy. For example, despite its widespread use, trust in social media remains relatively low at 24 per cent.

Further, traditional forms of communication, like television and family discussions, remain significant despite high levels of social media use, especially in rural areas, and have higher levels of trust. For example, television is used by 43 per cent of young people, with use particularly high in the Kurdistan Region (56 per cent). This shows that young people are using a diverse set of sources to find out about the world alongside the availability and prevalence of social media.

Overall, recommendations and actions for change must consider the diversity of profiles and experiences of young people living in Iraq, tailoring responses to their context and needs. Young people build their

49UNHCR. (2023). Iraq Operation; International Organisation for Migration (IOM). (2021). Persons with disabilities and their representative organisations in Iraq: Barriers, Challenges, and Priorities; Hassan, M. K. R. (2023). Factors Affecting Urbanisation in Iraq: A Historical Analysis from 1921 to the Present. Urbanisation, 8(1), 61-78. https://doi.org/10.1177/24557471231169386.

2. Perceptions

perceptions based on their interactions with a diverse range of environmental stimuli. This chapter will delve into the varied personal perspectives of young people as they navigate daily life in Iraq, beginning with an intersection of personal and social challenges that affect their journeys into adulthood. These challenges are rooted in Iraq's need for greater opportunities to build upward social mobility, the symptoms of which include poverty, unemployment, access to basic service, drug abuse and the subsequent pressures this exerts on families.

With respect to the British Council's commitment to inclusivity and engaging marginalised voices, one section is also devoted to the lived experiences of Iraqi disabled youth. Finally, in a country that is on the frontline of climate change, we explore the everyday realities of how both long-term and more immediate climate emergency manifest itself – and the role of youth in helping to address this global challenge.

Photo credit: Khezez/Pexels

Photo credit: Rebaz Geo /Pexels

2.1   Youth challenges

Most major challenges faced by young Iraqis today stem from the need for enhanced social mobility. The pressures this brings are social, economic, political, and environmental in nature, which present various hurdles on their journeys to a better quality of life. These manifest through cost-of-living concerns, compounded by limited job opportunities, managing societal expectations, as well as combatting the global climate crisis. This section explores how they navigate the balance between the personal and the social, the local and the global, and the long-term and the present-day, and where each issue sits within their wider outlook on life.

Key findings:

- On global challenges, addressing poverty (48 per cent) and unemployment (45 per cent) emerged as the most pressing. Extremism and violence remained significant global concerns among young Iraqis, stemming from reflections on security issues faced by previous generations in Iraq and discussions about their own futures.

- There is a clear urban and rural divide on perspectives of global challenges, with urban residents more likely to identify a broader range of global issues, including drug abuse/drug trade, health crises and pandemics (e.g., COVID-19) and erosion of religious values, compared to their rural counterparts.

- The need for more employment opportunities (52 per cent) was the top personal challenge faced by young Iraqis, consistent across all regions, ages, genders, and disability status. Qualitative findings aligned with this and underscored the importance of securing economic stability for achieving personal goals such as marriage and starting a family.

- Societal pressure from family and relatives (30 per cent) was identified as the second top personal challenge, particularly among young women (35 per cent) compared to men (24 per cent). This pressure often revolves around expectations to marry young, disproportionately affecting young women in marginalised communities.

- Access to housing (21 per cent), food and water (ten per cent), and sanitary products (nine per cent) were also identified as personal challenges, reflecting the current housing crisis in Iraq and the challenges it poses for young Iraqis.

2.1.1   Poverty and unemployment remain most pressing global challenges in the eyes of young Iraqis

Poverty and unemployment should not be seen as individual challenges distinct from one another, but rather as two component parts of a complex and often causal relationship. For example, unemployment is one of the main causes of poverty, which for those in long-term poverty, can deprive them of the access to skills and resources required to pull themselves out of poverty. [50] Given the deep systemic challenges faced by young Iraqis, this interrelationship is particularly prevalent.

Further, poverty and unemployment serve as indicators of the limited social mobility within Iraq and have been persistent issues in the two decades since the 2003 US-led invasion. [51] As our findings attest, poverty (48 per cent) and unemployment (45 per cent) remain the most pressing global challenges for young Iraqis (Figure 12). Moreover, in a country that witnessed huge protests in 2019 due in part to dissatisfaction with levels of economic deprivation, the findings from the survey may reflect the need for greater progress on these issues.

In addition to poverty and unemployment, young Iraqis continue to rank extremism and violence highly among their top global concerns. This is especially true among urban Iraqi youth, more than a third of whom (37 per cent) mentioned extremism/terrorism, compared to less than a fifth of rural youth (18 per cent). This disparity in the prioritisation of extremism and violence as a global concern may be linked to the effects of urbanisation. A report by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) suggests that urbanisation can act as a catalyst, exacerbating factors that contribute to violence and extremism, as seen across several cities in Iraq, thus potentially influencing the perception of these issues among urban respondents. [52] Despite being generally optimistic about their prospects, many young Iraqis expressed feelings of uncertainty about the country's security in group deep dive discussions.

'A sudden a war or battle could encounter our country and [we could] lose it all again. I am optimistic and I am confident that I will do my best to achieve and accomplish my dreams; but I always say; it is nonsense to be blindly optimistic.' (Female Respondent, Baghdad)

The urban vs. rural disparity in the perception of extremism extends to other global issues, most notably drug abuse and the drug trade (37 per cent in urban vs. seven per cent in rural), health crises and pandemics (26 per cent in urban vs three per cent in rural) and erosion of religious values (29 per cent in urban compared to eight per cent in rural) (Figure 12). This is likely because urban respondents are more exposed to a variety of issues, such as global drug trade and the negative effects of lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Though the erosion of religious values may be a standalone concern among urban respondents, interestingly, participants in the focus groups linked the decline of religious values with increased drug use, suggesting that these concerns may be interconnected. Moreover, it implies that the significance of religious values among urban respondents may extend beyond traditional religious practices, emphasising moral behaviour.

'The decline in religious adherence among individuals has contributed to their involvement in forbidden and immoral actions. Without a strong moral compass provided by religious teachings, people may be more susceptible to engaging in behaviours that go against societal norms and values.' (Male Respondent, Ninawa)

50 Saunders, P. (2002). The direct and indirect effects of unemployment on poverty and inequality. Australian Journal of Labour Economics, 5(4), 507-529.

51 Mahler, D., Vishwanath, T. (2021). When the consequences of conflicts last generations: Intergenerational mobility in Iraq and Vietnam. https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/dev4peace/when-consequences-conflicts-last-generations-intergenerational-mobility-iraq-and-vietnam.

52 Rifaat, Karrar. ('Eden in Peril: Understanding the Drivers of Violent Extremism among Youth in Southern Iraq.' International Organisation for Migration Report.
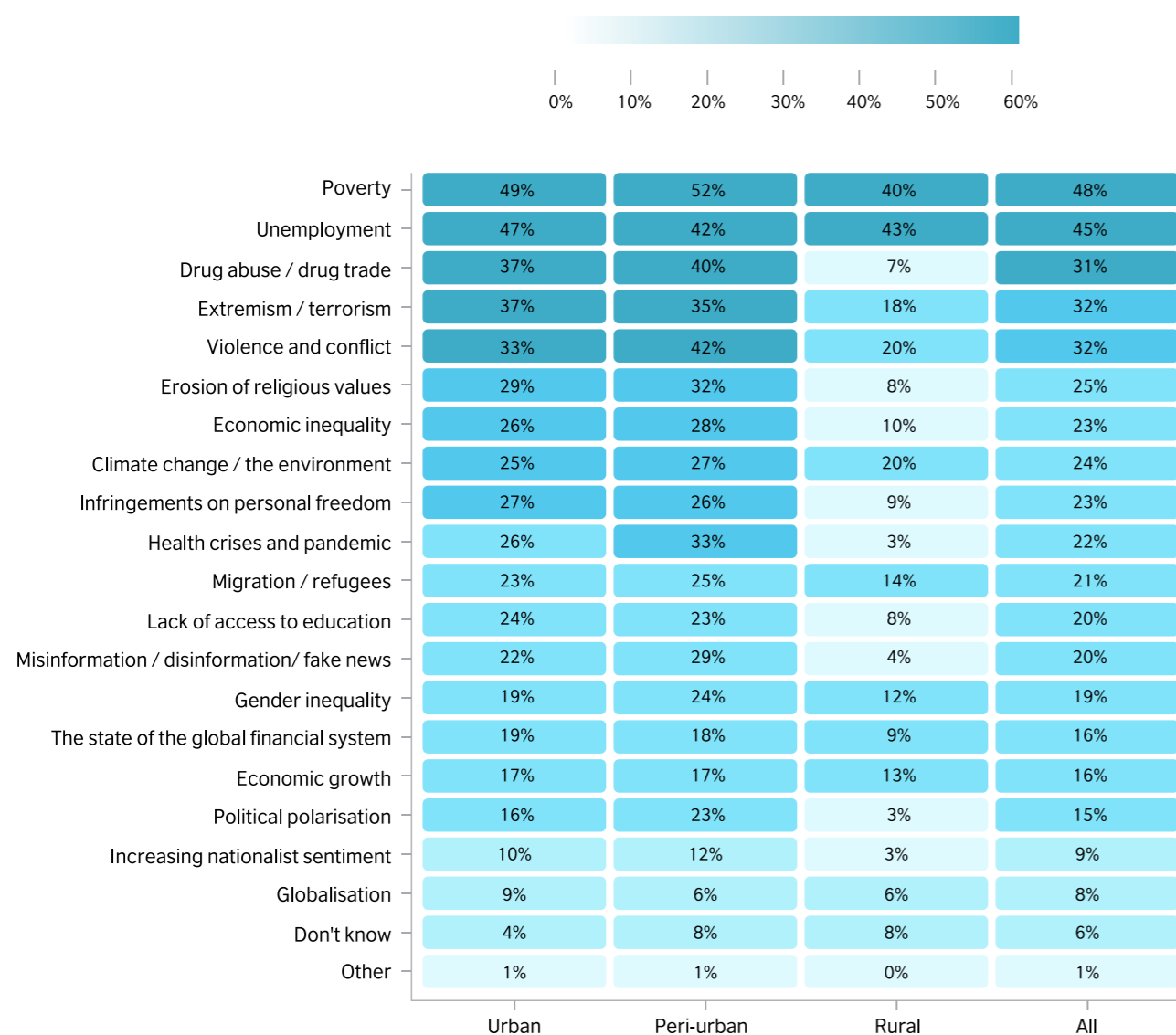
Figure 12: Percentage of most important issues facing the world today by urban/rural

	Urban	Peri-urban	Rural	All
Poverty	49%	52%	40%	48%
Unemployment	47%	42%	43%	45%
Drug abuse / drug trade	37%	40%	7%	31%
Extremism / terrorism	37%	35%	18%	32%
Violence and conflict	33%	42%	20%	32%
Erosion of religious values	29%	32%	8%	25%
Economic inequality	26%	28%	10%	23%
Climate change / the environment	25%	27%	20%	24%
Infringements on personal freedom	27%	26%	9%	23%
Health crises and pandemic	26%	33%	3%	22%
Migration / refugees	23%	25%	14%	21%
Lack of access to education	24%	23%	8%	20%
Misinformation / disinformation/ fake news	22%	29%	4%	20%
Gender inequality	19%	24%	12%	19%
The state of the global financial system	19%	18%	9%	16%
Economic growth	17%	17%	13%	16%
Political polarisation	16%	23%	3%	15%
Increasing nationalist sentiment	10%	12%	3%	9%
Globalisation	9%	6%	6%	8%
Don't know	4%	8%	8%	6%
Other	1%	1%	0%	1%

More widely, we can see more acute perceptions of a variety of global issues among urban youth. This can be attributed to several factors related to the urban environment in Iraq. These factors include better access to information, increased exposure to various global issues through social and traditional media in urban areas, as well as a more direct experience of challenges such as the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and issues related to drug use and the drug trade. Greater emphasis on issues such as misinformation/disinformation, political polarisation, and infringement on personal freedom among urban Iraqis can also stem from higher levels of education, better connectedness, and a more informed young public in urban compared to rural areas. For example, whilst over four in ten (43 per cent) of urban youth have achieved a graduate degree or above, the same proportion of rural youth have only achieved less than primary and lower secondary education.

The key global issues listed by young people in this section are directly related to their personal challenges, including the urgent need for employment opportunities, access to services and drug abuse. These personal challenges will be explored in the following sections.

2.1.2 Key personal challenges revolve around employment, societal pressures, and obstacles in accessing essential services

As mentioned in the previous section, unemployment is one of the key global challenges cited by young Iraqis. This global issue affects young Iraqis on a day-to-day level, with over half of Iraqi youth (52 per cent) identifying the need for employment opportunities as the most common issue affecting them personally (see Figure 13). This is consistent across regions, ages, genders, and disability status. Focus group participants confirmed this finding, explaining that personal economic security is essential to achieving common goals held by Iraqi youth, in particular, marriage and

Figure 13: Looking back from now and over the past five years, which, if any, of the below challenges would you say have had a negative effect on you personally?'

Lack of employment opportunities	52%
Societal pressure from family / relatives	30%
Lack of access to housing / poor quality housing	22%
Societal pressure from peers / people your own age	18%
Marriage at a young age	14%
Losing parents at a young age	13%
None of these	12%
Societal pressure from the media	12%
Lack of access to sanitary products	9%
Social media	9%

Figure 14: Looking back from now and over the past five years, which, if any, of the below challenges would you say have had a negative effect on you personally?'

Lack of employment opportunities
- 59%
- 42%
- 50%
- 52%
- 45%

- Bachelor's + Master's degree
- Short cycle tertiary
- Primary education + lower secondary
- Post secondary non-tertiary
- Upper secondary

Focus group participants characterised the role of economic stability differently depending on their demographics. For instance, those in internally displaced camps discussed how the economic security gained from employment would allow young people to provide safety to their families, while their peers in host communities discussed how economic status affected how desirable an individual may be as a partner.

'Economic status plays a crucial role in this equation. The high cost of living and limited safety measures amplify the challenges associated with marriage and family life. Economic factors directly impact individuals' decisions regarding marriage and family planning, as they need to consider their ability to afford basic necessities and provide a secure environment for their loved ones.' (Male Respondent, Ninawa)

Improved economic conditions are directly linked to the dynamism of the labour market in producing opportunities. Young people in the study expressed particular concerns around the scarcity and quality of graduate job opportunities. Focus group respondents described an overqualified and frustrated graduate

workforce with limited opportunities. Particularly, they noted that bachelor's degrees are often considered a prerequisite for entry-level jobs, even if the role is not specific to the subject matter studied. Inversely, participants noted that graduates are experiencing increasing competition for a limited number of graduate-level job opportunities.

Likewise, in the YAB sessions, young Iraqis shared the perception that having a degree no longer guarantees job security in Iraq. They pointed to the need for more employment opportunities and their perception that employment prospects are sometimes influenced not by qualifications but by connections. This overarching frustration is also reflected in the survey data as those with a bachelor's degree (or equivalent level of qualification) are more likely to mention the need for employment opportunities as a top issue compared to respondents with different levels of education (see Figure 14).In addition to employment, young Iraqis expressed concerns about familial pressure, access to basic services (such as quality housing, food, water) amongst their top personal challenges. Each of these issues will be explored in the next sections.
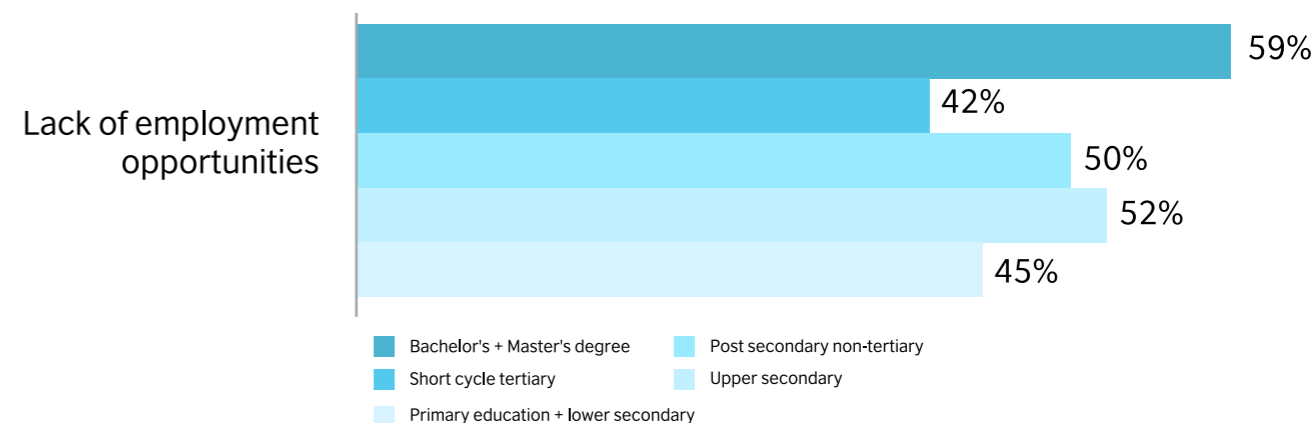
2.1.2.1 Societal pressure from family and relatives

As described in Chapter 1, family plays a crucial role for young Iraqis and there is a strong sense of belonging to the extended family and to other extended relationships. Within this context, young Iraqis benefit from a sense of belonging, protection, and unity. However, they also negotiate the challenges brought by this, most notably social pressure from family members and relatives which is the second most mentioned personal issue (30 per cent).

This social pressure particularly impacts younger women, as it can influence their opportunities for education, employment, and relationships. Our survey shows that more than a third of female respondents listed 'societal pressure from family / relatives' as a top issue that negatively affected them (female - 35 per cent, male - 24 per cent). This was also echoed in female focus groups, where nearly all participants described expectations from their family to marry relatively young and adhere to societal norms, such as avoiding staying out late at night to prevent judgement from others.

'Since our culture and customs have encouraged us to get married and establish a family at an early age, I believe that many of us grow up believing this.' (Female Respondent, Baghdad)

'We cannot, however, ignore our customs or the possibility of criticism from people around us. I can't, for example, work two shifts and come home late without anticipating judgment or unfavourable remarks from others, which would also annoy my parents.' (Female Respondent,

Family pressure is more pronounced in marginalised communities with conservative religious traditions. For example, female participants from ethnic minority backgrounds in Kirkuk, Northern Iraq, which is home to a diverse population of ethnic Turkmens, Iraqi Kurds, and Arabs, identified customs and traditions as the most significant barrier to achieving success. They described how their families upheld the cultural norms of previous generations and clans, which limit the options available for young women in these communities when it comes to education, employment, and relationships. Specifically, they cited workplace discrimination and public harassment as key issues which affected their participation in society.

'I think the number one thing preventing women from achieving our goals is the emotional shortage we get from our parents and families. Since the day we opened our eyes, in our household they teach us to be quiet, not do that, do this, this is bad, this is haram, this is forbidden, etc., so when we grow up, we try to fill this gap with anything that gives us a small affection, sometimes it's a male and we fell in love with them, sometimes it's a job, a hobby.' (Female Respondent, Kirkuk)

Despite this familial pressure, discussions highlighted the ambition of young women to navigate and balance these pressures against their ambitions. Many young women seem to be negotiating between the balance of pursuing their own ambitions in employment, education, and relationships while respecting and adhering to familial and community norms. Participants expressed respect for their parents, while emphasising the importance of pursuing their own ambitions for positive mental health and wellbeing. Some connected overcoming monotony and social isolation with actively seeking out opportunities. Though these barriers are not insubstantial, it is crucial to acknowledge the prevalence of ambition in these conversations.

'I hate the monotony of living at home, so I'm excited to finish my education and get a job. I want to go outside, see the world, and meet new people. I see work as more than just a way to make ends meet; it's a doorway to new experiences, relationships, and chances for personal development. I'm also looking forward to leaving the comforts of routine and exploring the endless possibilities that await me when I step outside my current environment.' (Female Respondent, Salah ad Din)

'If "male participant" were a female, it might be a bit challenging because running your own business often involves being out, interacting with others, and networking, which some families may not be comfortable with for their daughters. However, it's not impossible. Many girls successfully manage their businesses and have their family's support.' (Female Respondent, Baghdad)

2.1.2.2 Access to basic services

In addition to employment and family pressures, the third most pressing personal challenge identified by young Iraqis centres on access to basic services, such as the limited access to quality housing, food and water and healthcare services (see Figure 15). With many of these services directly affecting the day-to-day quality of life, it is not surprising to see these challenges mentioned by a substantial segment of young people in Iraq.

Figure 15: Ranking of difficulty accessing each basic service

Lack of access to housing 22%

Lack of access to food and water 9%

Lack of access to sanitary products 9%

**Lack of access to healthcare services 8%**

The housing crisis in Iraq is well documented, with issues relating to insufficient housing production, not enough residential land for housing developments, limited finance, deteriorating housing stock and the spread of slums. [53] Housing issues are especially acute among young people in urban areas, with a quarter of urban youth (25 per cent) suffering the negative effects of limited access to housing (compared to 14 per cent of rural youth). These results are in line with statistics showing a growing urban population in Iraq which is further exacerbating the housing crisis in Iraqi cities (see Figure 16).[54]

53 Al-Hafith, de Wilde, Satish bk. Research Gate (2021). A Review of the Iraqi Housing Sector Problems. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352841163_A_Review_of_the_Iraqi_Housing_Sector_Problems; https://shafaq.com/en/Report/Iraqi-housing-woes-government-acts-with-52-new-cities

54 Amwaj Media (2022). Iraq Struggles To Overcome Housing Crisis. https://amwaj.media/article/baghdad-real-state-high-prices

Figure 16: Iraq's urban population as a percentage of the total population 2000-2020
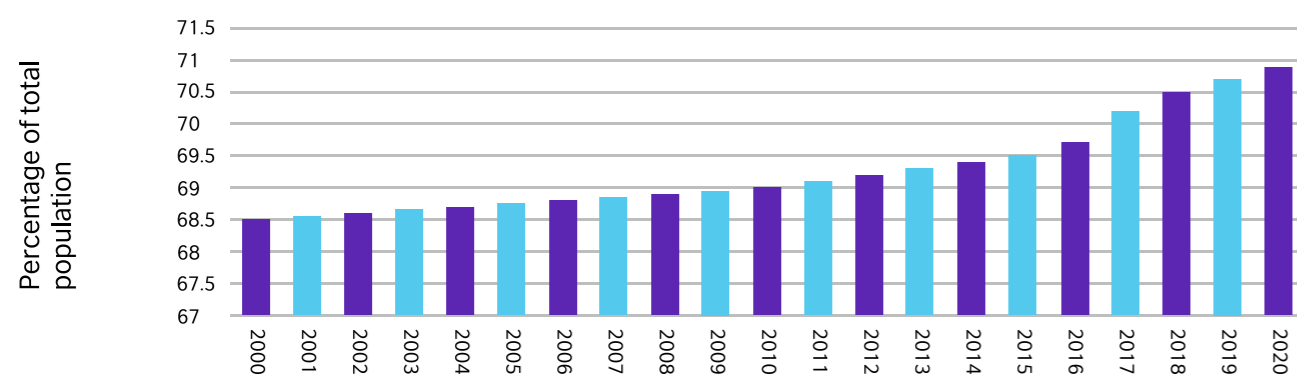
The housing crisis is one that has persisted in Iraq for many decades, influenced by political, economic and security challenges, as well as outdated urban planning. This crisis is most strongly felt in the Baghdad governorate, with its relatively greater levels of stability and opportunities for economic progression. Rather than precipitating a boom in the housing market, however, this increased urban sprawl has been met with a need for more affordable housing alternatives.

In contrast to housing issues, limited access to food and water disproportionately affects rural young people, especially those living in North/Western Iraq (see Figure 17). Northern Iraq faces a unique set of challenges when it comes to access to water, including the scarcity of surface water and an unfavourable climate, as well as unsound peace and security conditions. [55]

Figure 17: Lack of access to food and water by region)
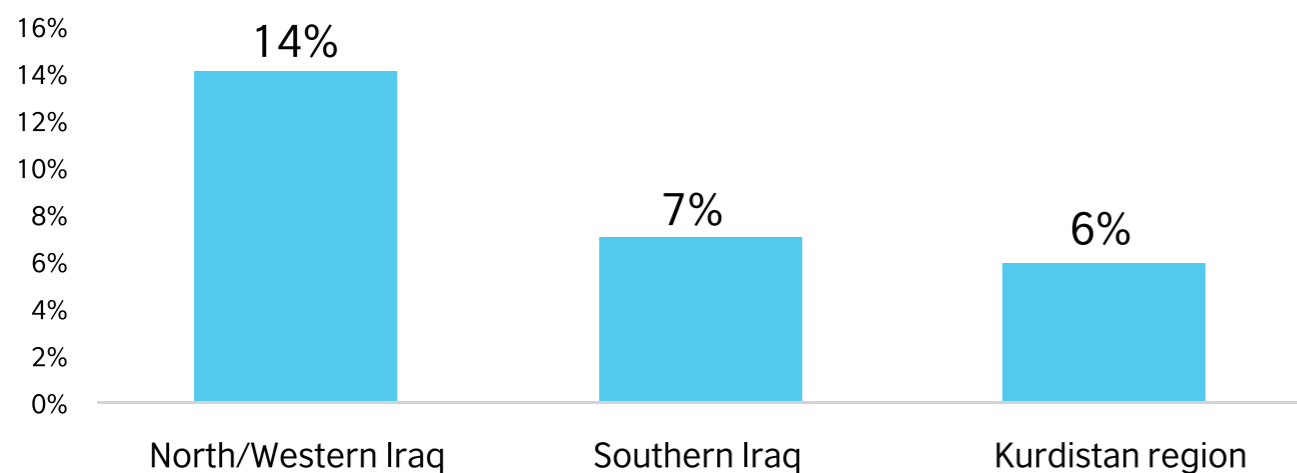
Beyond the geographical location, limited access to food and water disproportionately affects young people with lower levels of formal education and returnees (15 per cent and 17 per cent respectively compared to nine per cent on average). In addition, disabled respondents are more likely to list lack of sanitary products as an issue which affected them (18 per cent compared to seven per cent for those who are not disabled). Water inaccessibility is directly linked to the climate crisis Iraq is facing, a topic explored further later in this chapter.

2.1.2.3 Drug abuse

Closely linked with economic issues and unemployment, drug abuse has become a salient issue in Iraq, especially among the youth. While Iraq originally functioned as a transit route for Iranian and Pakistani drugs headed to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Gulf states, drugs such as methamphetamines are now being domestically produced in Iraq, while Captagon is one of the most widely trafficked drug in Iraq. [56] The effects of drug use are acutely felt by young Iraqis aged 15 to 35 who make up the majority of drug users, while the majority of people in addiction centres are aged 17 to 25. [57]

This trend is reflected in our research findings which indicate that drug abuse and the drug trade are perceived to be one of the most important issues facing the world today (31 per cent), especially amongst Iraqi youth residing in urban and peri-urban areas (37 and 40 per cent respectively). In addition, the drug issue is particularly felt in Southern Iraq (36 per cent), compared to North/Western Iraq (26 per cent) and Kurdistan (24 per cent). This may be due to the fact that the Southern governorates like Al Basrah are geographically closer to Iran, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. These neighbouring countries have witnessed an uptick in arrests of drug traffickers at border crossings, which may have contributed to the heightened awareness and perception of the drug issue in Southern Iraq. [58]

The Iraqi government has strict penalties for drug traffickers including hefty fines, imprisonment and even execution. However, the root causes of drug use and trade are linked to increasing employment and other vocational opportunities to give young Iraqis a greater sense of purpose. Indeed, scholars have argued that the country's unstable economic and political context, as well as social pressures, contribute to the spread of drug addiction among young Iraqi people. [59]

Our research aligns with the findings above, as respondents highlighted economic stress, boredom, and moving away from religion as key drivers of drug abuse. Some young people also highlighted the role of social media in normalising drug use, making it 'cool' and thus increasing the chances of use among young men.

'Social media plays a huge role in making drugs and alcohol seem attractive to young boys. It's everywhere you look, from music videos to influencers posting about partying. It's no wonder kids think it's cool to try these substances.' (Female Respondent, Salah ad Din)

Given the crackdown on drug abuse, young Iraqis who use drugs are therefore reluctant to seek help or report the issue as this also has societal consequences. Respected members of society are generally averse to tarnishing their social image, and women are especially subject to criticism if they use drugs or are in any way affiliated with drug users. [60]

Many people using drugs tend to deny or ignore the harmful effects, refusing to accept the reality of their situation. They convince themselves they're right instead of admitting the harm they're causing.' (Female Respondent, Kirkuk)

55 Norwegian Refugee Council (2023). Inadequate and Inequitable: Water Scarcity and displacement in Iraq. https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/inadequate-and-inequitable-water-scarcity-and-displacement-iraq-enar

56 Rahmin, A. A. (2022). The Toll of Iraq's Growing Drug Trade. The Washington Institute. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/toll-iraqs-growing-drug-trade

57 Rahmin, A. A. (2022). The Toll of Iraq's Growing Drug Trade. The Washington Institute. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/toll-iraqs-growing-drug-trade

58 Rahmin, A. A. (2022). The Toll of Iraq's Growing Drug Trade. The Washington Institute. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/toll-iraqs-growing-drug-trade; Rasool, M. (2022). Meth, Money, Militias: Welcome to Iraq's Hottest Narco Town. Vice News. https://www.vice.com/en/article/epzbgz/crystal-meth-basra-iraq; Drugs.ie. (2023). Iraqi emerging as a key route in global drugs trade. https://www.drugs.ie/news/article/Iraq_emerging_as_key_route_in_global_drugs_trade#:~:text=Statistics%20are%20hard%20to%20come,Iran%2C%20Kuwait%20and%20Saudi%20Arabia.

59 Alkhudhairy, M. K., Al-Tufaili, S. A., Al-Qazzaz, A. A., & Al-Mosauy, M. M. (2024). A survey study on drug abuse among young people in Al-Najaf governorate, Iraq. AIP Conference Proceedings. https://doi.org/10.1063/5.0191846

60 Rahmin, A. A. (2022). The Toll of Iraq's Growing Drug Trade. The Washington Institute. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/toll-iraqs-growing-drug-trade

In addition to this, the high price and low availability of rehabilitation services is also deterring young Iraqis who use drugs from seeking help. This issue was also raised in a YAB session, where it was agreed that that while the government has been acting on reducing the drug trade, it needed to focus more on the reasons for drug use among youth and on how to support those recovering from drug abuse.

In summary, while young Iraqis cite poverty and unemployment are their main challenges, the issues of societal pressures, drug abuse, housing, security, and insufficient basic services that follow are closely interrelated. For example, as the findings reveal, societal pressures on women prevent them from finding employment, which in turn keeps them impoverished and unable to access affordable services. For young Iraqis more broadly, there are clear links between a society with low socio-economic outcomes and a slide into drug abuse and the drug trade, which brings a reduced sense of security to everyday citizens. As these challenges are not independent from one another, tackling employment challenges, for example, can also contribute to improving the others. However, creating a more prosperous society also means building a more inclusive society that considers minority perceptions of daily life; including disabled persons, explored below.

2.2   Disability

While the previous chapter covered the personal challenges faced by Iraqi youth, some of these issues are already documented as humanitarian and development agencies regularly consult with young people as part of their programmatic efforts. By contrast, there has been limited consultation with young disabled persons in Iraq and their representative organisations, even though they make up a significant share of Iraq society and may have a diverse set of concerns and issues compared to their non-disabled peers.

As mentioned above in Chapter 1: Profiles, Iraq has one of the largest populations of disabled persons in the world. [61] While the exact number of disabled persons in Iraq is unknown due to the dearth of reliable statistics, according to a report by UKAID it is estimated that there are more than three million disabled persons in Iraq. [62] Yet there is limited data on what they think, feel and believe. This section goes into the perceptions of disabled persons, the barriers and enablers to their inclusion in day-to-day life (employment/education) and their aspirations.

Key findings:

- Awareness of various types of disability among young adults varies significantly, particularly in distinguishing between physical and invisible disabilities. Approximately four in ten adults (18 per cent) agree that they have a better understanding of physical disabilities compared to invisible ones.
- Survey findings reveal nuanced attitudes toward disabilities, with 70 per cent of respondents rejecting the perception that disabled persons are a societal burden. However, nearly half of respondents (47 per cent) acknowledge the presence of discrimination against disabled persons.
- Accessibility issues present significant barriers for young disabled persons in both education and employment. Physical accessibility challenges are notably more prevalent than issues related to treatment at school or work.

- Entrepreneurship emerges as an appealing option for young disabled persons, mirroring the interest among their non-disabled peers. 59 per cent of young disabled persons express an appetite for entrepreneurship, viewing it as an alternative employment pathway that allows for adaptation to their condition.

2.2.1 Positive perceptions of disabilities exist, but prevalence of discrimination is acknowledged

In terms of awareness of disabled persons, four out of five young people said they know at least 'a little bit' about disabled persons. However, levels of knowledge about disability varied between urban and rural settings. Young people in rural areas are more likely to say that they know 'nothing at all' about disabilities than urban youth (rural - 13 per cent, urban - eight per cent). In contrast, those in urban areas are more likely to say they know 'a little bit' (59 per cent vs 41 per cent). However, overall, young people are more aware and understanding of visible compared with invisible disabilities, with four in ten (40 per cent) agreeing that they are more understanding of physical disabilities rather than intellectual disabilities (Figure 18).

Although the Iraqi Parliament voted to accede to the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2013, disability-based discrimination remains a crucial issue ranging from discrimination in law to wider society. [63] The acknowledgment of this discrimination by nearly half (47 per cent) of the surveyed sample highlights its pervasive nature. Indeed, 38 per cent of the sample agreed that disabled persons are less capable than those without, and 42 per cent noted that disabled persons are often made fun of. In our qualitative findings there are also references to discrimination in interpersonal relationships, especially impacting future prospects, such as marriage, which underscores the far-reaching consequences of social

61   OHCHR. (2019). Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities discusses the impact of the armed conflict on persons with disabilities in Iraq. https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/committee-rights-persons-disabilities-discusses-impact-armed-conflict-persons

62International Disability Alliance. (2019). Summary of Iraq National Report on Sustainable Development Goals and the CRPD. https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/sites/default/files/final_iraqi_national_report_in_english_0.docx

63Human Rights Watch. (2021). No One Represents Us: Lack of access to political participation for people with disabilities in Iraq. https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/09/16/no-one-represents-us/lack-access-political-participation-people-disabilities-iraq

'It's possible that not everyone would be willing to marry a disabled person when they have the option to marry someone without disabilities. This could be because they may perceive it as more challenging or have concerns about the future.' (Male Respondent, Al Basrah)

This discrimination can disproportionately affect young disabled women of marriageable age, who are often denied the opportunity to marry and start their own families due to social customs and family attitudes. Furthermore, there may be requests for divorce if either spouse acquires a disability during the marriage.

Figure 18: Young people's views on disabled persons
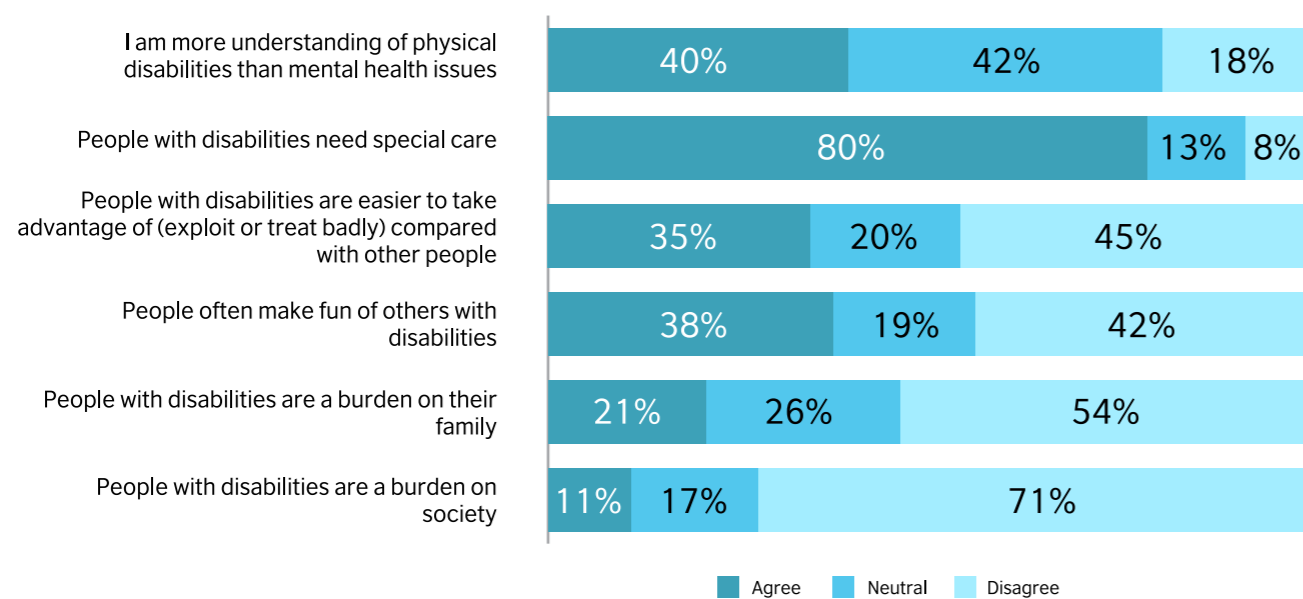
Despite 70 per cent of respondents disagreeing with the notion that disabled persons are a burden on society, over a third acknowledge discriminatory behaviours such as exploitation (35 per cent) and mockery (38 per cent). This varied by geography and setting. Those in Northern Iraq are less likely to disagree that disabled persons are a burden on society (62 per cent) than those in Southern Iraq (80 per cent), and those in rural areas (56 per cent) are less likely to disagree than those in urban areas (76 per cent). This reflects a nuanced understanding among youth, where empathetic attitudes coexist with ingrained societal biases. This complexity is further elucidated by qualitative research conducted by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Iraq, focusing on disabled children. The study reveals that while disabled children encounter bias and discrimination within society, they also have the capacity to forge friendships and establish support networks within their communities.[64]

Furthermore, our study reveals a disparity in community inclusion experienced by young disabled persons compared to their non-disabled peers. One-third of young disabled persons (33 per cent) reported not feeling 'at all' a part of their local community, compared to only a quarter (25 per cent) of those who indicated no disability (see Figure 19). This difference not only highlights the social exclusion faced by young disabled persons but also raises questions about the scale and effectiveness of community support systems and inclusion initiatives. Similar findings are echoed in a 2021 report by the IOM on disability in Iraq, which reveals that many disabled persons face exclusion from community engagements due to prevalent negative attitudes, lack of accessibility, or financial barriers. Additionally, families of disabled children often opt to keep their children away from community involvement, fearing instances of bullying or discrimination[65].

64 UNFPA Iraq. (2021). 'My disability is not a burden. In fact, it is a sources of strength', https://iraq.unfpa.org/en/news/ per centE2 per cent80 per cent9Cmy-disability-not-burden-fact-it-source-strength per centE2 per cent80 per cent9D-0

65 International Organisation for Migration Iraq. (2021). Persons with Disabilities and their Representative Organisations in Iraq: Barriers, Challenges and Priorities. https://iraq.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1316/files/documents/OPDs%20report%20English.pdf
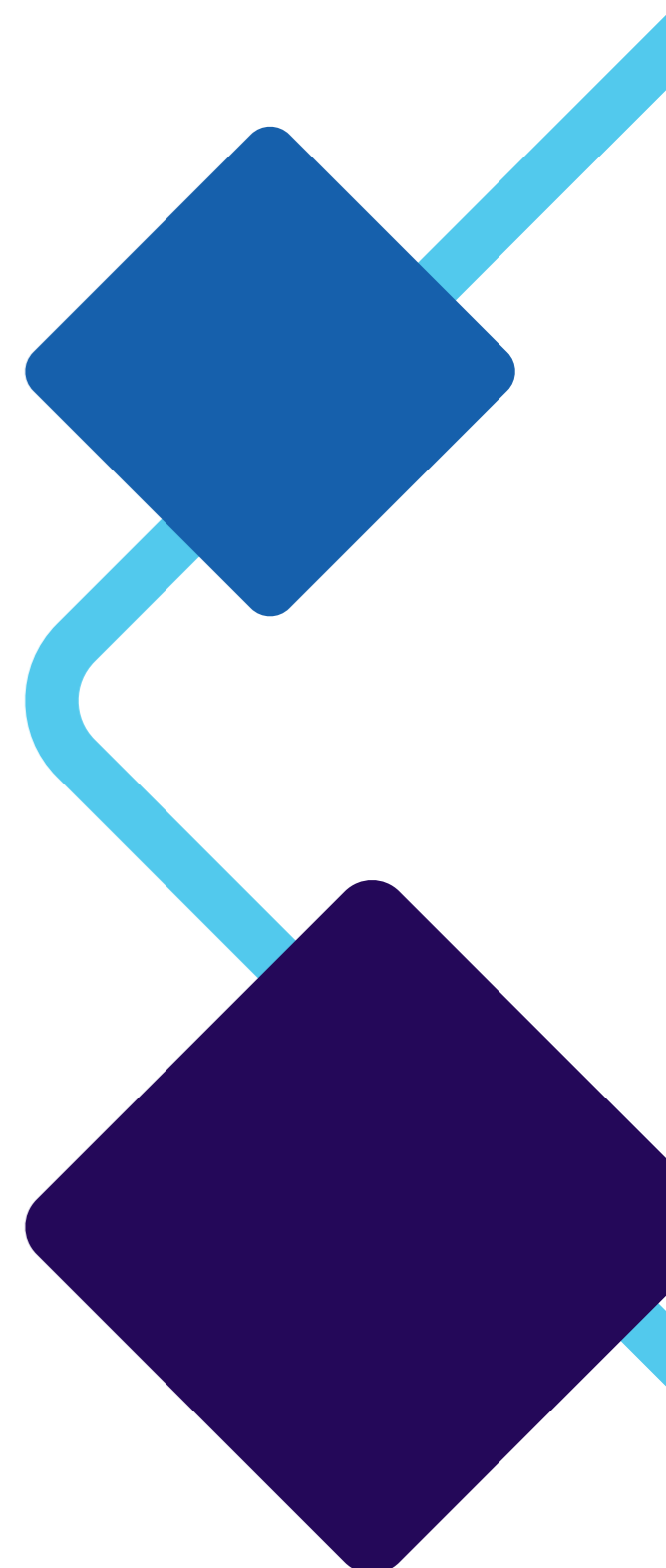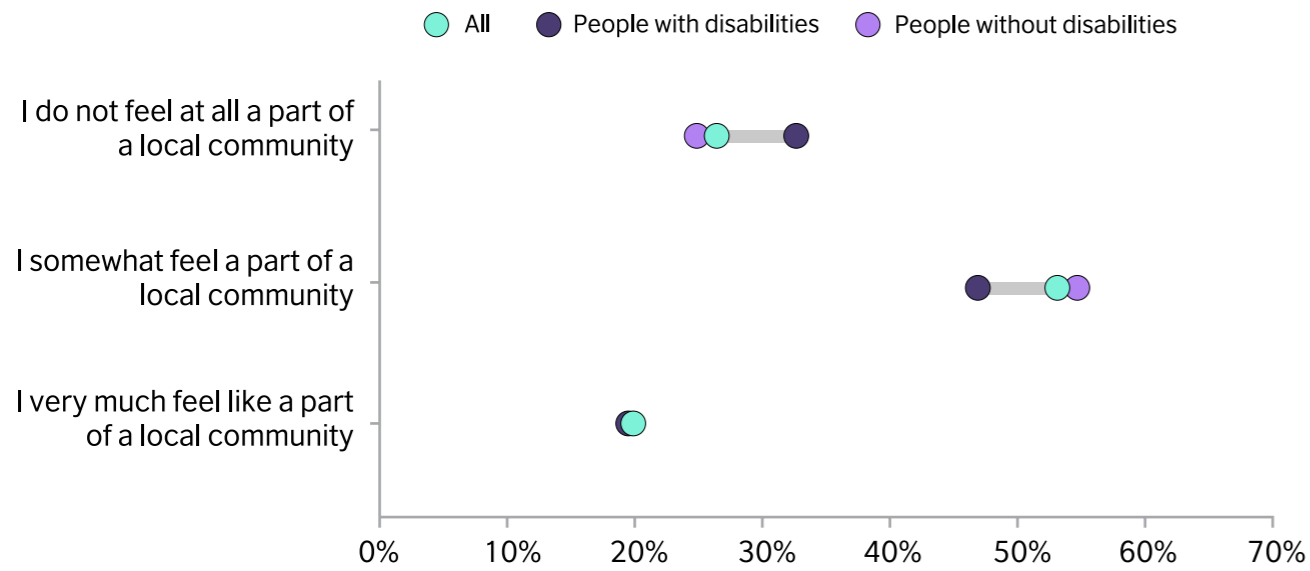
Figure 19: Percentage of young people who feel they are part of the community by disability status

○ All ● People with disabilities ○ People without disabilities

I do not feel at all a part of a local community

I somewhat feel a part of a local community

I very much feel like a part of a local community

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70%

2.2.2 Issues related to accessibility inhibit inclusion of young disabled Iraqis in education and employment

Disabled persons in Iraq have for years faced exclusion from employment, education, and politics, predominately due to issues of accessibility. Estimates suggest that unemployment rates among disabled persons have soared to an alarming 90 per cent, although precise figures remain elusive. [66] As seen in a priority mapping exercise with a young disabled man in An Najaf, his main priorities centre on finding a job and financial stability (Figure 20). Despite the Iraqi government's efforts to ratify international legislation, domestic laws are falling short in providing employment protections. This has led to communities taking matters into their own hands (see Photograph 4). [67]

This central issue has been reiterated by young disabled persons in our study, who also describe their main challenge as accessibility in public spaces, including workplaces. Whilst some note there have been improvements, such as placing ramps for those with mobility issues, generally it is felt that there is not enough awareness of and therefore investment in supporting more diverse disabilities. Discussions with YAB also brought to light the fact that accessibility issues go beyond places of employment and education and are also present in public places such as restaurants, hotels, and supermarkets, further contributing to the exclusion of disabled persons.

Figure 20: Life priorities mapping exercise and translation (Male Respondent with a disability, An Najaf).

Now/Presently	Next year	Future
"Obtaining a job" "To be an activist concerned with reform" "Health [well-being]"	"Traveling to another country to receive [medical] treatment"	"Improving my financial situation and getting married"

66 International Organisation for Migration Iraq. (2021). Persons with Disabilities and their Representative Organisations in Iraq: Barriers, Challenges and Priorities. https://iraq.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1316/files/documents/OPDs%20report%20English.pdf
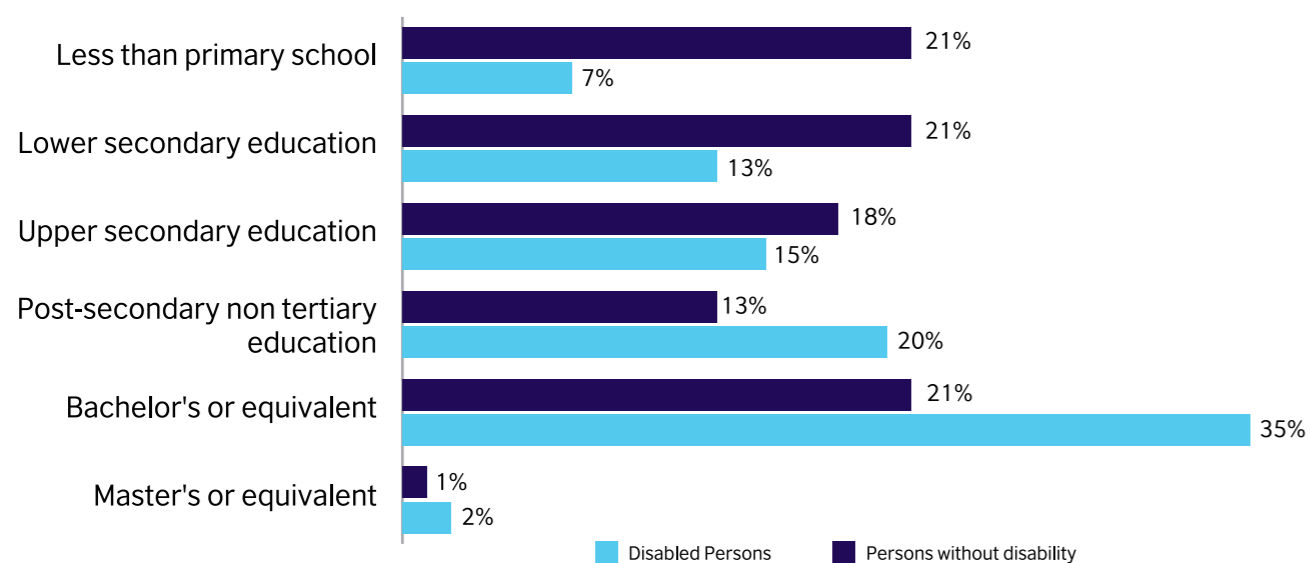
67 nternational Organisation for Migration Iraq. (2021). Persons with Disabilities and their Representative Organisations in Iraq: Barriers, Challenges and Priorities. https://iraq.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1316/files/documents/OPDs%20report%20English.pdf

'It's quite challenging for me to find employment, especially in the private sector. The typical workplace environment isn't suitable for me, as I need special accommodation like specific chairs and accessible bathrooms. Because of these needs, I don't believe traditional employment is the best fit for me.' (Male Respondent, 23, Al Basrah)

When it comes to education, the federal Iraqi and Kurdistan Regional Government's education systems are in need of the relevant expertise, infrastructure and resources to implement inclusive education in their classes. [68] These barriers contribute to disparities in educational attainment, as highlighted by the Next Generation survey, which found that young disabled persons are less likely to have completed primary school (21 per cent) and lower secondary education (21 per cent) compared to those without disabilities (see Figure 21).

Photograph 4: Community-led ramp making initiative in Baghdad.

Figure 21: Educational attainment of young disabled persons and those without disabilities

More broadly, disabled Iraqi youth described difficulties in receiving the adequate resources when it came to the issues they faced, rather than differences in treatment. However, the need for education stakeholders to prioritise meeting accessibility needs suggests an opportunity for more inclusive practices.

'We're grateful to be included in the education system, where we're treated just like any other student. But our challenge is that our disabilities mean we need special things to help us. For example, one person might need a workplace or university designed for someone without legs, while another might need accommodations for being blind or without hands.' (Male Respondent, Al Basrah)

Issues of accessibility and inclusion are also often connected with the general limited availability of assistive devices, such as wheelchairs, crutches, prostheses, glasses, and hearing aids in Iraq. [69] This has led to disabled persons losing their sense of independence and depending on others. Disabled youth are aware of the equipment they need but noted that these devices are rarely available in Iraq, which further excludes them from activities and impairs their quality of life.

'Obtaining specialised equipment such as wheelchairs, crutches, specialised beds, and adapted bathrooms can be quite challenging in Iraq. Through my research on the internet, I've discovered that there are excellent equipment options available in other countries that could significantly improve our quality of life.' (Male Respondent, Al Basrah)

'In terms of my happiness, I dream of having one of those machines or robots that assist you in standing up and walking. There are models available in Germany and America that can aid in walking and moving around, but they are quite costly.' (Male respondent, Al Basrah)

Even where availability exists, as the quote above denotes, there are often significant financial barriers which creates another challenge unless external support is provided.

2.2.3 Entrepreneurship is an alternative pathway into employment for young disabled persons

Although access to employment is seen as a challenge if workplaces cannot adapt to individual needs of disabled persons, some see opportunities in starting their own businesses or in freelance work. This employment route can provide more flexibility and an opportunity to bypass the accessibility barriers faced in traditional workplaces when it comes to generating income.

Qualitative findings highlight the perceived advantage of self-employment in tailoring workspaces to accommodate individual needs. This reflects not only the practical considerations of workplace accessibility but also the broader issue of inclusivity within mainstream employment sectors. By opting for entrepreneurial ventures, disabled persons seek to assert agency over their work environment, where traditional workplaces may fall short in providing necessary accommodations.

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68 Internatioxnal Organisation for Migration Iraq. (2021). Persons with Disabilities and their Representative Organisations in Iraq: Barriers, Challenges and Priorities. https://iraq.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1316/files/documents/OPDs%20report%20English.pdf

69 International Organisation for Migration Iraq. (2021). Persons with Disabilities and their Representative Organisations in Iraq: Barriers, Challenges and Priorities. https://iraq.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1316/files/documents/OPDs%20report%20English.pdf

'Some of us, like my friend here who works as a translator, find it more feasible to have our own jobs where we can tailor the workspace to our needs. Companies or government sectors may struggle to accommodate all our requirements, so pursuing our own ventures seems like a more viable option.' (Male Respondent, Al Basrah)

Yet, disabled youth also recognise that the difficulty in accessing finance remains a key barrier to their entrepreneurial solutions. One respondent touched on the disparity between the aspirations for entrepreneurship and the practical realities for disabled persons. While self-employment offers a sense of autonomy and flexibility, the financial constraints they face inhibit their ability to translate entrepreneurial aspirations into tangible opportunities for economic empowerment.

'One of the biggest obstacles is having limited access to funding, which makes it challenging to cover initial expenditures and maintain the firm.' (Male Respondent, Al Basrah)

These challenges likely contribute to the diminished levels of optimism regarding the future among young disabled persons, particularly concerning their future careers (see Figure 22). Notably, 32 per cent of disabled respondents are pessimistic about their future careers, compared to 19 per cent of those without disabilities.

However, these levels of pessimism do not deter them from feeling motivated to work towards improved conditions. A notable finding is that young disabled persons see that they have a role to play as role models, to help dispel stigmas and push for change. They feel that they can do this by achieving success, showing that no one's potential is restricted or reduced because of a disability. This perspective reflects a nuanced understanding of empowerment, wherein individuals leverage their unique abilities and perspectives to advocate for systemic change.

'Our limited talents may make it difficult for us to make big changes in the community because of our disability. Even if we might have fewer options, we can still make a significant contribution. We can push for change and advance inclusivity and accessibility in our community by concentrating on the areas where we can have an impact and making the most of our special abilities and viewpoints.' (Male Respondent, Al Basrah)

Moreover, statements from respondents on their futures serve as powerful testimonials to the broader societal implications of disability advocacy. Through their actions and accomplishments, they not only dismantle barriers and dispel myths but also inspire others to recognise their own potential and navigate obstacles with resilience.

'We can still be influential and show others that amazing things are achievable even if we have a disability. Through our demonstration of tenacity and resolve, we hope to encourage others to see their own potential and overcome obstacles. We can dismantle barriers, dispel myths, and promote an inclusive society where everyone's contributions are recognised by sharing our successes and accomplishments. Our life stories provide witness to the fact that our limitations do not determine who we are or what we can achieve.' (Male Respondent, Al Basrah)

Figure 22: Percentage of youth feeling optimistic about the future by disability status
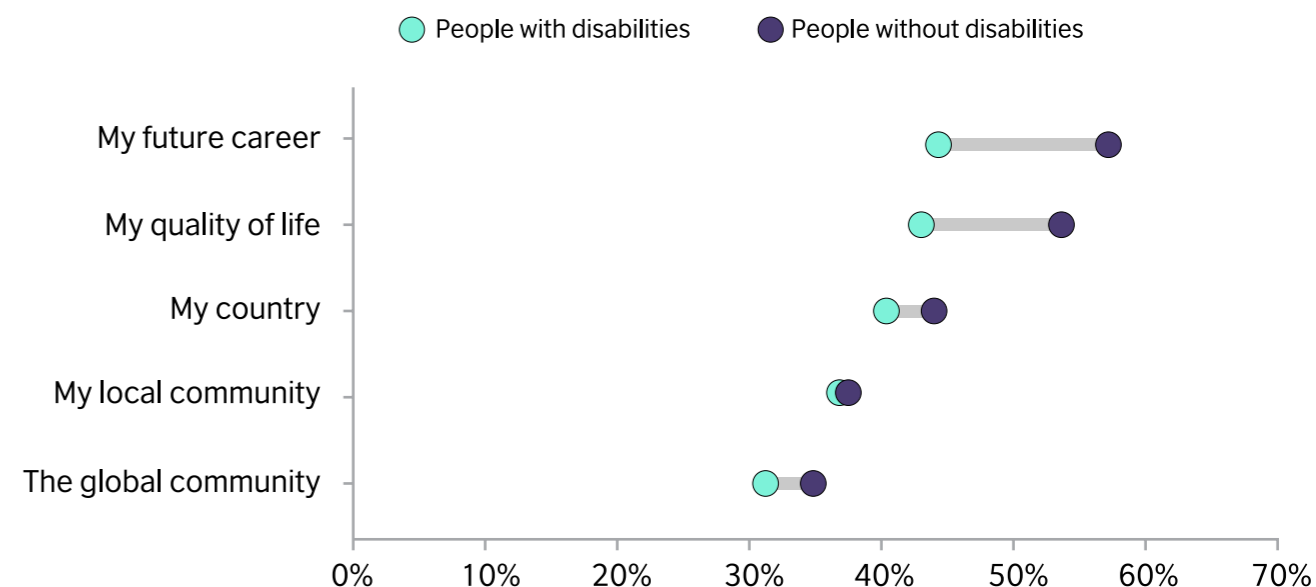
By reframing disability as a source of strength and agency, young disabled persons in Iraq not only redefine societal perceptions but also see their power in contributing to a more inclusive society.

Overall, the perceptions of education, employment, and the future held by young disabled persons in Iraq offer valuable insights into existing barriers and potential opportunities. These insights can guide policy development aimed at better accommodating their needs and fostering their future development. Addressing accessibility in all areas is crucial to eliminating physical barriers, while simultaneously working to reduce societal barriers is essential for promoting inclusivity and facilitating their overall development.

It is essential that governments, humanitarian and development agencies strengthen and grow their understanding of disability, disability inclusive approaches and the role of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities. This can be addressed through awareness raising sessions, social media campaigns and advocacy events and publications, but ultimately starts from acknowledging that disabled persons are active stakeholders in society, and therefore deserve a seat at the table. This also means including them in the wider conversation around global issues, such as climate change.
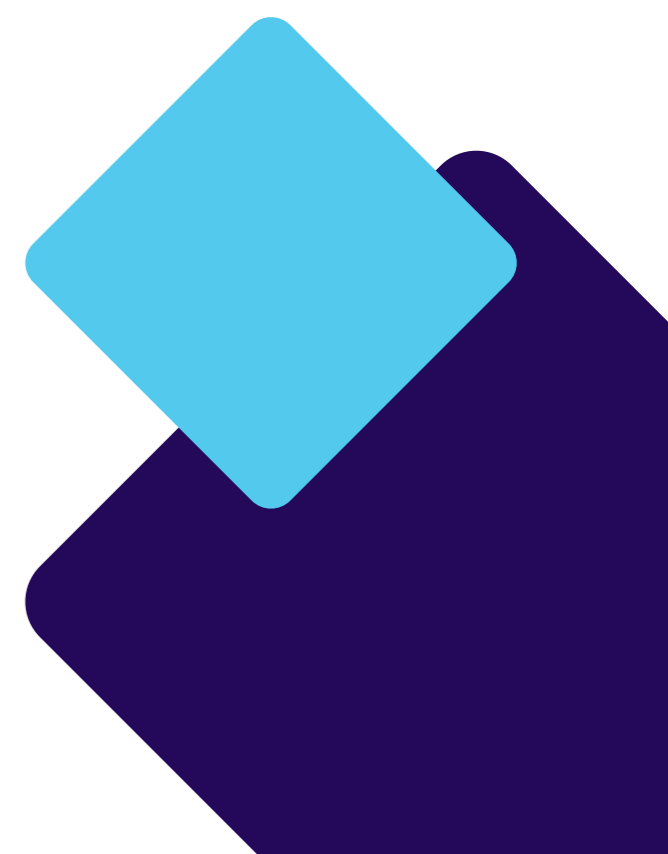
2.3   Youth voices on climate change

While the challenges discussed in the chapters above have features distinctive to the Iraqi context, climate change is very much a global issue that Iraqi youth share with their peers across the world. Indeed, the effects at home are felt even more tangibly as Iraq has been ranked the fifth-most vulnerable country to climate change globally. [70]

Iraq is increasingly affected by soaring temperatures, diminishing rainfall, droughts, water scarcity, sand and dust storms, and flooding. Rapid population growth and urbanisation is also propelling increased demand for water, which along with climate change, is exacerbated by inefficient water use and hydropower projects constructed upstream of major Iraqi rivers by Turkey and Iran. Climate migration, notably in response to water scarcity, is already occurring in Iraq, and as environmental changes intensify, displacement is likely to increase exponentially. [71]

In light of this background, the following subsection will delve into the perceptions of climate change among young Iraqis. This includes their concerns about climate change, the key climate issues they face, and their suggestions for addressing the issues.

Key findings:

- While 44 per cent of young Iraqis expressed concern about the environmental impact of climate change within their country, only 24 per cent identified it as the most urgent global challenge.
- Young Iraqis are aware of climate change and its impact on their lives, and also acknowledge the interconnectedness of climate change with other pressing issues such as employment and poverty.
- Air pollution (15 per cent), extreme heat (12 per cent), and desertification (nine per cent) emerged as the most significant climate concerns among young Iraqis, with rural residents particularly highlighting

desertification (19 per cent) compared to their urban counterparts (six per cent), aligning with research on the disproportionate impact of desertification in rural areas.
- Water-related issues closely followed (20 per cent) as key climate concerns, with young Iraqis emphasizing drought (nine per cent), water scarcity (seven per cent), and flooding (five per cent). During qualitative immersion sessions the impacts on livelihoods, access to drinking water, and agriculture were cited as specific concerns connected to the water crisis.
- Regarding climate change mitigation, young Iraqis expressed a preference for national (27 per cent) and local governments (20 per cent), as well as environmental organisations (20 per cent), to take responsibility. However, qualitative findings also underscored the recognition of individual agency in addressing local climate concerns.

2.3.1 Young Iraqis are concerned about climate change and its intersection with economic and employment challenges

Iraq is rated in the highest category of climate change risk by EU Inform's risk index. This is evident to young Iraqis who regularly experience heat waves, dust storms, droughts and floods. The adverse effects of climate change are therefore both a present-day challenge and a longer-term threat for the younger generation. [72] Consequently, fostering awareness about these impacts and exploring potential mitigation strategies among youth is paramount.

environmental issues, but places economic and employment concerns above them in the broader societal context. This sentiment is echoed in qualitative remarks, such as those from participants in an IDP camp in Ninawa and a male respondent from Basra:

'While environmental issues may not always be at the forefront of young people's minds, we do prioritise maintaining a clean environment. For instance, I avoid littering by not throwing bottles on the streets and disposing of my cigarettes properly'. (Male Respondent, Ninawa)

'I believe that young people who have fewer stressors and worries in their lives tend to focus more on these matters. However, if a young person is dealing with financial, housing, or safety issues, they may not have the luxury of thinking about natural disasters.' (Male Respondent, Al Basrah)

These reflections highlight the fact the young Iraqi's present-day circumstances are affected by more immediate personal and societal challenges, where day-to-day concerns overshadow an issue that requires generational and global change.

2.3.2 Young people have a strong awareness of climate change due to its localised impact

Iraq is a country covering 432,162 square kilometres and encompasses four distinct terrains, which results in a wide variety of regional environmental challenges, as well as the overarching issues facing the country as a whole. [73] For instance, in the southern part of the country, the main environmental issue is flooding in the Tigris River and salinisation of arable land, whereas in the KurdistanRegion, air pollution and smog from oil refineries is more of an issue. [74]

In light of these localised issues and concerns, the notable difference in climate change concern among young Iraqis may also be because of the abstract nature of the term climate change itself. In the qualitative findings it is evident that questions about the specific local impacts of climate change (e.g. flooding, desertification) and the exacerbation of issues like water scarcity are more commonly understood. Insights from immersive sessions further illustrate this point, where respondents express varying degrees of awareness regarding the connection between local issues and climate change.

'I don't think young people necessarily connect these two issues. While natural disasters like extreme heat might disrupt our daily routines temporarily, they may not seem to affect the future or other aspects of life.' (Female Respondent, Kirkuk)

This quote highlights a perception among young people about the relationship between natural disasters, such as extreme heat and their long-term implications. While acknowledging the disruptive impact of such events on daily routines, they may not be perceived as having lasting effects on future prospects or broader aspects of life. Likewise, the quote below also highlights the complexity of connecting extreme weather events or natural disasters to climate change. Their observation that such events are relatively infrequent in Iraq, coupled with its geographical distance from the sea, contributes to a less evident link between these occurrences and broader environmental concerns.

'While it's true that extreme weather events or natural disasters are often linked to underlying issues within local communities, this connection may not always be prevalent, especially in our country, where we are somewhat distant from the sea. Consequently, occurrences of such events are relatively infrequent here.' (Male Respondent, Dhi Qar)

70UNICEF. (2023). Climate Landscape Analysis for Children and Young People in Iraq. https://www.unicef.org/iraq/reports/climate-landscape-analysis-children-and-young-people-iraq#:~:text=Iraq%20is%20ranked%2061st%20out,food%20shortages%20and%20extreme%20temperatures.

71 International Organisation for Migration Iraq. (2022) Migration, Environment, and Climate Change in Iraq. https://iraq.un.org/en/194355-migration-environment-and-climate-change-iraq; Carnegie. (2024). Drying Land worsening water crisis. https://carnegie-mec.org/2024/02/12/drying-land-iraq-s-worsening-water-crisis-pub-91543#:~:text=Water%20shortage%20in%20Iraq%20is,increased%20temperatures%2C%20severe%20and%20prolonged

72UNICEF. (2023). Climate Landscape Analysis for Children and Young People in Iraq. https://www.unicef.org/iraq/reports/climate-landscape-analysis-children-and-young-people-iraq#:~:text=Iraq%20is%20ranked%2061st%20out,food%20shortages%20and%20extreme%20temperatures.

73 Al-Ansari, N. (2021). 'Topography and Climate of Iraq', Journal of Earth Sciences and Geotechnical Engineering, https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1499414/FULLTEXT01.pdf

74 UNDARK. (2021). 'Everything Living is Dying': Environmental Ruin in Modern Iraq, https://undark.org/2021/12/22/ecocide-iraq/

This suggests that there is varied understanding of climate change among young Iraqis, where the immediate impacts of natural disasters may not always translate into broader awareness of their connection to long-term environmental challenges. Addressing this gap in awareness is crucial for fostering greater engagement in climate change. Iraq's climate change and sustainability education is at an emergent stage, but there is a key opportunity to develop this further. [75] Previous research from the British Council highlighted the potential of arts-based practices and co-curricular activities to support transformative climate change education in Iraq, further explored in the recommendations.[76]

2.3.3 Young Iraqis are aware of the intersection of climate change with other systemic issues

Climate change is not only an environmental issue, and this is also the case in Iraq. Environmental issues in Iraq have already had wide-ranging impacts, spilling over into areas such as internal displacement, industry, agriculture, and poverty levels. [77] This interconnectedness is also evident in our qualitative findings, where young Iraqis highlighted the intersection of climate change issues with other challenges they currently face.

The interconnected issues highlighted in the quotes revolve around concerns regarding increased financial strain, heightened job insecurity, the destruction of livelihoods tied to agriculture, and the exacerbation of socio-economic vulnerabilities.

'The worry extends to our jobs being disrupted as well. When extreme weather hits, it can sometimes force businesses to shut down temporarily for safety reasons. For example, heavy rain might flood roads, making it difficult for employees to commute to work, or extreme heat might cause power outages, halting production in factories. This can lead to financial strain and uncertainty about job security, which adds to our concerns during such weather events.' (Female Respondent, Kirkuk)

'Recently, we've been witnessing numerous disasters due to natural events like heavy rain and floods. These disasters destroy homes and businesses, causing significant damage.' (Female Respondent, Kirkuk)

In a country where present day quality of life is low for many, the knock-on effects of climate change serve to spotlight the challenges of a post-conflict state. While day-to-day challenges understandably take precedence, Iraq is on the frontline of climate change, with the devastation of communities a present-day reality.

2.3.4 Urgent environmental concerns include air pollution, extreme heat, desertification and water related issues

Iraq is currently grappling with a pressing environmental reality marked by critical water shortages, rapidly rising temperatures—exceeding the global average rate of warming—and consequential desertification, leading to significant agricultural land loss at a rate of over 100 square kilometres annually according to the United Nations Development Programme. [78] Our analysis of the Next Generation survey reveals an overlap between the climate concerns identified by young Iraqis and the urgent environmental issues outlined in the landscape analysis, underscoring the immediacy of these climate challenges. According to the survey, the top climate concerns facing Iraq, as reported by young people, include air pollution (15 per cent), extreme heat (12 per cent), and desertification (nine per cent) (see Figure 23).

Figure 23: What is the most important climate concern in your local area, if at all?' by urbanicity
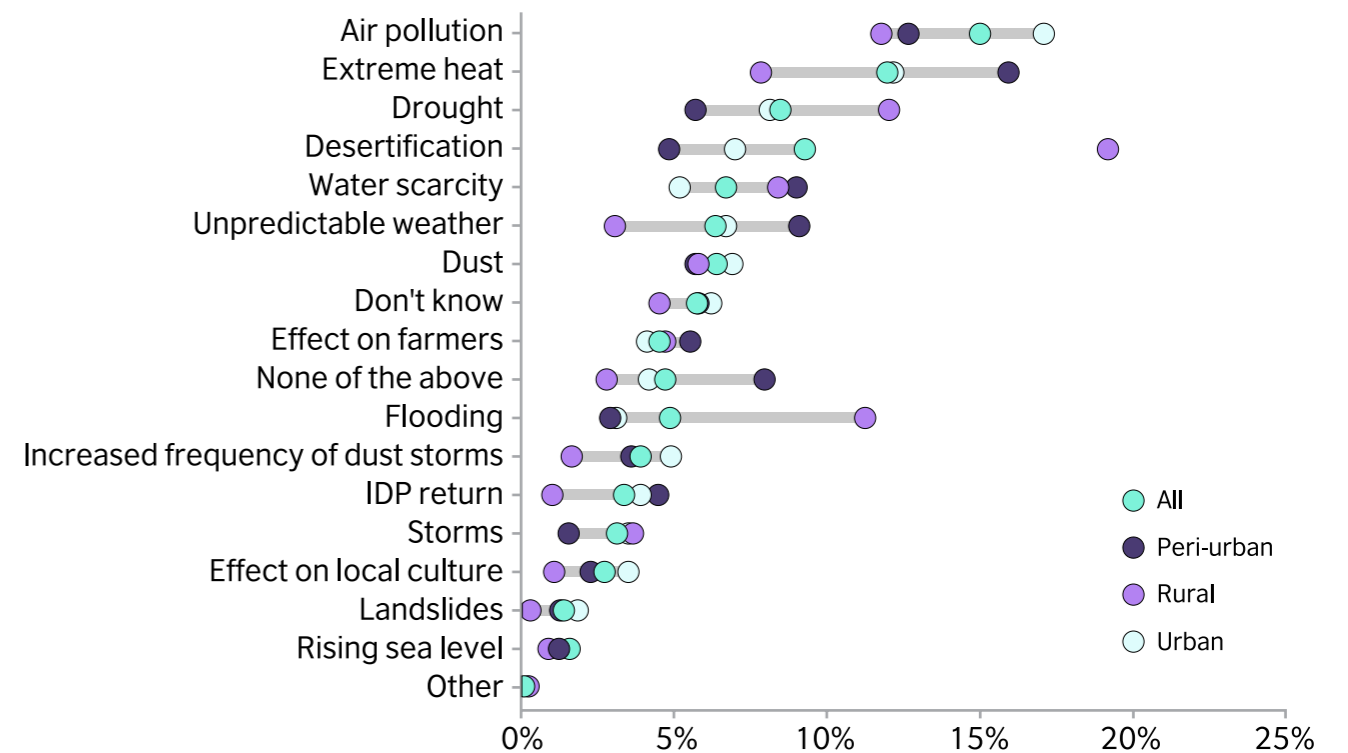

75 Rushton, E., Sharp, S., Walshe, M. (2023). 'Global Priorities for enhancing school-based climate change and sustainability education', British Council. https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-insight/climate-education-schools.

76 Rushton, E., Sharp, S., Walshe, M. (2023). 'Global Priorities for enhancing school-based climate change and sustainability education', British Council. https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-insight/climate-education-schools.

77 IOM Iraq. (2023). The Silent Enemy: How Climate Change is Wreaking Havoc in Iraq. https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/silent-enemy-how-climate-change-wreaking-havoc-iraq

78 Sulaiman, K. (2023). 'Addressing Iraq's environmental Challenges: Population Growth', Washington Institute. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/addressing-iraqs-environmental-challenges-population-growth

There is a significant difference between urban and rural young people in terms of concerns with desertification, with those living in rural areas (19 per cent) significantly more likely to highlight it as a key concern than those from urban areas (six per cent). This aligns with climate research in Iraq by the Norwegian Refugee Council Iraq Office in 2023, which has found that rural areas are disproportionately impacted by environmental issues compared to urban areas. [79]

Although air pollution was not directly addressed by many participants during the immersion sessions, recurring themes centred around extreme heat, desertification, and water-related environmental concerns. Below are excerpts and photographs shared by respondents during in-depth discussions, illustrating their experiences with these pressing issues in their respective areas.

2.3.4.1 Increasing temperatures, changing seasons, and desertification

While air pollution was not discussed directly by many participants in the immersion sessions, extreme heat and desertification were recurring themes. Respondents highlighted how increasing temperatures had impacted their day-to-day lives, as well as highlighting the impact of desertification on former green areas and agriculturally viable land in Iraq.

Discussion varied from discussing changes in weather they have experienced, e.g. from cold winters in their childhoods to rare instances of snow nowadays, with participants drawing this out as a key example of the impact of climate change.

'In this photograph it is snowing heavily in Suli and I remember it used to be like that in Jan-Feb of each year; something that we don't see often nowadays due to climate change' (Female Respondent, As Sulaymaniyah)

Photograph 5: Heavy snowfall in As Sulaymaniyah, a thing of the past.

Mentions of the impact of climate change on agriculture were commonplace among respondents, particularly in discussions about rising temperatures. Iraq relies heavily on its agricultural industry for food security and economic growth. [80] However, the combination of rising temperatures and a decline in rainfall is already

contributing to a decline in agricultural productivity. [81] Respondents frequently referred to this detrimental impact on agriculture when reflecting on the issue.

'Seeing the marshlands drying up is really disappointing. This used to be the greatest source of agriculture and farming while now it is barely green.' (Female Respondent, Dhi Qar)

Photograph 6: Dried up Marshlands in Dhi Qar

2.3.4.2 Water related issues take precedence among young Iraqis

Iraq is currently facing an alarming water crisis, which is impacting the length and breadth of the country, from northern Ninawa to the southern governorates. Water shortages are arguably one of the most pressing issues for Iraq when it comes to climate change. [82] In the Next Generation survey, cumulatively, issues surrounding water (20 per cent) are also key climate concerns in Iraq, with young Iraqis highlighting drought (nine per cent), water scarcity (seven per cent), and flooding (five per cent). All of these concerns are greater among rural communities, notably 11 per cent of those in rural areas highlighted flooding as the most important climate concern compared to three per cent in urban areas.

The importance of this wide issue was further supported by young people's discussions regarding water related climate issues in the deep-dives and immersion sessions. Participants delved into various facets of this crisis, addressing issues such as frequent

flooding, failures in water management systems, pollution of Iraq's waterways, and the alarming decline in water levels in the country's rivers.

'It's sad to see the floods in our streets, it is as a result of climate change; that there is heavy rain in a short period of time and the fact that our infrastructure if not designed to endure the climate change causing flood.' (Male respondent, Baghdad).

Photograph 7: Flooding in Baghdad

79 Norwegian Refugee Council. (2023). Iraq: Climate Change Causing Crop Loss. https://www.nrc.no/news/2023/november/iraq-climate-change-causing-crop-loss-contributing-to-secondary-displacement/#:~:text=Climate%20change%20in%20Iraq%20is,Refugee%20Council%20(NRC)%20today.

80 Atlantic Council. (2023). Climate Profile: Iraq. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/programs/middle-east-programs/rafik-hariri-center-for-the-middle-east/empowerme/macromena/climate-profile-iraq/#:~:text=Key%20Impact%20Areas-,Agriculture,central%20regions%20of%20the%20country.

81 Atlantic Council. (2023). Climate Profile: Iraq. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/programs/middle-east-programs/rafik-hariri-center-for-the-middle-east/empowerme/macromena/climate-profile-iraq/#:~:text=Key%20Impact%20Areas-,Agriculture,central%20regions%20of%20the%20country.

82 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. (2023). Climate Change and Vulnerability in the Middle East. https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/07/climate-change-and-vulnerability-in-the-middle-east?lang=en&center=global.

'Over on the left, that's the lake in the Habania district of Anbar. There used to be photos of this river full of people from western countries, but these days, the water's pretty low, and the area's got a lot of pollution going on.' (Male respondent, Al Anbar).

Photograph 8: Lake at Habania district, Anbar

These discussions illuminated the multifaceted impact of the water crisis on various aspects of life in Iraq. Young Iraqis highlighted the dire consequences on access to safe drinking water, which is essential for sustaining life and ensuring public health.

'Access to drinking water will be the biggest problem for Iraq in the upcoming years and we don't know what to do about it. The second concern is that we cannot endure another crisis; we have seen a lot and I hope [the] water issue is taken seriously by the Government.' (Female Respondent, Ninawa)

'For residents, this water shortage isn't just an inconvenience—it's a daily struggle that impacts their health, hygiene, and overall quality of life. Dependence on water tankers becomes a necessity for many, but even they can't always provide a reliable solution to the problem.' (Male Respondent, Arbil)

Moreover, the adverse effects on agricultural productivity were a major concern, given the country's heavy reliance on agriculture for food security and economic stability.

'It is certainly a serious issue affecting Iraq. In Anbar it is mainly affecting our agriculture and crop. As you can see; many of the agricultural lands are gone; due to lack of water access.' (Male Respondent, Al Anbar)

2.3.5 While young people have a strong sense of agency in combatting climate change, interventions from the state are seen as crucial

At COP28, Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid, acknowledged that Iraq and Gulf nations 'are on the front lines to confront the effects of climate change,' and that the nation must 'set a roadmap for the future' to address this. [83] The Iraqi government has articulated its commitment to adapting to climate change impacts through its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC), serving as the country's guiding policy framework. [84] These contributions were developed in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) following Iraq's accession to the Paris Climate Accord in 2021.[85]

83 Rudaw (2023). Environmental crisis is world's biggest problem: Iraqi president. https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/02122023
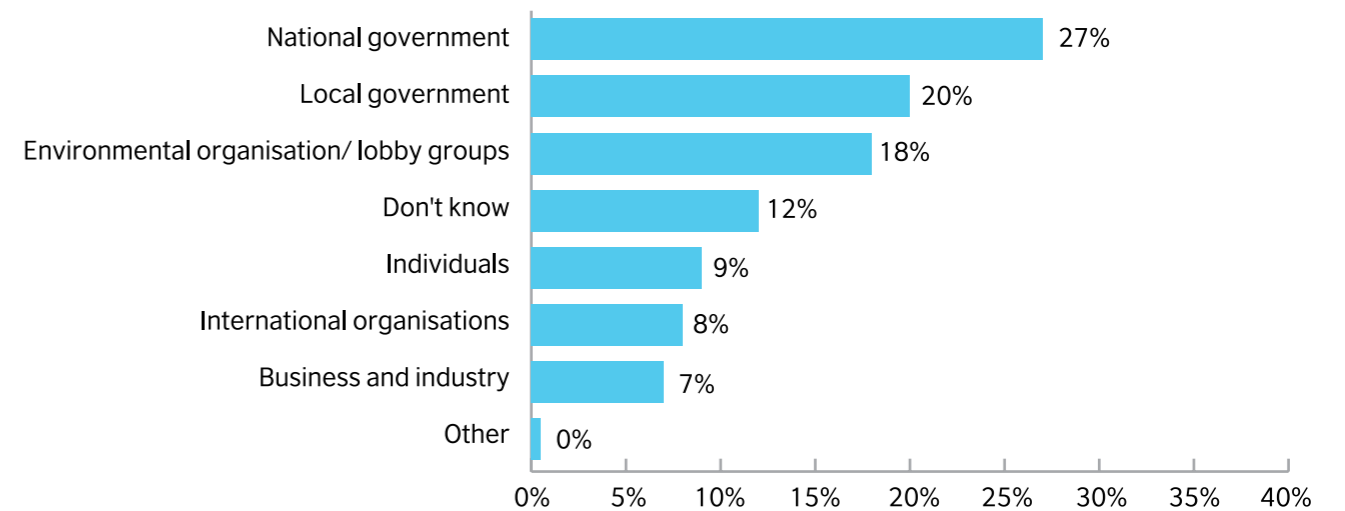
84 UNDP (2022). Climate Change and the Law: Integrating the NDC in Iraqi Legislations. https://www.undp.org/iraq/stories/climate-change-and-law-integrating-ndc-iraqi-legislations

85UNDP (2022). Climate Change and the Law: Integrating the NDC in Iraqi Legislations. https://www.undp.org/iraq/stories/climate-change-and-law-integrating-ndc-iraqi-legislations

Our Next Generation survey shows that young Iraqis welcome government action when it comes to climate change. When asked who should be responsible for tackling climate change, the top three choices are national government (27 per cent), local government (20 per cent), and environmental organisations (20 per cent) (see Figure 24). Far fewer chose individuals, international organisations (eight per cent) (such as the UN), and businesses/industry (seven per cent). This focus on governmental responsibility is slightly more pronounced in rural areas where 36 per cent thought it is the national government's responsibility and 28 per cent that of the local government.

Despite expressing a willingness to see government intervention, our qualitative findings reveal a prevailing sentiment among young Iraqis that current efforts to address environmental issues are inadequate. Participants express disappointment with the perceived low priority given to climate change, with a prevailing focus on personal gains rather than pressing societal concerns. Similarly, respondents in the YAB sessions also cited that the government's current actions related to climate change issues are predominately reactive rather than preventative.

Figure 24: Entity most responsible for tackling climate change according to young people

Entity	Percentage
National government	27%
Local government	20%
Environmental organisation/ lobby groups	18%
Don't know	12%
Individuals	9%
International organisations	8%
Business and industry	7%
Other	0%

This sentiment was also mentioned during the immersion sessions, with a participant acknowledging that systemic change and collective efforts are required beyond individual actions, thus the need for government intervention.

'Solving environmental problems isn't just about individual actions; it's mostly up to the government.' (Female Respondent, Kirkuk)

During the YAB sessions, participants also expressed a preference for substantial government intervention in climate change action. This preference stems from the belief that the government has the capacity to raise awareness about climate-related issues and actions among both young people and the general population.

'Our politicians show little concern for the environment or issues that matter to a young girl like myself.' (Female Respondent, Salah ad Din)

'Politicians prioritise matters that bring them personal benefits and financial gain, rather than prioritising humanitarian concerns.' (Female Respondent, Salah ad Din)

However, qualitative findings also suggest that young people acknowledge individual agency, whether through undertaking seemingly small actions in their local community or advocating for change. This suggests that while they perceive the government as the main player in addressing climate change, they do not disregard the impact they and their own actions can have locally.

'Anyone has the ability to enact change given the appropriate potential and determination.' (Female Respondent, Salah ad Din)

This varied from personal, seemingly small actions to take care of their environment locally which can make a difference, as seen below, to broader awareness raising actions.

'By keeping their surroundings clean, each person has the power to bring about change. If everyone takes this duty seriously, it helps with the group effort to reduce trash creation and create a cleaner environment.' (Female Respondent, Salah ad Din)

This sense of agency is reflected in their going beyond personal responsibility and taking on the role of advocates who understand the role social media can play in widening engagement.

'For people like us, the most impactful action we can take is spreading awareness and encouraging others to do better. By sharing information about environmental issues and inspiring positive changes in behaviour, we can collectively make a difference in protecting our planet.' (Female Respondent, Kirkuk)

The insights presented in this section reflect the nuanced understanding among young Iraqis of the multifaceted impacts of climate change. They demonstrate not only awareness of the term itself but also recognition of its tangible repercussions. While there is some disconnect between everyday perceptions of climate change and the problem it poses at a global level, the severity of the problem is clear. Young people in Iraq primarily look to the government as the main actor responsible for addressing this issue, while also acknowledging the role individuals can play within their communities, which highlights a hopeful potential for collective action.

Beyond collective action, there is also opportunity to connect the fight against climate change into pathways for personal development, as the nature of the challenge requires a significant focus on developing the green economy as part of a consistent and sustained approach.

2.4   Conclusion - Perceptions

Overall, young Iraqis' perceptions of their environment and key concerns are drawn from a number of interconnected challenges, primarily rooted in the desire to engage in meaningful work. Concerns around high levels of poverty and unemployment, leading to economic pressures that have persisted since the 2003 US-led invasion, are still dominant and overshadow other global concerns, such as health crises and pandemics and political polarisation. [86]

Linked to economic pressures, the need for employment opportunities is a key personal challenge, affecting 48 per cent of Iraqi youth, with economic security seen as crucial for achieving wider life goals such as marriage and family life. Graduates face a limited job market, with bachelor's degrees often required for entry-level positions, leading to frustration. Societal pressure from family and relatives, particularly for young women also restricts opportunities for education, employment, and relationships. For instance, 35 per cent of female respondents listed 'societal pressure from family / relatives' as something that negatively affected them, and this is linked to expectations from family to marry relatively young and adhere to societal norms, namely avoiding staying out late at night to prevent judgement from others.

Infrastructure issues such as access to basic services (e.g. quality housing – 22 per cent, food and water – nine per cent, and healthcare – eight per cent) are also pressing. The housing crisis is particularly severe in urban areas with one quarter of urban youth (25 per cent) suffering the negative effects of limited access to housing. Rural youth face limited access to food and water, especially the most vulnerable, such as returnees (17 per cent). Drug abuse is also a significant concern for young people (31 per cent), especially amongst Iraqi youth residing in urban and peri-urban areas (37 and 40 per cent respectively), and those in Southern Iraq (36 per cent). Young people link drug abuse with economic stress, boredom, and a decline in religious values. Despite strict penalties for drug trafficking, which mean that those using drugs are reluctant to seek help or report the issue, the root causes of drug use (e.g. limited economic opportunities) remain unaddressed.

The challenges outlined above, particularly in employment and accessibility of services, are heightened for young disabled persons. In focus group discussions, disabled persons describe their main challenge as accessibility in public spaces, including workplaces. This can manifest in the need for ramps for those with mobility issues or access to assistive devices. Due to this, entrepreneurship offers a potential pathway to employment, with 59 per cent of disabled persons interested in starting a business. However, financial constraints can hinder young disabled persons' entrepreneurial efforts, a concern shared among wider Iraqi youth. Beyond the workplace, experiences of young disabled persons are complex, and they face both sympathy and social stigma. Whilst seven in ten young people (70 per cent) reject the notion that disabled persons are a societal burden, many young disabled persons still report feeling excluded from their communities (33 per cent reported not feeling 'at all' a part of their local community) and face barriers in accessing crucial enablers like assistive devices.

Climate change is not considered the highest priority compared to economic pressures at the global level, with only 24 per cent identifying it as the one of the most important issues the world is facing. Nevertheless, 44 per cent of young Iraqis are concerned with the environmental impact of climate change on their country, highlighting differences in understanding climate change at global and national levels. Most young people have experienced the effects first-hand, and identify extreme heat (12 per cent), desertification (nine per cent) and water scarcity (seven per cent) as the most important climate concerns in their area. Young people are also aware of the impact of climate change on poverty and unemployment, particularly as worsening conditions in rural areas drive urban migration. While young people recognise the need for government action, with 27 per cent believing that national government should have the main responsibility for tackling climate change, they also see the importance of individual efforts and advocacy in addressing climate change (nine per cent).

86 Mahler, D., Vishwanath, T. (2021). When the consequences of conflicts last generations: Intergenerational mobility in Iraq and Vietnam. https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/dev4peace/when-consequences-conflicts-last-generations-intergenerational-mobility-iraq-and-vietnam.

Young people are clear on what they need in the face of these challenges. Young disabled persons need better accessibility in public spaces, workplaces, and educational institutions through comprehensive policies and building codes. Inclusive education and vocational training are essential, requiring investment in teacher training, inclusive curricula, and assistive technologies. Strengthening legal protections and enforcement mechanisms to align with international standards is crucial, alongside providing legal assistance to those facing discrimination.

Gender-sensitive programming is needed to support women's employment, including safety-focused livelihood activities and micro-business support, while engaging men and boys to reduce social stigma. Additionally, enhancing climate education, promoting sustainable livelihoods, empowering youth in environmental advocacy, and building climate-resilient educational practices are vital to address climate change and create green job opportunities.

Despite the layered nature of the issues Iraqi youth face, a number of different pathways are opening up that could increase their social mobility while also addressing their country's most pressing challenges, explored in the next chapter.
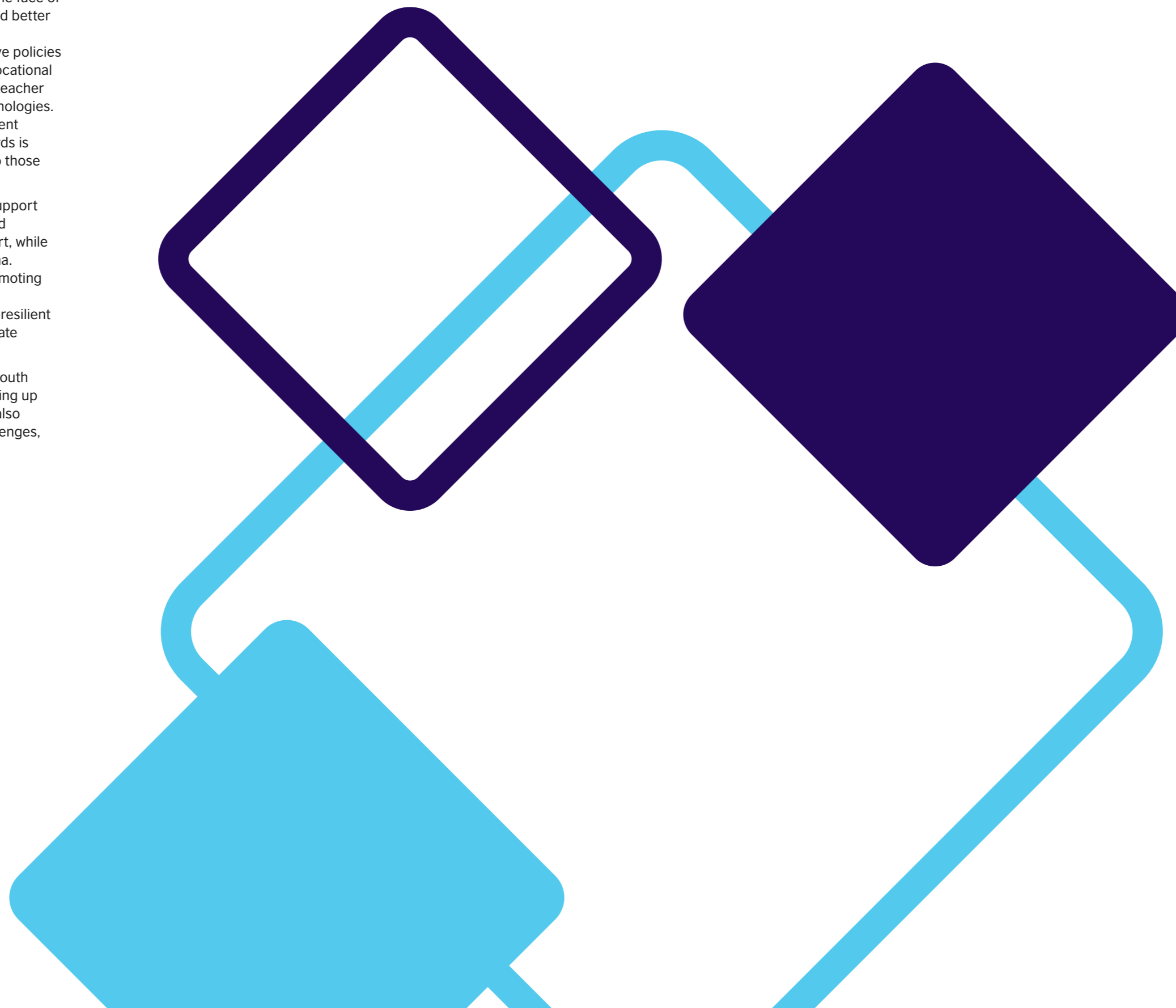
Photo credit: o3 Media Production/Pexels

3. Pathways

The profiles and perceptions discussed in previous chapters painted a picture of a young and dynamic population with a desire for upward social mobility, and the promises of personal and professional success that can bring. However, in post-conflict Iraq there remain a myriad of barriers and risks which complicate the transition in young adulthood. Young people therefore face uncertainty as they navigate the challenges and opportunities to improve their lives, a reflection of their complex living environments and an unpredictable future.

The upcoming chapter explores pathways for youth development while shedding light on these existing barriers. It examines paths for civic engagement and youth voice when it comes to political involvement. Additionally, it investigates the accessibility of education, identifying barriers and initiatives aimed at enhancing educational opportunities for all young people. The chapter also highlights impediments to employment and entrepreneurship, presenting insights from young Iraqis on overcoming these challenges. Lastly, it explores the aspirations for international migration among young Iraqis.

Photo credit: Khezez/Pexels

3.1 Youth political and civic engagement

Since 2005, Iraq's political model has been based on the muhasasa (quota) system, an ethno-sectarian power-sharing arrangement that provides representation for various partisan, religious, and ethnic groups. The country, therefore, operates on paper as a federal, representative parliamentary democracy, with a semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region.

During each election cycle since Iraq's constitution was developed in 2005, a wide range of new political parties have emerged. With ethnic and sectarian identity as the current backbone of the political system, the vote inevitably reflects sectarian and ethnic interests and concerns, as well as reflecting political rivalries. This diversity of political actors and interests therefore often leads to complex periods of negotiation to form new governments.

As previous studies have shown, it is this system of ethnic federalism that many Iraqi youth now associate with policies that prevent the country from achieving its full potential.[87]

Key findings:

- Iraqi youth recognise the importance of being politically engaged but remain sceptical about the electoral process due to unfulfilled promises and systemic issues. Overall, half of young Iraqis still believe it is important to engage in national politics, with some variance across regions.

- However, the vast majority of young people do not feel like their views are reflected in political discussions, while almost 40 per cent do not plan to increase their political involvement as they are disillusioned with the political process.

- Protest and social media are seen as powerful ways for Iraqi youth to voice concerns and mobilise for change, but reservations were expressed by some regarding their security and safety expressing views online.

3.1.1 Political participation is valued but a sense of disillusionment exists

Iraq's political history is characterised by resilience amidst turmoil, including regime changes, security issues, and periods of conflict. [88] Following the US-led invasion in 2003, Iraq has navigated various political transitions marred with instability, and has been exploited by armed groups. [89] In October 2019, significant public demonstrations were held across Baghdad and the southern provinces. These protests coalesced around a demand for political and electoral reform, which would ultimately pave the way for more transparent and accountable governance, and called for more job opportunities, better public services, and improved living conditions. These were known as the Tishreen (October) protests and they were more energetic, diverse, and effective than those of previous movements.

Youth in Iraq have a history of active political engagement and they played a highly prominent role in the Tishreen movement, which ushered in a new phase of civic participation. However, they were subsequently met with repression from government forces and their allied militias, who responded forcefully to protests resulting in a loss of leadership in the movement. [90]

Five years on from the Tishreen protests and one year since the last elections, a significant number of young Iraqis continue to show a baseline interest in engaging in politics, with half of young people (50 per cent) stating that it is important to participate in political processes at the national level (see Figure 25). Interestingly, respondents in North/Western Iraq are less likely to think this (41 per cent) compared to Southern Iraq (54 per cent) and the Kurdistan Region (51 per cent). This may be influenced by factors impacting residents of Northern Iraq who were largely removed from the 2019 protests in Baghdad and South, compounded by periods of marginalisation and political disenfranchisement during Saddam Hussein's regime as well as in the aftermath of the US-led invasion.[91]

Figure 25: Percentage of young people who think it is important to participate in political process by level and region

While there is a moderate level of engagement overall, there appears to be a relatively limited intention to increase political engagement, with almost four in ten respondents (39 per cent) reporting this sentiment (Figure 26). This reluctance to go beyond their current level of engagement is higher for women, 44 per cent of whom said they did not want to increase their engagement, than for men (34 per cent).

Among those willing to engage, there is a strong indication that if politics reflected personal views and opinions of young people (20 per cent) they would increase their engagement in politics. This indicates a strong desire for alignment between individual beliefs and political discourse. Additionally, the accessibility of political information is identified as a key facilitator of increased engagement, with nine per cent of respondents expressing openness to engagement if information was more readily available.

Similarly, young disabled persons express a desire for greater inclusion and representation in the political process, especially for these issues to be included in national discourse and political priorities. 21 per cent of young disabled persons stated that they would be more inclined to engage in politics if it reflected their personal views and opinions. Moreover, an additional nine per cent are open to engagement if they could vote on decisions directly impacting them.

87 Enabling Peace Iraq Center (2021). The Long Game: Iraq's Tishreen Movement and the Struggle for Reform. https://enablingpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Tishreen_ Report_October_2021.pdf.

88 European Council on Foreign Relations (2023.) From Shock and Awe to Stability and Flaws: Iraq's Post-invasion Journey. https://ecfr.eu/publication/from-shock-and-awe-to-stability-and-flaws-iraqs-post-invasion-journey/
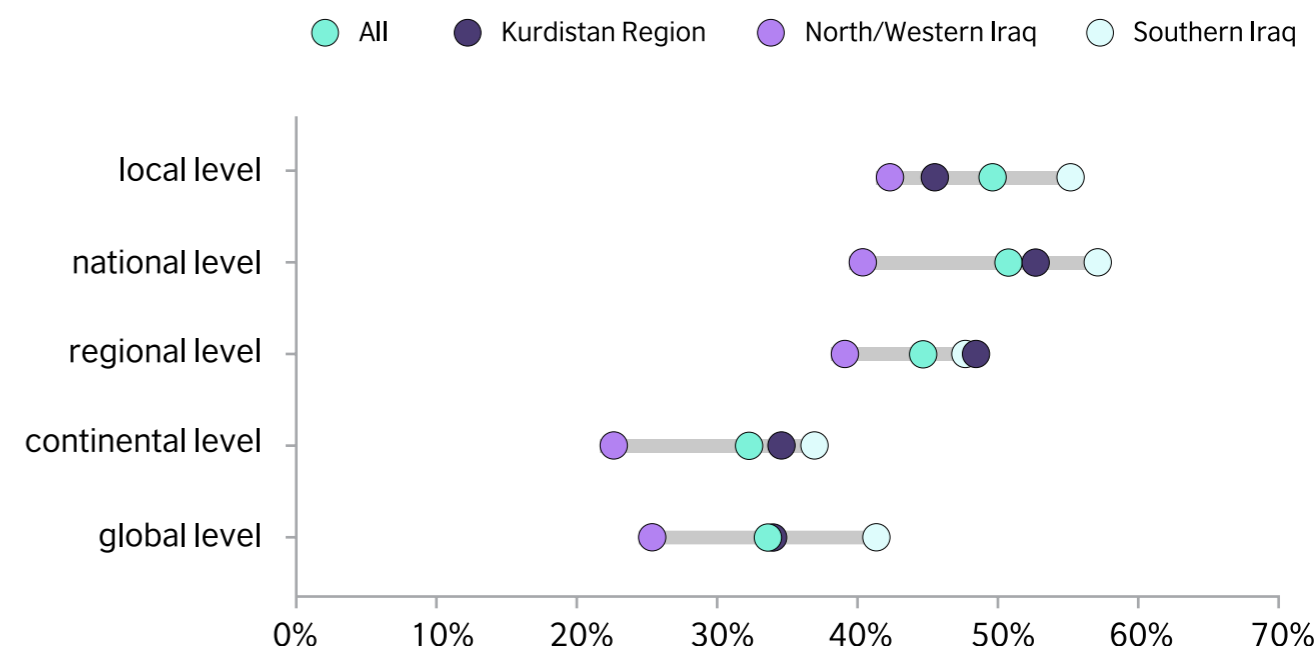
89 Global Conflict Tracker. (2024). Conflict in Iraq. https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/political-instability-iraq

90 Chatham House (2023) Tackling Iraq's Unaccountable State.https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/12/tackling-iraqs-unaccountable-state/04-elite-repression-societal-accountability.

91 Foreign Policy Research Institute (2023). Recentralization Imperils Iraq's Stability and Fuels Regional Tensions. http://www.fpri.org/article/2023/10/recentralization-imperils-iraqs-stability-and-fuels-regional-tensions/

Figure 26: Percentage of young people who do not want to increase their political engagement.

3.1.2 Voting dissent: alternative pathways to civil engagement among young Iraqis

Overall, attitudes towards civil engagement are driven by a desire from young people to be heard by those in positions of power. However, the sentiment towards voting varies significantly among respondents, indicating diverse perspectives on the political process. In the immersion sessions, only a couple of respondents, both from the Kurdistan Region, viewed voting as a viable option. Others expressed reservations about voting's effectiveness , pointing to past instances of unfulfilled political promises and perceptions that election processes are not sufficiently free and fair, and do not deliver democracy as they see it. Instead, they proposed active engagement outside of elections as a means of voicing their views on a system perceived as not fully representing the interests of young people.

The quotes from respondents highlight this sentiment vividly. A respondent from Ninawa emphasised the significance of boycotting elections as a form of protest in a system perceived as discriminatory. Her perspective on abstaining from elections as a powerful statement underscores a commitment to seeking change within the political landscape.

'By not participating in the election, we're making a stand, showing that we're fed up and won't endorse a system that discriminates against us. It's about making our voices heard in the only way left to us, by refusing to be part of a process that seems rigged against our interests from the start.' (Female Respondent, Ninawa)

'I don't trust this system at all and taking part in this election means that we are part of this corrupt system.' (Female Respondent, As Sulaymaniyah)

Similarly, a participant from An Najaf acknowledged the significance of elections in theory but expressed scepticism about their effectiveness in practice, acknowledging that the decline in voter turnout reflected a broader sentiment of disenchantment among Iraqi youth.

'Well, election is certainly important; it is the only tool for a democratic nation to gain their rights and select the officials that better represent their rights; however, in Iraq, elections never worked well. You may have noticed that voting turnover keeps decreasing every year, almost half of Iraqis did not believe or did not have faith in the latest election. [...] I don't want to boycott elections, but I don't have a great hope in it either.' (Male Respondent, An Najaf)

These responses underscore the complex relationship between Iraqi young people and political participation, where there is a recognition of the importance of civil engagement but scepticism towards the electoral process, fuelled by the need for better representation of youth opinions and issues in politics. The survey findings highlighted that trust in the political system is split, with 37 per cent reporting they have some or a lot of trust in the political system, compared to 35 per cent with no or not much trust (see Figure 27). This suggests a level of ambivalence towards the political system among young Iraqis, most likely born out of frustration after many years of trying and being unable to affect systemic change, often at great personal risk.

Figure 27: Level of trust in political system
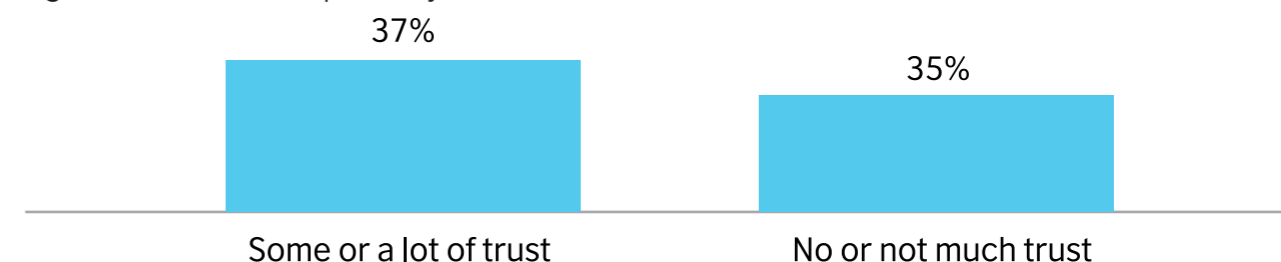
3.1.3 Protest: a mixed response on its value for political participation

In line with their aspirations for progress in Iraq's political landscape, young Iraqis have a range of perspectives on their engagement in political life and the effectiveness of different forms this can take.

The efficacy of public protest is one aspect of this discussion. The discussions with young Iraqis revealed a range of views on political engagement, with a notable emphasis on creating spaces for active dialogue as well as some support for more confrontational forms of activism such as protest. [92]

The Tishreen movement provides an interesting contextual background to these findings. The movement had mixed results – on the one hand, it catalysed the emergence of new political organisations and led to the resignation of President Abdul Madhi. On the other hand, ultimately, the fundamental system that sparked the protests remained largely unchanged. [93]

'I am not with protest, because I believe the first step to be taken is awareness, discussion and dialogue.' (Female Respondent, Dhi Qar)

Another respondent, from Al Anbar, specifically rejected protest as he preferred to be positive about the future. This may reflect more recent improvements and reconstruction efforts in Al Anbar following the liberation of areas in the governorate from Islamic State control, and a preference for stability. [94]

'Well, I am not with protest because I think this moment is over and it is time for Iraq to rebuild and build a better future. There have been some improvements in Anbar and we don't want [to] face another disaster here.' (Male Respondent, Al Anbar)

Similarly, a respondent from Al Basrah when asked indicated a stronger preference for less physically confrontational civic engagement as opposed to protest regarding the issues of climate change and government corruption (see Figure 28).
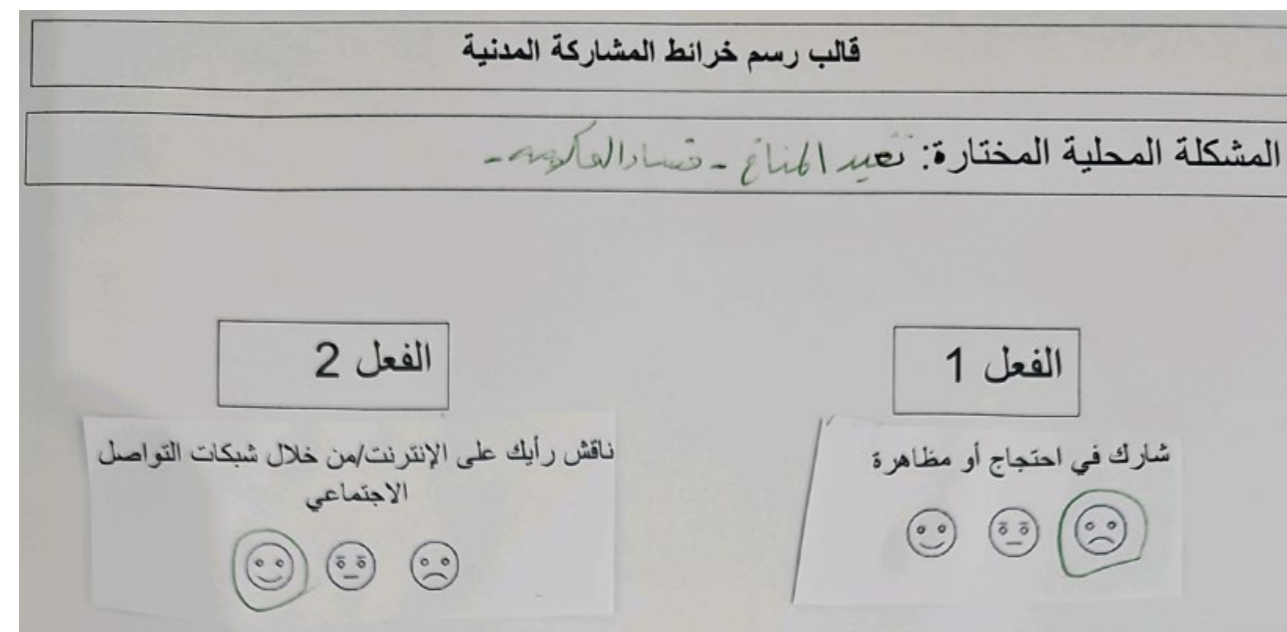
Protest is however still seen by some as an effective way to create change, particularly by those most sceptical about the capacity of formal political process to implement changes they would like to see, and seen as a valid part of political life to assert pressure for these to be prioritised.

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92 Enabling Peace Iraq Centre (2021). The Long Game: Iraq's Tishreen Movement and the Struggle for Reform. https://enablingpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Tishreen_Report_October_2021.pdf

93 Amnesty International (2023). Iraq: Four years after Tishreen protests, no justice for state and militia violence. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/09/iraq-four-years-after-tishreen-protests-no-justice-for-state-and-militia-violence/

94 Amnesty International (2023). 643 Iraqi Men Disappeared Two Years Ago: Where Are They? https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2017/06/643-iraqi-men-missing-for-a-whole-year/

Figure 28: Politics exercise and translation (Male Respondent, Al Basrah).

قالب رسم خرائط المشاركة المدنية

المشكلة المحلية المختارة: تغير المناخ - فساد الحكومة -

الفعل 2

الفعل 1

ناقش رأيك على الإنترنت/من خلال شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي

شارك في احتجاج أو مظاهرة

Civic Engagement Mapping Template

The chosen local problem/issue: "Climate change - Government corruption-"

Action [Reaction 1]

Action [Reaction 2]

Participating in a protest or demonstration

Discuss your opinion online/ on social media networks
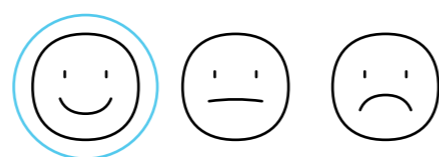
'This idea of taking protest action really gives me hope, and I'm feeling optimistic about it. It seems like our government doesn't really do anything unless there's pressure from us.' (Male Respondent, Al Basrah)

3.1.4 Harnessing social media, amplifying local concerns and youth voices

Social media has been a powerful coordination tool for protesters in Iraq for over a decade, and was instrumental during the Tishreen movement which was initially organised and promoted via private groups and pages. A 2021 study by the Enabling Peace in Iraq Center revealed that for young Iraqis, social media is heavily utilised to organise, share photos and videos of protests, and discuss Iraq's political and social realities.[95]

Indeed, aside from being a primary source of news about current events among young Iraqis (64 per cent), social media continues to be seen as a channel for individual expression and civic engagement. Some Iraqi youth view social media as a potent tool for collective action and advocacy, allowing individuals to voice their grievances and mobilise for change. Despite the acknowledged risks, such as perceived potential repercussions from the authorities, many see it as an effective means to reach a wide audience and contribute to conversations that matter to them the most.

'I think nowadays; there are many people active on social media and Instagram and Facebook, recently TikTok, [they] are all places where you can express your feeling and your concerns. (...) Even if it does not go anywhere; it means I have made a difference and I have raised my voice to the world.' (Male Respondent, An Najaf)

Moreover, social media is not only seen as a tool for individual expression but also as a mechanism to collectively address societal issues. In Halabja, for example, a respondent credits social media activism for bringing attention to the water crisis in her area, which ultimately led to the resolution of the issue.[96]

'I think Facebook is the most common social network, it is a good channel to express your thoughts and feeling. If you are able to reach a certain number of fans; it is also seen and heard by the officials and political activists. (...) I think it is also a good way to criticise the government in certain issues. Lately, the water crisis frustrated the people of Halabja but we were able to send our voice to the international community and the issue was resolved by USAID eventually.' (Female Respondent, Halabja)

In summary, young people in Iraq project a mixture of hope, determination, and pragmatism onto their country's politics. There is a baseline interest to be engaged in rebuilding Iraq with divergent views on how best to do so, with the emergence of alternative forms of engagement. These include continuing to protest, avoiding direct confrontation with authorities, prioritising spaces for dialogue, or focusing efforts on local development projects. Social media also offers different avenues for engagement, from planning and strategising direct action to simply expressing feelings and enabling discussions among peers. Yet others have decided to tone down their engagement and, in some cases, boycott the electoral process altogether, with low voter-turn in 2023 an outcome of this disillusionment.

95 Enabling Peace Iraq Center (2021). The Long Game: Iraq's Tishreen Movement and the Struggle for Reform. https://enablingpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Tishreen_Report_October_2021.pdf

96 It is noteworthy that Halabja is under the control of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, which is more tolerant of free speech and protests compared to Kurdistan Democratic Party-controlled areas, thereby allowing greater bandwidth for young activists to critique local governance.

3.2 Employment challenges

Despite challenges such as violence, the COVID-19 pandemic, and economic pressures, the spirit of the 2019 protest movement remains resilient. Indeed, the Tishreen movement established several political parties in 2021, pursuing organised means for formal political action. In the 2023 elections, independent candidates won 40 parliamentary seats out of 329, a sign of progress for those who wish to see change. [97] Part of these candidates' agenda was to improve one of the most apparent symptoms of Iraq's crisis: the pressing need for employment opportunities for young people, which is now explored in greater detail.

Both heightened political engagement and political disaffection among Iraqi youth, as discussed in the previous section, is partly driven by widespread unemployment. The worsening economic situation and accelerating rise in unemployment have been at the centre of their grievances for years, highlighting the pressing need of jobs for the country's growing youth population. Youth unemployment is currently at 32 per cent, higher than both the national average (19 per cent) as well as the regional youth unemployment average (25 per cent). [98]

With this in mind, it is unsurprising that the majority of young people (52 per cent) cited the need for more employment opportunities as the biggest challenge they had faced in the last five years. Young Iraqis' wider concerns of corruption and nepotism within the state apparatus feeds into their perceptions around the need for opportunities in the employment sector, a reflection of limited change since the last British Council MENA Youth Survey in 2020. [99] I Discussions with a number of young Iraqis highlighted the challenge of access and competition for jobs, with some navigating through 'middlemen' to access public sector jobs, and acknowledging the fierce competition for private sector jobs with good salaries.

These reflections are not without foundation. Iraq is ranked 154th in Transparency International's global corruption index out of 180 countries, with bribes and kick-backs commonly-reported among government contracts. [100] Public sector work is perceived as being occupied by officials in comfortable and well-paid roles who have little incentive to embrace anti-corruption measures and economic reforms. [101] Furthermore, spending is prioritised towards military security, while sectors like agriculture are often neglected. [102]

Key findings:

- Young Iraqis' wider concerns of corruption and nepotism within the state apparatus feed into their perceptions around the limited opportunities in the employment sector.

- Seven in ten (69 per cent) young people were not in paid employment and 52 per cent cited limited employment opportunities as the biggest challenge they had faced in the last five years. This was more pronounced amongst women than men, who were more likely to be stay at home parents and homemakers.

- Over half (56 per cent) of respondents identified the biggest challenge of youth in employment as low wages, especially for those living in urban areas (59 per cent) compared to their peers in rural areas (47 per cent).

- There is a relatively high level of dissatisfaction with existing employment among young people, with only around a third (32 per cent) working in professional, scientific, and technical activities saying that this was their desired sector to work in.

98 Statista (2023). Youth Unemployment Rate: Iraq. https://www.statista.com/statistics/812116/youth-unemployment-rate-in-iraq/ ; World Bank (2024). Youth Unemployment, youth total – Middle East and North Africa. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=ZQ

99 British Council. (2020). Youth Perceptions of Hope, Opportunity and Trust in the Middle East & North Africa (MENA).

100 Transparency International, (2023). 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index. transparency.org/en/cpi/2023.

101 Lizzy Porter, Prospect Magazine (2023). Iraq: The Fallout. https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/60490/iraq-the-fallout

102 Commitment to Equity (2023). The Effects of Fiscal Policy on Inequality and Poverty in Iraq. https://commitmentoequity.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/ceq133.pdf

97 CFRI. (2023). Local Elections in Iraq: Reality and Implications. https://cfri-irak.com/en/article/local-elections-in-iraq-reality-and-implications-2023-12-15.

3.2.1 Youth unemployment demographics

In our survey, seven in ten (69 per cent) young people were not in paid employment. Of those currently out of work, the majority were students or unemployed and a minority were stay at home parents or homemakers (see Figure 29). As employment is seen as important to self-fulfilment, the need for more workplace opportunities and the frustration of being unable to find work after university was highlighted by some young people in focus group discussions.

"The scarcity of job opportunities for young people, compounded by the struggle to secure employment after graduation, is a pressing issue that significantly impacts individuals and society at large. Many young graduates find themselves facing a daunting and competitive job market, where the demand for skilled workers often exceeds the available opportunities. This situation not only creates financial stress and uncertainty for individuals but also stunts their professional growth and development." (Male Respondent, Dhi Qar)
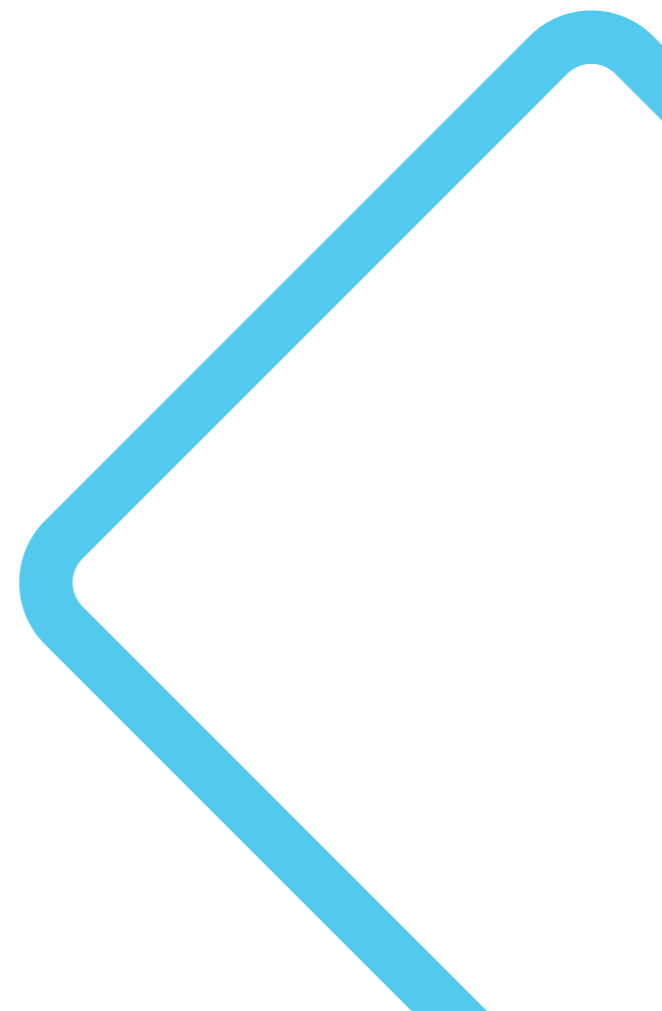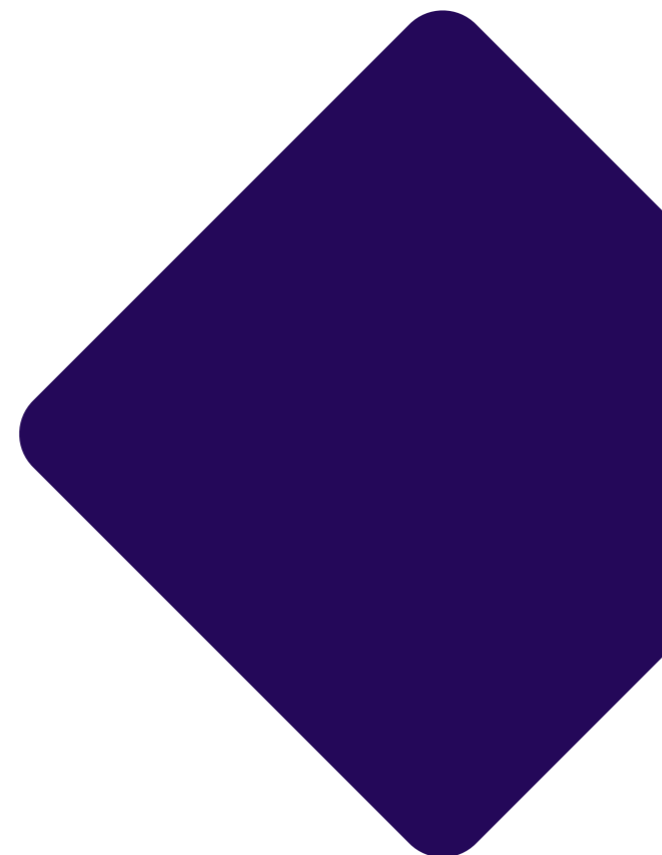
Figure 29: Current occupation of young people
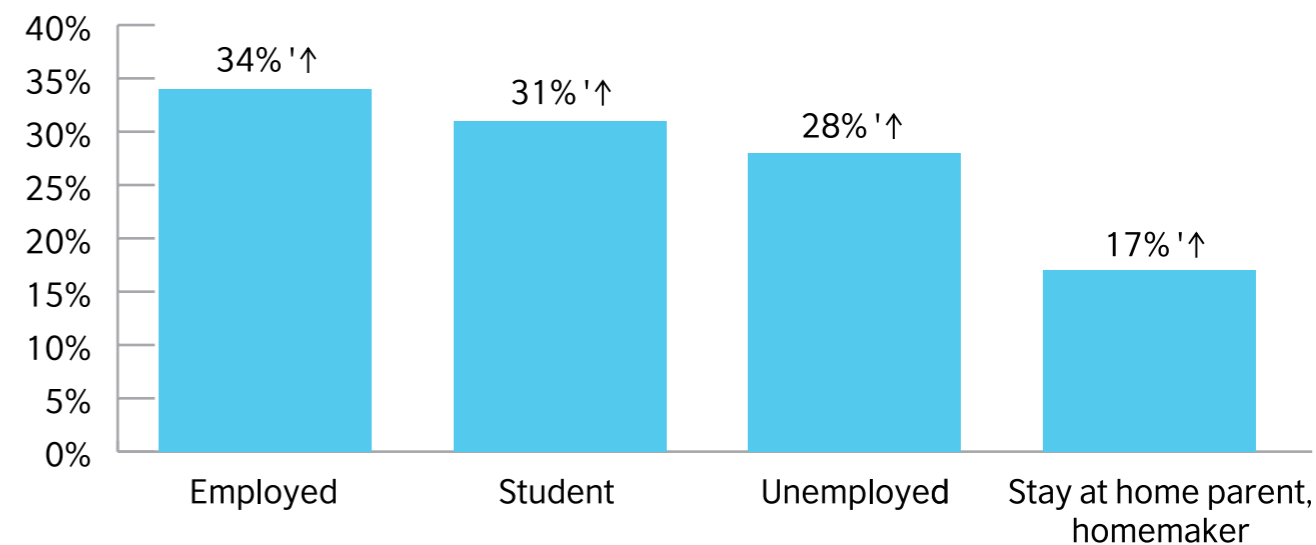
Gender plays a huge role in the employment figures, with women being much more likely to be stay at home parents or homemakers (28 per cent) compared to men (six per cent), with this being the highest for rural women (34 per cent). While Iraq has one of the lowest employment-to-total population ratios in the MENA region, the gendered dimension of unemployment is particularly stark. For example, in 2021, the national labour force participation rate was 39 per cent, with male participation almost six times that of Iraqi females. [103] This is reflected in our Next Generation survey, with 47 per cent of men either in employment (part or full-time) or self-employed, compared to just 23 per cent of women (see Figure 30). These gendered roles and the effect of social norms on reducing the participation of young women in the labour force are well documented and were also noted in focus group discussions. [104]

"For young people, especially girls, customs and cultural expectations can provide serious obstacles in some circumstances. For example, there can be job opportunities that require overtime or long hours, which could promote personal growth. They might not be able to take advantage of these chances, though, due to expectations from their families, particularly with regard to safety and social standards for young women. These societal limitations frequently present challenges for young people, especially girls, as they make their way toward developing personally and professionally." (Female respondent, Baghdad)

103 International Labour Organization. (2022). 'Iraq Labour Force Survey 2021'. Central Statistical Organization (CSO), Kurdistan Region Statistics Office (KRSO) and International Labour Organization (ILO).

104 For example: El-Khalil, Soraya & Ismail, Tala. (2024). Navigating social norms to empower Iraq's female workforce. World Bank Blogs. World Bank.
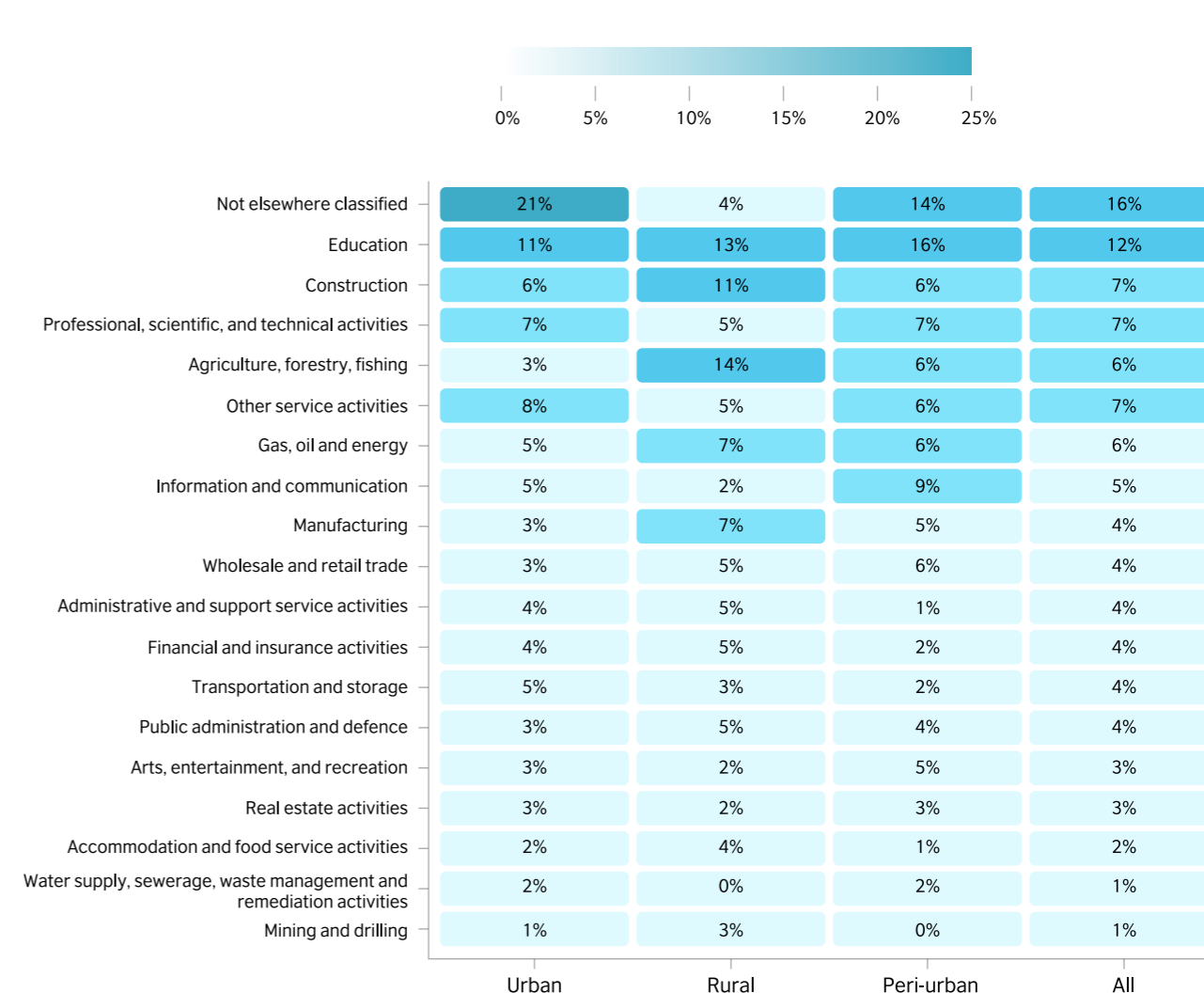
Figure 30: Percentage of young people by employment status and gender

Figure 31: Employment sector among those employed in the sample
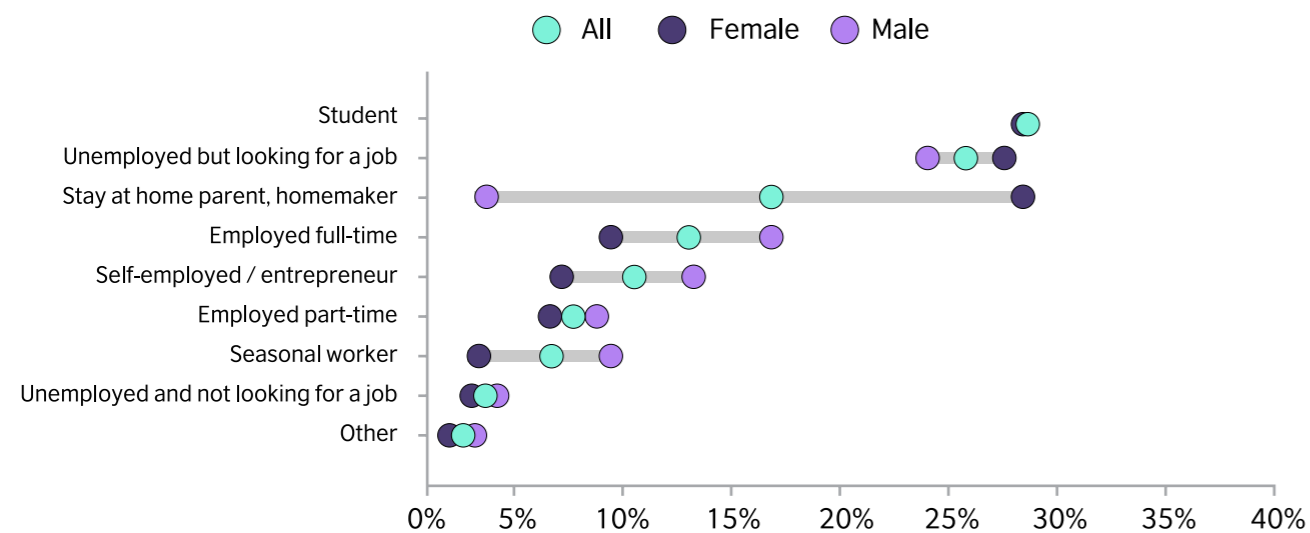
There were also region differences in employment in the Next Generation survey with the Kurdistan Region having the highest levels of unemployment (40 per cent compared to 25 per cent in other regions). This aligns with discussion in our Youth Engagement Studio sessions where young people pointed out that there are significant differences between cities, with areas like Al Basrah facing far fewer job opportunities compared to Baghdad. This discrepancy underscores a broader issue of uneven economic development across the country. Furthermore, respondents expressed a sense of indifference from the government towards these regional inequalities, suggesting a shortfall of proactive measures to address the imbalance and foster equitable economic growth throughout Iraq.

Among young Iraqis who were employed, the most popular sectors included: industry not elsewhere classified (16 per cent), education (12 per cent), professional, scientific, and technical activities (seven per cent), construction (seven per cent) and agriculture, fishing, or forestry (six per cent). Unsurprisingly, those in rural areas were more likely to work in agriculture, fishing, or forestry and those in urban areas were more likely to say that they worked in an industry not elsewhere classified (21 per cent) (see Figure 31). This latter point indicates the relevance of an informal labour market in the absence of formal employment opportunities.

However, when asked in which sector they would like to work, more young people selected education (13 per cent), gas, oil, and energy (12 per cent), information and communication (nine per cent), suggesting that some would like to move to other sectors. Indeed, only 42 per cent of respondents working in education, 32 per cent working in professional, scientific, and technical activities, and 26 per cent of those in the construction sector said that this was their desired sector to work in. This reflects a limited job market with a narrow focus on typical public sector work, while the private sectorremains underdeveloped, offering little in the way of meaningful alternatives.[105]

3.2.2 Low wages, long hours, and unfair or discriminatory treatment are key challenges for young people in the work place

Despite the relatively high levels of unemployment, roughly 500,000 young people enter the workforce in Iraq each year, where they face a myriad of different challenges alongside their peers. For this cohort, low wages were cited as the biggest challenge by over half (56 per cent) of all respondents (Figure 32). This aligns with the high levels of informal employment and low levels of employment in the public sector (which is known for higher wages and more stability) amongst young people. [106] Low wages also drive the desire for young people to turn to a preference to work in the private sector where wages are perceived to be higher and opportunities for growth more varied, as expressed in the focus group discussions and Youth Engagement Studio sessions.

This variation also extended to the different regions within Iraq. Young people in the Kurdistan Region were significantly more likely to cite low wages as a challenge faced by youth in employment (Kurdistan Region - 69 per cent; North/Western Iraq - 52 per cent; Southern Iraq - 54 per cent).This is partly due to income inequalities, some of which stem from the country's oil dependent economy, and the management and distribution of oil and non-oil revenues within the federal system. Therefore, while those with proximity to power and the oil sector earn above average salaries,

most salary earners from the Kurdistan Region do not experience similar wages. [107] This, in turn, leads to lower wages and poorer working conditions in less popular sectors of the Iraqi economy.

While Iraqi youth are determined to broaden their skills and find gainful employment opportunities, challenges to their ambitions for a more dynamic private sector remain. For those in employment, their levels of satisfaction are low due to a combination of factors including low wages and roles that do not correspond to their skills and interests. This reality is forcing young people to pursue alternative forms of employment, including setting up their own businesses, which has in turn positively revealed high levels of resourcefulness and entrepreneurialism.

Figure 32: Challenges faced by young people in employment by urbanicity

	Urban	Peri-urban	Rural	All
Low wage	58%	47%	60%	56%
Corruption in the workplace	42%	30%	51%	41%
Long working hours	43%	28%	43%	40%
Unfair treatment	35%	14%	44%	32%
Mistreatment	35%	28%	31%	33%
Lack of opportunity for career growth and development	34%	9%	36%	29%
Unfavourable working environment	31%	11%	29%	26%
Nepotism / Lack of social connections for opportunities	29%	18%	29%	26%
Lack of work ethic	26%	12%	29%	23%
Racism	23%	22%	20%	22%
Bullying/Verbal abuse	21%	14%	25%	20%
Sexual harassment	20%	9%	21%	17%
Tribalism	14%	22%	13%	16%
Tax burden	11%	7%	10%	10%
Other	0%	0%	1%	1%

105 UN Iraq. (2021). Drivers of Informality in Iraq's labour market. https://iraq.un.org/en/160608-new-report-identifies-drivers-informality-iraq%E2%80%99s-labour-market.

106 UN Iraq. (2021). Drivers of Informality in Iraq's labour market. https://iraq.un.org/en/160608-new-report-identifies-drivers-informality-iraq%E2%80%99s-labour-market.

107 Qardaghi, O. (2023, January 18). The unequal distribution of income within an oil economy - Iraq as a case study. Centre Francais de Recherche L'Irak. https://www.cfri-irak.com/en/article/the-inequality-distribution-of-income-within-an-oil-economy-iraq-as-a-case-study-2023-01-17#:~:text=The per cent20inequality per cent20in per cent20Iraq per cent20is

3.3 Entrepreneurship

In response to the limited job and career prospects identified above, young people are increasingly turning to entrepreneurship as a viable pathway. Iraqi youth are full of energy, drive, and innovative ideas. Supporting young entrepreneurs and their small businesses could be a highly effective way to promote economic recovery and development. [108] The Iraqi government recognises this, with a recent approval of a national competition for entrepreneurs across the country during the fifth meeting for the Supreme Council for Youth. In this initiative, 100 youth-led entrepreneurial projects will be provided loans of up to 100 million dinars ($76,303) each. Whilst entrepreneurism offers an exciting pathway for young[109] people, and Iraq, key barriers, explored below, need to be addressed.

Key findings:

- Six out of ten respondents (60 per cent) expressed an interest in entrepreneurship, viewing it as a solution to the pervasive unemployment crisis. This sentiment was consistent across all demographics, underscoring entrepreneurship as a widely considered path to self-sufficiency.
- Urban residents (62 per cent) showed a higher interest in entrepreneurship compared to their rural counterparts (52 per cent), with those in the Kurdistan Region (76 per cent) particularly keen on starting a business compared to those in North/ Western Iraq (46 per cent).
- The primary barrier to entrepreneurship was access to startup funding, although some respondents were aware of government initiatives aimed at addressing this challenge.
- Women identified societal constraints (17 per cent), such as family concerns about communication with others, as a significant barrier to entrepreneurship, compared to only three per cent of males.

3.3.1 Entrepreneurship is perceived as an escape from the issue of unemployment, yet barriers render it a challenging pathway

Given the limited job prospects offered by the state, many young Iraqis are keen to embrace entrepreneurship. However, there is a need for greater support. This is further reflected in our sample, where six out of ten respondents (60 per cent) said they were interested in starting their own business. Immersion sessions and deep dives showed that participants thought of starting their own business as a solution to challenges around unemployment and shortages of job opportunities, a sentiment also echoed in the priorities mapping exercise (see Figure 33).

"Many young people start their businesses or work freelance because there aren't enough jobs available. This allows them to have more control over their finances and careers. While it takes hard work and creativity, it also offers freedom and satisfaction. Overall, the shortage of jobs has pushed many young people to become entrepreneurs, showing their ability to adapt and persevere." (Male Respondent, Dhi Qar)

Figure 33: Priorities exercise and translation (Male Respondent, Arbil).

Now/Presently	Next year	Future
"Finding a better job"	"Starting my own business"	"Marriage"
"Earning more money for travel and enjoyment [having fun]"		

Although participants in our focus groups understood that starting their own business was a substantial challenge, taking hard work and creativity, they saw this as a satisfying pursuit and a way of achieving freedom, self-reliance, and independence from a difficult job market. This is supported by the finding that those with a bachelor's degree (or equivalent qualification) were more likely to say they would consider starting a business, and earlier findings showed the scarcity of graduate employment opportunities as a top concern. This push towards entrepreneurship may indicate a wider desire for self-sufficiency among Iraqi youth more broadly.

These entrepreneurial expressions were most common among participants in urban areas, particularly those in the Kurdistan Region. Urban respondents were more likely to say they were interested when compared to those in rural areas (urban – 62 per cent, rural – 52 per cent). Those in the Kurdistan Region were also more likely to say they wanted to start a business compared to those in North/Western Iraq (76 per cent vs 46 per cent, respectively). This could be due to the long-standing freeze of the federal budget, which has compounded a labour market that does not satisfy the high number of skilled graduates in Kurdistan Region. [110]

The biggest barrier to starting a business is access to start-up funding, though some participants were aware of government initiatives. While an increasing number perceive running their own business as a desirable career choice, the overwhelming majority have never received support from an incubator, accelerator (95 per cent) or are unaware of other forms of access to external funding (32 per cent). Despite male respondents being more likely to highlight access to funds as a barrier to entrepreneurship than female respondents, it is still the main issue chosen by both genders (male – 44 per cent vs. female – 33 per cent) (see Figure 34).

108 UNSDG. (2021). Iraq's young entrepreneurs: A promising engine of economic growth. https://unsdg.un.org/latest/stories/iraqs-young-entrepreneurs-promising-engine-economic-growth.

109 Iraqi News. (2024). Iraq to hold national competition for entrepreneurs. https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq/iraq-to-hold-national-competition-for-entrepreneurs//

110 The New Arab. (2023). Iraq: Parliament Finance committee suspended amid budget bill row. https://www.newarab.com/news/political-disagreements-freeze-iraqs-budget-bill.

Figure 34: Barriers to entrepreneurship
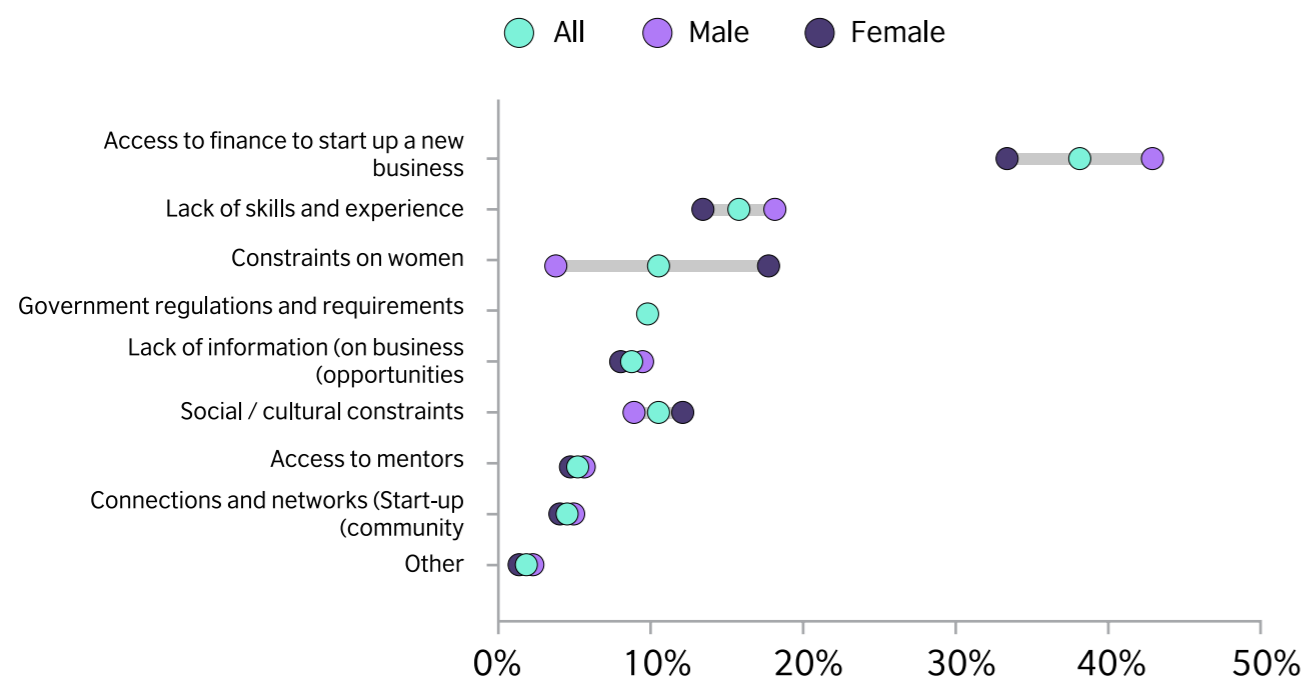
Access to funds was also highlighted during focus groups and Youth Engagement Studio sessions. Indeed, one of the main challenges highlighted by the participants in the Studio session was the difficulty in accessing bank loans, which made it hard for aspiring entrepreneurs to gather the necessary capital to launch their enterprises. They identified the absence of easily accessible financial products tailored to the needs of young business owners as a critical issue that impedes the growth of entrepreneurship in the region.

'In my experience and from what I've seen with others, getting money is the hardest part of starting a business. It's frustrating because there are lots of talented people with great ideas, but they can't start because they don't have enough money.' (Female Respondent, Baghdad)

As a result of this some, respondents described entrepreneurship as more of an option to those from more affluent families:

'Numerous young individuals, especially those from affluent families, prefer to pursue entrepreneurship rather than seek employment, as they have the financial support to do so.' (Female Respondent, Salah ad Din)

This is compounded by the absence of societal mechanisms in Iraq that provide loans or grants, despite very recent developments of a national competition. [111]

While the Central Bank of Iraq has started implementing classic approaches to support, the banking system does not currently offer loans or support for businesses and is in need of a system to determine which small and medium-sized companies are eligible for fiscal support. [112] However, participants in Baghdad were able to name the available government programs supporting particular groups, such as The Riyadh Initiative, which has helped young women with start-up funding. [113]

For women, however, gender stereotypes create additional barriers. Women highlighted societal constraints as a barrier to starting a business, particularly around concerns from their families about communicating with others. Societal constraints were the second most common barrier selected by female participants (female – 17 per cent vs. male – three per cent). Female participants in focus groups and Youth Engagement Studio sessions explained that their family were likely to be unsupportive of them running a business because it required them to network, make phone calls, and otherwise forging working relationships. It is significant that no participants said this was an impossible barrier to overcome, however it was something they have to be mindful of.

'Perhaps pursuing a career involving frequent communication and interaction, such as running a business, could pose challenges within a family dynamic. Factors such as cultural norms and societal expectations may contribute to hindering a woman's path to entrepreneurship.' (Female Respondent, Kirkuk)

'I believe this type of business might be challenging for girls because it involves a lot of communication like phone calls, but it's not impossible for a girl to have her own business.' (Female Respondent, Baghdad)

Another significant barrier identified during the YAB sessions was the need for enhanced training and guidance for aspiring entrepreneurs. Suggestions included implementing educational modules at universities to better prepare aspiring entrepreneurs for the challenges they will face and the publication of government-provided data and market analysis to help young entrepreneurs identify promising business sectors.

In conclusion, there is a notable appetite for entrepreneurship among young Iraqis, motivated by their desire to address the employment crisis. However, persistent barriers, such as trouble accessing finance and social stigma (particularly affecting young women), hinder their entrepreneurial pursuits. Nonetheless, as shown in previous chapters, young Iraqis are technologically astute, a potential that is yet to be fully utilised within the private sector.

Indeed, digital tech capabilities have strong potential to be harnessed for online-business development that avoids reliance on the state as a job-creator, in an increasingly online and remote working world. With the right levels of support for online and offline businesses, there is also potential to off-set pressures to remain at home as well as a broader limited job diversity which some young Iraqis face. [114] For example, young women working online could circumvent the barriers related to societal pressures, while a boost to digital job creation has endless possibilities.

111 Iraqi News. (2024). Iraq to hold national competition for entrepreneurs. https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq/iraq-to-hold-national-competition-for-entrepreneurs//

112 International Labour Organisation. (2022). Iraqi entrepreneurs access loans to support growing businesses. https://www.ilo.org/resource/iraqi-entrepreneurs-access-loans-support-growing-businesses.

113 Kapita. (2023). Riyadh Initiative: Promoting Entrepreneurship for Social Progress. https://kapita.iq/content/issue/riyada-initiative-promoting-entrepreneurship-social-progress.

114 GIZ. (2024). Promoting employment in the digital economy in Iraq. https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/143842.html.

3.4 Education and career readiness

Some of the employment challenges highlighted in previous chapters are partly related to significant skills gaps among recent graduates. This is because Iraq's educational system is driven by theoretical education, where exam grades are prioritised over the student's active participation. This process often neglects students' preferences and interests, as well as skills and competencies which would be better suited to the labour market. [115]

In addition to these systemic and structural issues, Iraq's educational system has also been adversely affected by conflict and displacement, with learning levels among the lowest in the MENA region. [116] Instability in the country has led to damaged infrastructure, ongoing waves of displacement and relatively less investment in teacher training. This is coupled with nationwide school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic, all of which negatively impacted access to and quality of education in Iraq. [117]

Key findings:

- While over 70 per cent of respondents view education as crucial for societal change and personal empowerment, 63 per cent feel that society does not adequately reward educational achievements.

- Only 36 per cent of respondents believe that their education adequately prepared them for the workforce. Concerns about education quality centred on improving the curriculum (23 per cent) and teaching standards (29 per cent).

- English emerged as the most desired language for young Iraqis to learn, with 80 per cent expressing a desire to learn it, followed by Arabic (64 per cent) and Turkish (10 per cent). Over half (56 per cent) believe learning multiple languages is important, primarily for better job prospects (40 per cent), cultural engagement (29 per cent), and travel (28 per cent).

- Over a third of respondents had tertiary education, however this was unequally distributed throughout the country and varied significantly across regions, ethnicities, urban and rural areas, as well as income levels.

3.4.1 Education is valued by young people, but does not prepare them adequately for work

High levels of poverty and poor quality of life often lead to an environment where many young people face barriers to accessing a full education. In our sample, just over a third (38 per cent) of respondents have an upper-secondary level of education or below, and 36 per cent have tertiary level education.

While educational attainment is generally low, there are important regional differences. For example, young people in North/Western Iraq were much more likely to have completed only lower secondary education or less (35 per cent) compared to those in Southern Iraq (21 per cent) and the Kurdistan Region (nine per cent). There are also large differences between urban and rural residents, with those in rural areas being more likely to have less than lower secondary education and less likely to have tertiary education (see Figure 35).

Related to this disparity in educational attainment, the two most common reasons for stopping education overall were limited opportunities (12 per cent) and finances (12 per cent). The lack of finance is unsurprisingly strongest in the lowest income tercile (16 per cent) compared to the highest (seven per cent).

An outcome of heightened economic deprivation is that earning a living is naturally prioritised over educational attainment. This is reflected in the fact that for men, going into employment (11 per cent) is a key reason for them stopping education. In contrast, gender-specific barriers prevent women from receiving proper education, as societal pressures referenced in Chapter 2 are further validated in our survey, with 15 per cent citing their family not wanting them to go (compared to three per cent for men) and personal challenges (12 per cent compared to two per cent for men) were the key reasons from them stopping education. Lack of opportunity (ten per cent) and finances (ten per cent) followed only in third place.

Figure 35: Percentage of young people by highest educational attainment and urbanicity
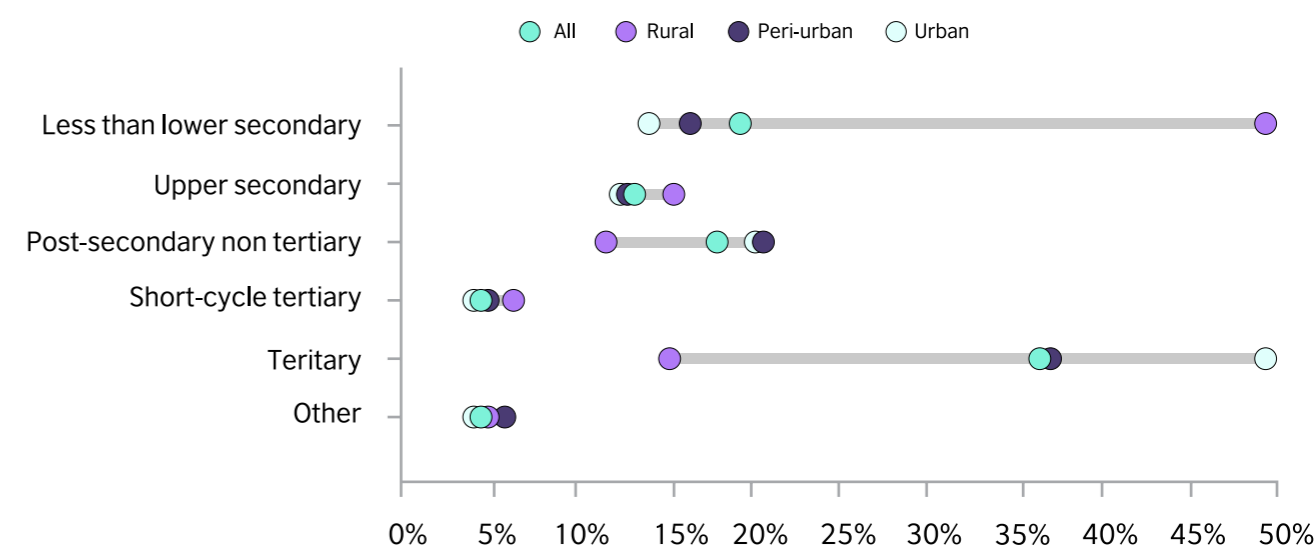
'The main thing that can prevent young people from reaching their objectives is frequently a lack of funds and financial resources. Many young people have a difficult time reaching their full potential and pursuing their goals in the absence of sufficient financial support.' (Female Respondent, Employed, Baghdad)

Despite these challenges, over 70 per cent of young people believe that education is an essential tool to make changes in society and that it gives people the confidence to take on challenging situations (Figure 36), and 31 per cent stated that education is the most powerful tool to deal with global challenges. Overall, completing their education and achieving good grades is a major priority for young people.

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115 Kapita (2021). Iraq Education Sector Overview. https://kapita.iq/storage/app/media/Research/Iraq%20Education%20Sector%20Overview%20EN.pdf.

116 World Bank (2021). Iraq: An Urgent Call for Education Reforms to Ensure Learning for All Children and Boost Human Capital.

117 Norwegian Refugee Council. (2022). Gaps in Formal Education in Iraq. https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/gaps-in-formal-education-in-iraq/.

Figure 36: Percentage of young people agreeing with the following statements on education
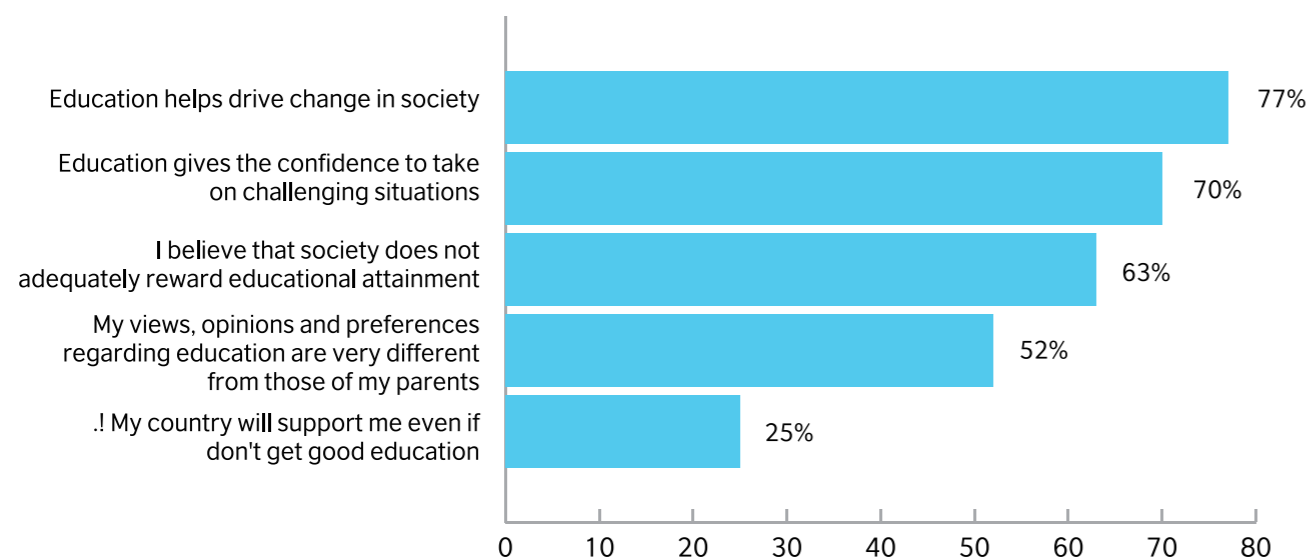
Focus group discussion with young people highlighted that a university degree in particular is seen as essential for a chance of a job with the public or private sector, and a required step in life, even if it often leads to underemployment. For some participants, there is a wish for further education, including master's degrees and PhDs, which they feel is important to their own personal development and growth. Some also see further study as a potential source of scholarships and travel abroad.

'Many of us strive to secure jobs to ensure a stable income, which often requires completing a college education since most jobs nowadays require a college degree'. (Male Respondent, Student, Ninawa)

'In our country, having a certificate, especially a bachelor's degree, is often a requirement for employment, even for entry-level positions like cashiering or working in a mall. This can be frustrating because it means investing time and effort into obtaining a degree, possibly spending four years in college, only to end up in a job completely unrelated to your major.' (Male Respondent, Student, Ninawa)

Reflecting on the quality of education, young people were most concerned about the standards in their country, saying that the curriculum (23 per cent) and the quality of teaching (29 per cent) needed the greatest improvement. There were also key differences by location – rural young people were more likely to highlight issues related to physical location such as proximity of institutions (nine per cent compared to five per cent for urban) and teacher/lecture absenteeism (12 per cent compared to six per cent for urban). This differential between rural and urban settings reflects the challenges of remote regions where access to transportation is limited.

Further, this also speaks to another significant challenge for Iraq's education system: enrolment. According to data provided by USAID, 33 per cent of children of secondary school age in Iraq are not enrolled, which is significantly more than those of primary school age children at 11 per cent. [118] There are multiple reasons for this, including financial challenges, child labour and missing documentation as well as the regional disparities in accessibility highlighted above. [119] Overall, increasing access to and improving the standard of education remains crucial to enabling new graduates to transition successfully into the work force.

3.4.2 More skills are needed to make the transition from education to employment smoother

The labour market in Iraq has a unique set of conditions, requirements and skill sets that are needed for different career paths. They cover a wide range of skills, such as computer skills, English language proficiency, communication skills, entrepreneurial mentality, critical thinking, marketing, and creative problem-solving. However, the educational curriculum fails to prepare students for this type of job market, preferring a focus on memorisation skills, and focus group discussions raised this issue. [120]

'Education is important because it opens up many opportunities and helps us grow personally. But sometimes, regular education doesn't fully prepare us for the practical side of jobs.' (Male Respondent, Al Basrah)

Despite seeing a degree as a prerequisite for work, education is not seen as the best preparation for work, with only around a third (36 per cent) of young people feeling that education prepared them for work. This is higher in North/Western Iraq (43 per cent) and the Kurdistan Region (51 per cent) than in Southern Iraq (27 per cent), suggesting that the gap between education and work may not be equal across the country.

Some participants in focus group discussions describe educational institutions as prioritising getting students through the educational process, rather than giving them the information and skills needed for real-world employment. In line with this, two-thirds (63 per cent) of respondents did not feel that society adequately rewards educational attainment.

'Students are frequently not given enough knowledge about their chosen majors or prepared for the workforce by the present educational system. It appears more concerned with getting students a degree and getting them out of there than it does with giving them the information and skills they need for real-world employment. The importance of practical application and professional preparedness is conspicuously lacking.' (Female Respondent, Baghdad)

118 USAID (2024). Iraq Education Country Dashboard. https://idea.usaid.gov/cd/iraq/education.

119 3RP, (2024). Iraq Country Chapter 2023 - 2024. https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/3rp-iraq-country-chapter-2023-2024

120 Kapita (2021). Iraq Education Sector Overview. https://www.kapita.iq/content/issue/report-iraq-education-sector-overview

Connecting young students with the labour market is also found to be missing in the wider education system. Indeed, only one-third (34 per cent) of young people received career guidance at their last education institution, with youth from North/Western Iraq the least likely to receive career guidance (Figure 37). Further, only one-third of those (36 per cent) found the career guidance to be useful. Despite this, young people have clear ideas about the skills they needed to enter the workplace.

Young people believed that a range of skills were important for employment, with the top skills, consistent across genders, including creativity, interpersonal skills and problem-solving skills (Figure 38), which supports the strong entrepreneurial ambition noted in earlier stages of this report. Communication, digital and technology skills were also highlighted as key in discussions with young people across the country.

'Effective communication, both verbal and written, is crucial for working well with colleagues, resolving conflicts, and connecting with clients or customers.' (Female Respondent, Kirkuk)

'With technology changing how we work, it's crucial to be able to share ideas and work well with others. Having digital skills helps you keep up with new technology and contribute effectively in different industries. These skills are essential for succeeding in today's job market.' (Male Respondent, Ninawa)

Despite the desire for digital skills mentioned by this participant, technology has not been well invested in to support the learning and education processes, with many young Iraqis effectively teaching themselves how to utilise computer technologies and social media channels.[121]

Along with being digitally-savvy, there were also significant variations in the perceptions of skills needed for the job market, such as time management, creativity, and interpersonal skills across groups. For example, there were differences between those living in urban and rural areas, with those in urban areas thinking that creativity (42 per cent compared to 26 per cent in rural areas), interpersonal skills (42 per cent compared to 16 per cent in rural areas), and time management (38 per cent compared to 23 per cent in rural areas) were important. This is likely to be due to the nature of employment available in rural areas and the expectations that this brings, which do not require the type of creative thinking and wider strategic approach (e.g. networking, building contacts) that is more often found when seeking work in urban environments.

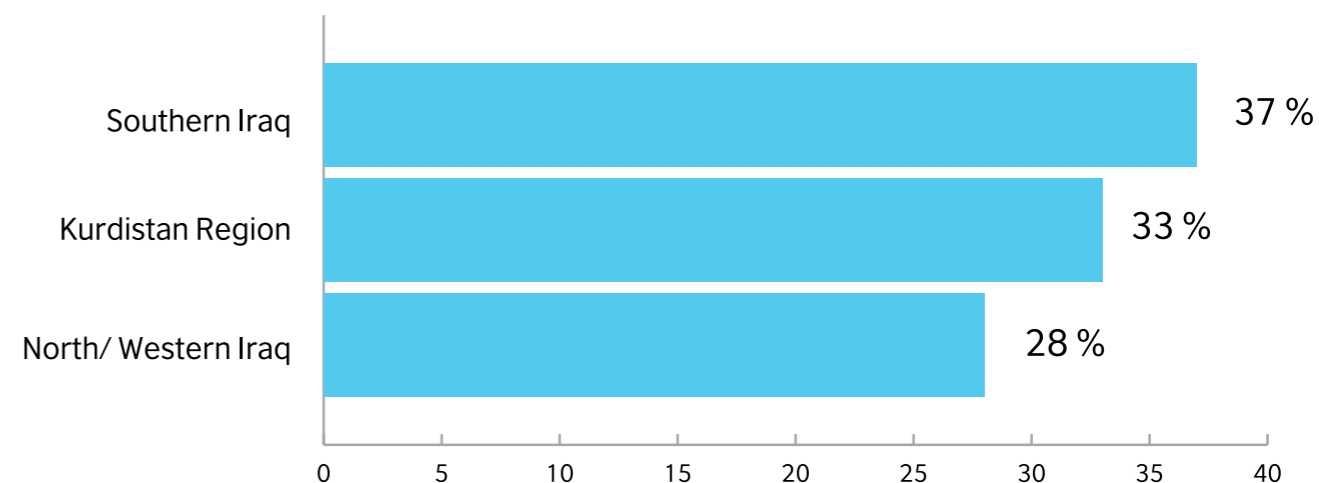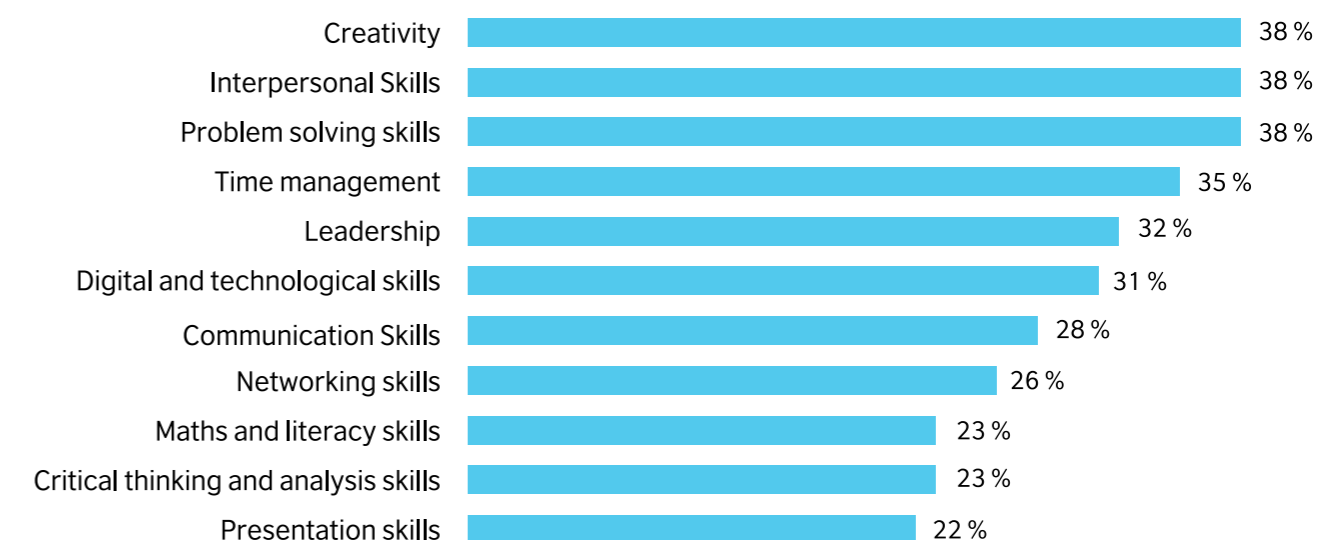**Figure 37:** Percentage of young people that received career guidance by region

Figure 38: What general skills do you think are important when it comes to employment?'

121 Kapita (2021). Iraq Education Sector Overview. https://www.kapita.iq/content/issue/report-iraq-education-sector-overview

For those who value languages as a key skill to enhance employability, English is the language young people think is most important to learn. Four out of five respondents said English is the most important language to learn (80 per cent), followed by Arabic (64 per cent) and Turkish (ten per cent). However, over half (56 per cent) of respondents say it is important to learn more than one language. In line with this, 57 per cent of young people have a self-assessed intermediate or advanced level of English, and 88 per cent an intermediate or advanced level of Arabic.

Interestingly, young people in the Kurdistan Region were more likely to think that English (89 per cent), Turkish (17 per cent), and Farsi (ten per cent) were important to learn compared to those in other regions, but were less likely to know English and Turkish than those in other regions. In contrast, those in rural areas were less likely to think English (70 per cent) is important to learn and are also less likely to know it, with 11 per cent speaking it at an intermediate or above level compared to 66 per cent in urban areas.

The top reason for learning another language is for better employment opportunities (40 per cent), followed by engaging with other cultures and countries (29 per cent) and travel (28 per cent). Over one-quarter of respondents also said that learning multiple languages is important for engaging with and learning about other communities in their country (27 per cent). The importance placed on employment opportunities and communication with other communities aligns with the feeling that interpersonal and communication skills are necessary for the workplace.

Overall, young Iraqis place significant value on pathways in education, viewing them as pivotal for driving societal change. This sentiment resonates across genders, regions, and income brackets, notwithstanding the challenges some encounter in accessing higher levels of educational attainment. In addition to enhancing access to education, young Iraqis stress the necessity for improvements in both physical infrastructure and curriculum content to foster their future development. Indeed, a holistic approach to improving education is essential in a fragile post-conflict state. This extends in the immediate term to improving access for marginalised young people, rehabilitating damaged school infrastructure as well as re-designing the wider curriculum to bridge the gap between the skills gained during school, and the skills needed for successful entry into the job market.

Young Iraqis are therefore not completely satisfied with the state of education, with many reflecting that graduation does not equal employability. Given this frustration with the labour market and the education system, it is not surprising that many young Iraqis are considering the virtues of a life abroad. The

3.5 International migration

phenomenon of youth migration outside Iraq has increased in recent years due to a need for more job opportunities, a deteriorating security situation, worsening economic conditions, and restricted personal freedoms, which have encouraged many young people to search for better alternatives elsewhere. [122] These push and pull factors resonate across both federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, as well as across various demographic groups.

Recent research on migration dynamics in Iraq has shown how these trends differ across regions, with young people from the Kurdistan Region more likely to migrate due to conflict, whereas in the Southern governorates it is often linked to economic and environmental factors such as the decrease of arable land due to desertification, salinisation, and water scarcity. [123] More broadly, however, desires to migrate across the country are driven by concerns about the living conditions for young people.

Key findings:

- Just under half (48 per cent) of young Iraqis consider moving abroad, with young people from the Kurdistan Region more open to relocation than North/Western Iraq.
- Canada tops the list of preferred destinations at 16 per cent, followed by Germany (11 per cent) and France (eight per cent), driven by language and culture, education, employment, and quality of life.
- Young Iraqis see emigration as vital for personal and academic development, broadening perspectives, opportunities, and allowing cross-sharing of cultures.
- Immediate steps for those considering emigrating include focusing on academic excellence, saving money, and building networks through part-time work and online courses.
- For young disabled persons, considerations for emigration revolve around accessing better healthcare, particularly for essential medical support and assistive devices.

A considerable portion of young Iraqis often think of migration, with some actively preparing for it. In our sample, nearly half (48 per cent) of young people said that they would consider moving abroad, while over a third (38 per cent) said they had a close friend or family member who moved abroad in the last six months. This is important as information on the costs and legal processes of the migration journey can then be relayed by those in the diaspora.

Willingness to relocate varies by region, with young people from the Kurdistan Region being the most likely to be willing to consider moving to a different country. This is partly reflective of the worsening economic conditions and limited employment opportunities in the Kurdistan Region. Conversely, young people in North/Western Iraq are the least likely to want to move, with six in ten (60 per cent) reporting they would not consider relocation (Figure 39).

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122 Mirami (2024). Irregular pathways: Probing migration dynamics in Iraq and the significance of information campaigns. https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/61026/file/Final_Report_MIRAMI.pdf.

123 Mirami (2024). Irregular pathways: Probing migration dynamics in Iraq and the significance of information campaigns. https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/61026/file/Final_Report_MIRAMI.pdf.

Figure 39: Willingness to move abroad by region

Figure 40: Most attractive countries to emigrate to
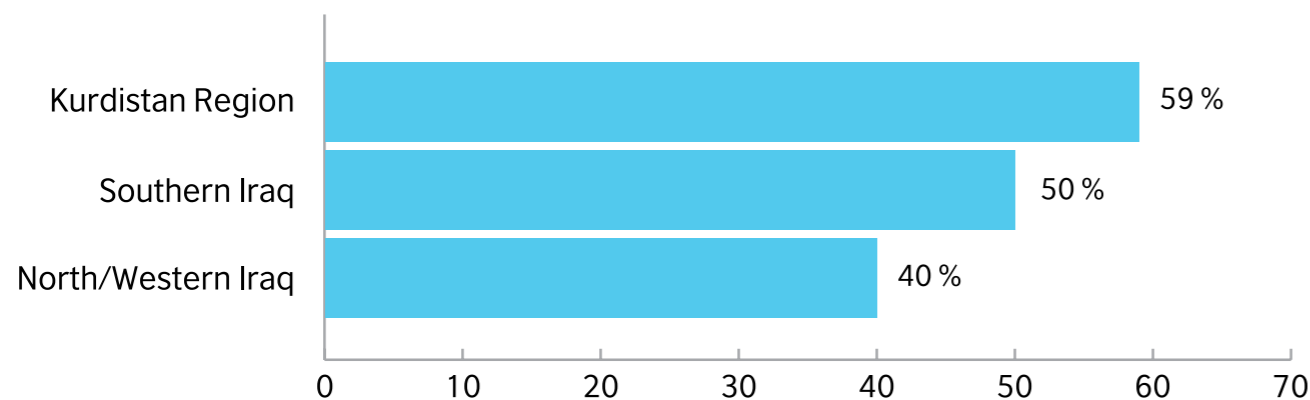
The most attractive country to move to for young people is Canada (16 per cent), followed by Germany (11 per cent) and France (eight per cent) (Figure 40). These findings are consistent with previous research conducted in 2024. [124] The key reasons driving these choices are language, history, and culture (30 per cent), education opportunities (25 per cent), employment opportunities (15 per cent) and quality of life (13 per cent).

However, this is not reflected across the Middle East more broadly, where a study from Arab Barometer suggests that potential migrants do not seem to agree on a destination. [125] Indeed, several factors contribute to migrant's preferences, including historical trends, language, proximity, and perceived opportunities. These in turn encompass a wide variety of preferred destinations. For example, according to the study, Jordanians, Lebanese, and Mauritanians prefer a move to North America, Egyptians and Sudanese prefer a Gulf country, while North Africans tend to choose France or another European country as their preferred destination.

Young people noted that emigrating for educational and personal growth reasons offers a myriad of benefits. Pursuing further studies, whether abroad or in a different region of Iraq, such as the northern areas, can provide invaluable experiences and insights into different cultures. It fosters personal growth, broadens

perspectives, and enhances one's academic and professional opportunities.

'I've always dreamed of pursuing further studies, perhaps even abroad or in a different part of Iraq, especially towards the north. I believe experiencing different cultures and living away from home is crucial for personal growth and gaining a broader perspective. However, this dream seems a bit out of reach for me right now.' (Female Respondent, Baghdad)

Immediate steps noted for some young people involve excelling academically to improve job prospects and secure scholarships for further studies abroad. Concurrently, working part-time, saving money, and building networks through online forums and courses are seen as essential. While uncertainties about the job market and challenges of employment abroad exist, remaining flexible in career plans helps navigate these obstacles.
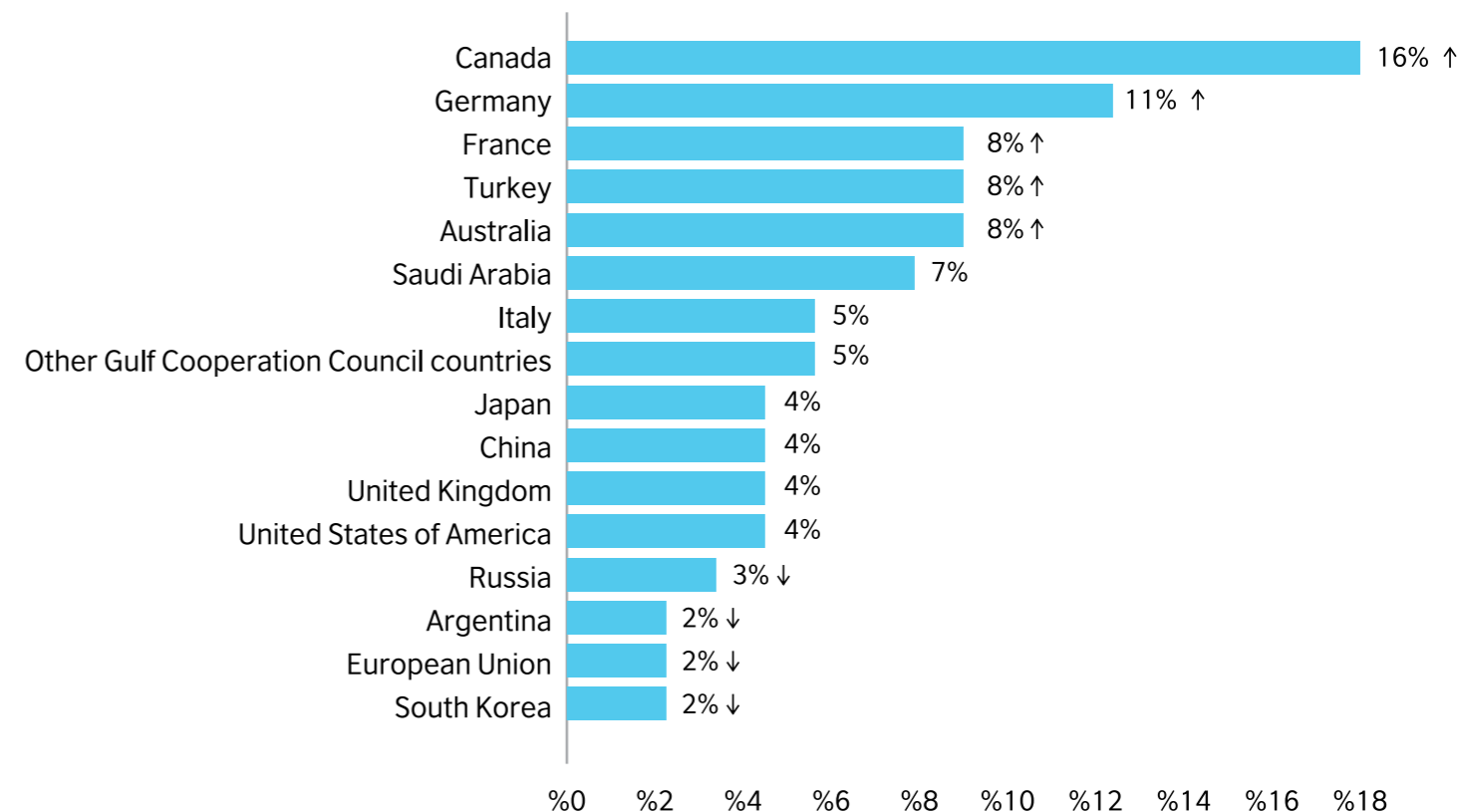
124 Mirami (2024). Irregular pathways: Probing migration dynamics in Iraq and the significance of information campaigns. https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/61026/file/Final_Report_MIRAMI.pdf.

125 Arab Barometer (2022). MENA Migration Report. https://www.arabbarometer.org/topics/migration/.

3.6 Conclusion - Pathways

'Concurrently, I'm working part-time to save money and participating in international online forums and courses related to my field to build my network. I'm also starting to research potential countries and cities that align with my career interests and personal growth goals.' (Male Respondent, Baghdad)

For young disabled persons, emigrating for healthcare access is a consideration. Challenges in obtaining essential medical support and assistive devices pose significant obstacles. The struggle to acquire essential tools for daily life, from public hospitals, infrequent medical check-ups, and the absence of adequate financial support compound the challenges faced.

Having an enabling and supportive environment, seen in countries outside of Iraq, is needed to allow young disabled persons to also advance their educational and career goals. The notion of emigration becomes a means to access comprehensive healthcare services and potentially improve overall quality of life. Indeed, half of young disabled persons reported quality of life and treatment, inclusion and respect for citizens and human rights (50 per cent) being key reasons that countries abroad are attractive.

'I need several tools to make my life easier but it takes me ages to get that from the public hospitals. I need regular medical checking, again this does not exist. More importantly, I cannot work like a normal ordinary human being; I think there had to be a monthly pay to support me with my daily needs, but unfortunately, it is very minimal and does not my needs' (Male Respondent, Al Basrah)

Overall, the most common reason for having moved abroad previously was safety and security reasons (24 per cent). However, female respondents were more likely to list family as their reason for moving (female - 31 per cent; male - 11 per cent). Nevertheless, only eight per cent of young people had actually lived abroad in the last five years, which also reflects the challenges faced in attaining the necessary funds, and navigating legal processes in other countries.

Nevertheless, young Iraqis feel drawn to leave their country for a number of different reasons that include social, economic, political and environmental elements. This combination of factors has ultimately left them feeling personally, academically, and professionally dissatisfied, something that is exacerbated due to the perception that little progress has been made in assuaging their fears and concerns, and their relatively low trust in the political system.

A number of pathways exist for Iraqi youth to affect change and improve their lives. Political participation is significant among young people, despite widespread disillusionment. Five years on from the Tishreen movement, more than 50 per cent of youth believe political engagement is important, although many prefer to advocate for dialogue instead, or choose not to participate formally at all. Indeed, almost four in ten respondents (39 per cent) cited no inclination to increase their engagement with politics at all. However, for those who do, social media has become a powerful tool for civic engagement, allowing young people to organise, raise awareness, and voice their grievances. Despite potential risks, many young people use social media to participate in discussions and hold authorities accountable.

Pathways to employment are a central concern and linked to political dissatisfaction among young people, with youth unemployment at 32 per cent, significantly higher than the national average. [126] Many young Iraqis face barriers such as nepotism and scarce opportunities in both public and private sectors. Gender disparities in employment are stark, with women much less likely to be employed (23 per cent) than men (47 per cent). Regional differences also affect employment prospects, with the Kurdistan Region having the highest levels of unemployment (40 per cent), despite the highest completion of vocational education. For those in work, low wages (56 per cent) and dissatisfaction with the quality of employment due to corruption in the workplace (41 per cent), long working hours (40 per cent), unfair treatment (32 per cent), and mistreatment (33 per cent) are cited as key issues.

Considering these challenges in traditional employment, entrepreneurship is seen as a viable livelihood pathway. Six in ten (60 per cent) young Iraqis were interested in starting their own business. However, access to start-up funding remains a significant barrier (39 per cent), with many relying on personal or family resources. Gender stereotypes and societal constraints further hinder young women from pursuing entrepreneurial ventures and were the second most common barrier selected by female participants (17 per cent). These societal constraints involved the negative connotations related to safety associated with young women in Iraqi society networking, making phone calls, and otherwise forging working relationships. Despite these challenges, there is

a notable appetite for entrepreneurship, with many young people eager to leverage their skills and creativity to achieve self-reliance.

Developing practical and marketable skills is crucial for employment and entrepreneurship. Iraq's education system is not generally seen as an adequate stepping stone for work, with only 36 per cent of young people agreeing that it had prepared them adequately for work. As a result, the system is seen as needing reform, with curriculum development (23 per cent) and improving the quality of teaching (29 per cent) needing the greatest improvement. These changes are needed to better equip students with practical employable skills, such as creativity, communication, digital and technology skills.

Disparities in educational attainment are also pronounced, with those in rural areas (43 per cent of young people have less than lower secondary education), internally displaced people (54 per cent have less than lower secondary education) and disabled persons (42 per cent with less than lower secondary) achieving lower levels of education than their peers. Despite these issues, education is highly valued by young Iraqis, who see it as a key tool for societal change and personal development. This includes learning new languages, with English seen as the most desirable language among young Iraqis (80 per cent).

The need to harness these pathways for future prosperity is heightened by the fact that nearly half of young Iraqis are considering migration abroad (48 per cent). Top reasons for emigration include inclusion and respect for citizens and human rights (44 per cent), employment (43 per cent) and education (38 per cent). This is in line with challenges that young people faced in finding opportunities for meaningful work and study in Iraq. Despite this, the overwhelming majority are proud to be Iraqi and would be willing to stay and contribute if the pathways to do so are leveraged to their advantage.

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126 Statista (2023). Youth Unemployment Rate: Iraq. https://www.statista.com/statistics/812116/youth-unemployment-rate-in-iraq/ ; World Bank (2024). Youth Unemployment, youth total – Middle East and North Africa. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=ZQ

Supporting Iraq's youth requires comprehensive reforms across education, employment, entrepreneurship and political engagement. This includes modernising curricula aligned with labour needs, expanding vocational training, improving rural education access and teacher training. Boosting apprenticeships, university-industry linkages, entrepreneurial financing, rural economic opportunities and workforce participation for young disabled persons is crucial for employment. Enhancing youth political engagement necessitates inclusive rhetoric from leaders, youth advisory councils, policy impact assessments and activism safety online. Collaborative multi-stakeholder efforts involving government, NGOs, the private sector, and youth themselves, are vital to effectively implement these wide-ranging initiatives to unlock youth potential.
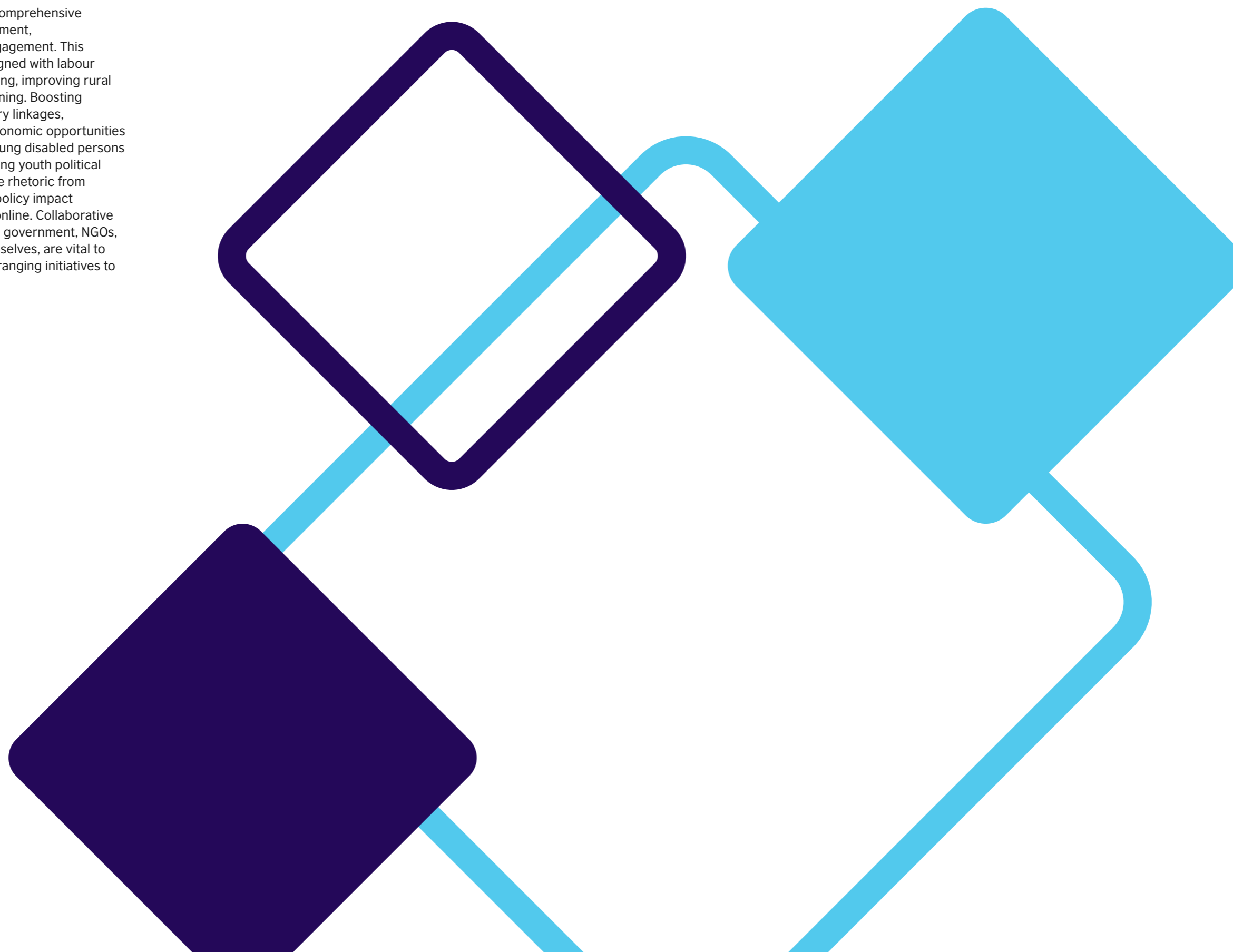
4. Conclusions and recommendations

From insights gathered across the research, it is clear that the youth of Iraq embody a mixture of hope, aspiration and some apprehension in bringing about real change in their country.

Exploration into 'Profiles' found that young Iraqis are navigating a delicate balance between tradition and modernity, striving to uphold their community and identity in a rapidly changing world. Family is central to Iraqi identity, profoundly influencing young people's views and decisions. With 63 per cent of young Iraqis citing family as their primary influence and 73 per cent considering it their most trusted information source, familial ties remain crucial. Raising their own family is a goal for 56 per cent of young people, marking it as a key indicator of success and happiness. However, the realities of modern life are impacting the realisation of these values. Financial security emerged as the top success factor for young people (44 per cent), with attaining financial security seen as a prerequisite for achieving personal goals such as marriage and starting a family.

Family ties, while essential, also pose challenges, particularly for young women. Societal pressure from family is a significant personal challenge for 35 per cent of young women compared to 24 per cent of men. Additionally, 17 per cent of women identify family constraints as barriers to entrepreneurship, in contrast to only three per cent of men. While traditional values are cherished, exposure to global ideas which may encourage female participation in the labour force, especially online, adds complexity to maintaining cultural norms. Thus, young Iraqis are negotiating the pressures of traditional Iraqi culture alongside the influences of modernity as they seek to fulfil their own aspirations.

Young Iraqis are increasingly online and digitally capable, with 78 per cent using online sources for news and current events, including 66 per cent in rural areas. Despite the strong uptake of digital media, disparities in internet access persist, particularly for marginalised groups like internally displaced people and disabled people, who are less likely to use social media. Traditional communication channels, such as family (44 per cent), religious and community leaders (21 per cent) and radio (14 per cent) remain prevalent, especially in rural areas. This blend of digital engagement and traditional communication shapes the way they engage on political and civic issues, and express their views on issues that affect them such as employment and education.

Economic concerns dominate young people's perceptions, as seen in Chapter 2 'Perspectives'. While young people harbour hopes of professional growth, access to employment is their generation's most pressing issue and the key to building financial security. Young people mention high levels of poverty (48 per cent) and unemployment (45 per cent) as their uppermost challenges. These challenges are grounded in their realities with seven in ten (69 per cent) young respondents not currently in paid employment. They note barriers such as nepotism, lack of opportunities, and constraining social norms in accessing employment. Gender plays a significant role, with women much less likely to be in paid work and more likely to be stay-at-home parents or homemakers (28 per cent compared to six per cent for men).

The quality of employment is also a concern, with only 32 per cent stating their current jobs match their technical abilities, and 56 per cent stating that low wages are a central concern. Given these challenges, young people are looking for alternative 'Pathways' outside traditional employment to build their livelihoods, especially through entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship emerges as an appealing alternative to traditional employment. Six in ten young people (60 per cent), including disabled persons, are interested in starting their own business. Iraqi young people view entrepreneurship as a satisfying, albeit challenging, pathway that brings added freedom and financial independence. The interest in entrepreneurship is particularly high among urban youth (62 per cent in urban vs 52 per cent in rural areas), as well as among young people living in the Kurdistan Region (76 per cent) compared to those in North/Western Iraq (46 per cent). While young people view entrepreneurship as an appealing alternative to traditional employment, they also highlight a number of challenges to succeeding. The key barriers to business ownership reflect a need for more accessible start-up funding and better training opportunities for aspiring entrepreneurs.

Photo credit: Khezez/Pexels

Iraq has bountiful resources and human capital, yet young people are caught between education that does not prepare them well for the world of work and low levels of employability. 63 per cent of youth feel that society does not adequately reward educational achievements, while only 36 per cent believe that they have the requisite skills to enter the workforce. This is true even in areas with higher levels of attainment in vocational training where the percentage of those receiving career guidance is higher, such as the Kurdistan Region.

Young people in Iraq note a clear need for curriculum reform (23 per cent) and quality of teaching (29 per cent), but policy and practice should also be tethered to the reality that achieving equitable access to education faces diverse challenges. For instance, for those in rural areas of Southern Iraq, ensuring continuously reliable transportation to schools, in addition to the construction and rehabilitation of schools are key issues. In urban settings, the main priorities of young people are curricula re-design, teacher training and the inclusion of employment-relevant skills like creativity, interpersonal skills, problem-solving, and English. Furthermore, there is significant interest in learning languages, with 80 per cent of young Iraqis choosing English as the language they most desire to learn. This indicates that, with improvements in accessibility, there is a large cohort of willing English language learners for British Council to engage with.

Adopting more strategic and inclusive practices for both education and employment are essential given the challenges experienced by minority groups. Limited knowledge and understanding around how disabled persons navigate daily life is feeding into a lack of inclusivity in both offline and online spaces. Concerningly, 33 per cent of young people with a disability reported not feeling 'at all' a part of their local community and have a more pessimistic outlook on the future than their peers. These issues are heightened by two factors: accessibility, and representation. There is a pressing need for more equipment in public education and workspaces that cater to the needs of disabled persons. This includes more assistive devices and ramps in buildings. Secondly, there is a need for better representation and inclusion in decision-making processes to counter the discriminatory attitudes and social bias they experience. Young disabled persons are keen to play an active role as advocates and change-makers within their community. However, to nurture this sentiment the factors that affect the broader political

and civic engagement of young people need to be addressed.

In terms of political and civic engagement, while over 50 per cent of youth believe political engagement is important, there is a lack of consensus on the most effective way of doing so. While some young people expressed preference for abstaining from voting due to disillusionment with the political system, for others protests or social media engagement were preferred methods. These later preferences were based on the belief that pressure is needed for change to be achieved. For many young people, the awareness raising and community mobilisation functions of social media have become a powerful tool for civic engagement, despite the potential risks associated with using it. Indeed, many young people cited using social media to participate in discussions and hold authorities accountable.

Going beyond issues of employment and education, the Next Generation survey revealed that young people are aware of the threats of climate change and its impact on their environment through droughts, dust storms and floods. Despite this, climate change is not considered a top global challenge for young Iraqis. This suggests that their everyday economic and employment concerns overshadow the effects of climate change. Further, there is a need to cultivate a greater understanding of the long-term implications of climate change. Notably, while young people are aware of the role individuals can play in addressing climate change, they tend to believe that the government should take the lead in taking and enforcing action.

Iraqis are generally a proud nation, and this extends to its young people. Over eight in ten (88 per cent) of young Iraqis are proud of their country. Despite various issues outlined above, young people have an optimistic outlook on life and the future, with over half of young people reporting optimism about their future career (54 per cent) and their future quality of life (51 per cent). Nevertheless, 48 per cent are considering migration due to concerns for their future. The desire for progress on Iraq's social, economic, political, and environmental challenges lies at the roots of this. Therefore, working to address the issues raised by young people will help enable the young generation to be active participants in a more dynamic and positive vision for Iraq.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings and reflections, the following recommendations have been proposed across the pathways available to young people, and considering their profiles and perceptions on the key local and global issues that affect them the most. Next Generation Iraq offers Iraqi and international organisations, decision makers and young Iraqis themselves a clear articulation of the priorities for change. When teamed with a shared optimism in the power of education for positive change, continued learning, collaboration and creative solution-making is to be a priority.

The below recommendations are a starting point for this type of engagement between all those that are invested in supporting young Iraqi's in overcoming the challenges outlined and attaining the aspirations shared in Next Generation Iraq.

Education and employability skills:

- Build clearer connections between secondary school outcomes and labour market opportunities, by updating curricula, developing core-skills alongside core knowledge, improve career counselling and school-leaver services, in collaboration with employers.

- Provide opportunities for young people to develop job-oriented skills and gain practical work experience.

- Promote quality vocational/technical training routes linked to national development priorities, and future sectors such as the digital economy.

- Address young people's concerns of career readiness through core-skills including IT and English language learning.

- Invest in teacher education and leadership to support better quality and more relevant teaching, and to improve learning outcomes.

Entrepreneurship and employment:

- Develop the ecosystem to support young people's entrepreneurial energy and aspirations, including access to finance, information and expertise, incubators and accelerators, and opportunities to network andbuild skills.

- Improve fairness and transparency in the workplace and accessing the workplace, including improving protections around wages, hours and anti-discrimination, and a fairer and more transparent job market.
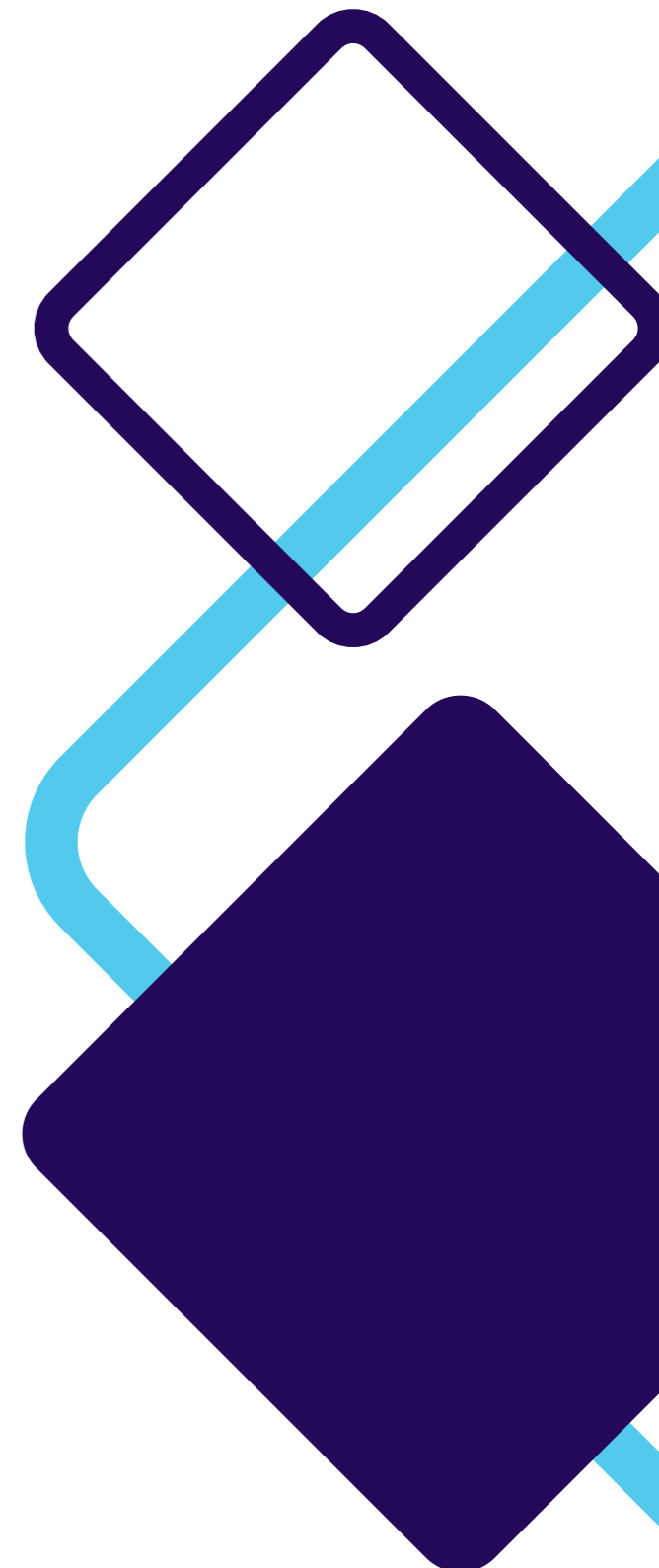
Inclusion and accessibility:

- Enhance accessibility in public spaces, workplaces, and educational institutions and accessibility to opportunities and services, including barrier-free access to public facilities, use of assistive technologies, adaptations so services are available at times and places that promote more inclusion.
- Enhance inclusion through more consultation and adaptation/adjustments to ways of working to mainstream inclusion across education services, and workplaces, supported with comprehensive policies, training/awareness and compliance.
- Develop specific strategies and approaches to improve opportunities for specific circumstances within Iraq, for example approaches to incentivise education rural communities, approaches to adult learning to acquire new skills for employability or for people whose formal schooling was disrupted by insecurity, approaches to improve representation and greater participation of underrepresented voices in the development of policy and programming.

Climate action, resilience and greener futures:

- Enhance climate change and sustainability awareness through education, including improving knowledge, skills and agency, through school-based approaches, relevant to the specific challenges in Iraq and locally, that encourage civic responsibility and action.
- Engage young Iraqis involved in environmental advocacy and decision-making on climate action and environmental protection, including through national and local platforms, though networking opportunities.
- Mainstream climate and environmental sustainability within existing industries and investing in green entrepreneurship, including sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, and eco-friendly technologies.

Constructive, youth-friendly political and civic engagement:

- Create more opportunities for young people to engage with politics and increase youth representation, voice and impact. This could include formal consultative initiatives, youth-inclusive practices within formal political parties and local government decision-making, youth-friendly platforms/forums for young Iraqis to network and discuss policy, collaborate on advocacy, and engage with decision makers.
- Address concerns with online safety and trustworthiness, including skills and awareness raising on evaluating the credibility and reliability of online information, and clearer safeguarding for online expression.

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Annex 1

Area	Province	Youth aged 18-24		Youth aged 25-30		
		Urban (CAWI)	Urban (CAWI)	Urban (CAWI)	Rural (CAPI)	TOTAL
Northern and Western governorates	Ninawa	53	27	56	18	154
	Al Anbar	32	11	31	14	88
	Salah ad Din	25	7	24	9	65
	Kirkuk*	20	8	18	8	54
Southern governorates, plus Baghdad	Al Basrah	55	18	52	26	151
	Dhi Qar	32	14	24	8	78
	An Najaf	21	10	20	9	60
	Baghdad	124	-	127	-	251
Kurdistan Governorates	Arbil	33	11	26	11	81
	As Sulaymaniyah	32	8	32	14	86
		427	114	410	117	1068

Annex 2

The following sections explore the geographic and regional profiles of key youth groups, including young women, disabled persons, internally displaced people, and including urban and rural breakdowns and a regional overview.

Key findings:

- Across four key groups, including young women, disabled persons, rural residents, and internally displaced people, educational attainment levels were generally lower to their respective counterparts (young men, people without disabilities, urban youth and those who are not internally displaced), though the underlying reasons varied significantly.
- In terms of geographic distribution, North/Western Iraq had the highest proportion of individuals with less than lower secondary education (35 per cent), while the Kurdistan region had the lowest (nine per cent).
- Both young women and disabled persons expressed a greater willingness to enrol in adult education programmes, at 41 per cent and 57 per cent respectively, if tertiary education had not been completed.
- Barriers to education and entrepreneurship differed for each demographic group, with young women facing family and societal expectations, while disabled persons encountered challenges related to physical accessibility.
- Concerns about community inclusion were more pronounced among young women and disabled persons.
- Geographic location influenced political engagement attitudes, particularly among rural youth in Southern Iraq, who were more inclined to increase political engagement if elected representatives came from diverse backgrounds (eight per cent vs. three per cent).
- Concerns about climate change varied regionally, with North/Western Iraq showing the least concern (37 per cent), compared to Southern Iraq and the

Young women

Young women represent a diverse group, with significant variations between them on employment and education outcomes, as well perceptions and attitudes. Specific challenges and motivations, particularly regarding expectations in education, the workplace, and their societal roles, contribute to a broader picture of the isolation young women may experience within Iraqi society and their families.

Looking at employment overall, women are half as likely to be in the labour force (Figure 41), and four times more likely to be homemakers and stay at home parents (28 per cent vs six per cent of men). For those in the workplace, there are no meaningful differences between women and men in the sectors they worked in, except that men are more likely to work in real estate (four per cent compared to none for women). Female respondents show less interest in working in sectors

such as mining/drilling (one per cent compared to five per cent of men), manufacturing (two per cent compared to six per cent of men), and construction (three per cent compared to nine per cent of men). However, they do not show a significantly higher preference for any sector in the survey compared to men.

Figure 41: Percentage of young people in employment by gender

Figure 42: Reasons to drop out of school by gender
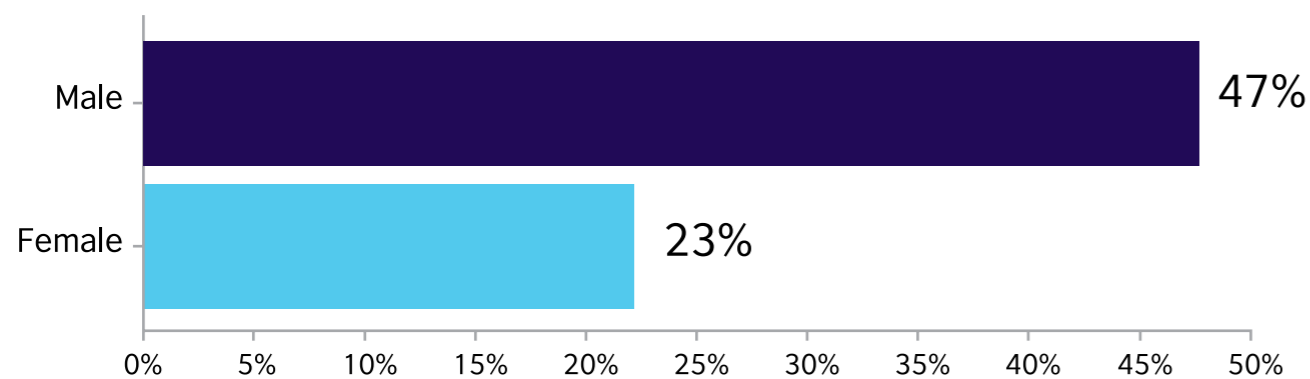
This gender disparity in employment is also seen in education and entrepreneurial opportunities, and is linked to societal norms, whereby family expectations restrict young women's autonomy in these spaces compared to young men. For young women, the primary barrier to continuing education beyond age 18 was family pressure, with 15 per cent stating that their family no longer wanted them to continue, followed by personal challenges like early marriage and pregnancy (12 per cent) (Figure 42). This highlights how familial and societal expectations uniquely impact women's educational paths. In contrast, young men's primary barriers to further education are different. Their main reasons for not pursuing further education are the lack of opportunities (15 per cent) and the necessity to enter employment (11 per cent). This indicates that young men face more systemic and economic barriers rather than familial or societal pressures.

These differences suggest that interventions aimed at increasing educational opportunities need to be gender sensitive. A significant 41 per cent of female respondents who had not entered further education said they would be interested in enrolling in an adult education programme, suggesting a keen interest in furthering their opportunities. However, for young women, efforts need to also focus on addressing familial and societal expectations, potentially through community education and support programmes that emphasise the importance of continued education and challenge traditional gender roles. For young men, increasing access to educational opportunities and addressing economic barriers would be more effective. Understanding these distinct challenges is crucial for developing targeted strategies that can help both young women and men achieve their educational and professional goals.
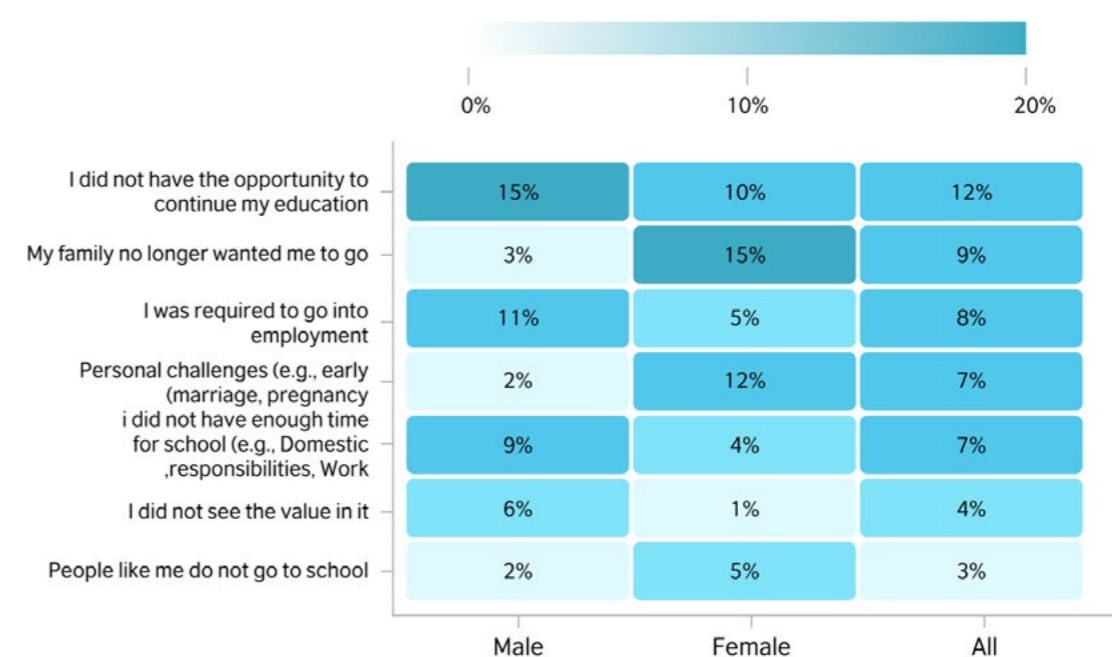
Similarly, whilst there is a strong appetite for young women to start their own businesses, with six in ten young women (60 per cent) reporting interest, gendered barriers exist. Although access to funding was the main barrier for both young men and women, societal constraints and constraints on women are the second biggest obstacle for young women, affecting 28 per cent of young women compared to only ten per cent of young men. Female participants described how Iraqi families might be uncomfortable with their daughters building and maintaining working relationships:

'[Starting a business] might be a bit challenging because running your own business often involves being out, interacting with others, and networking, which some families may not be comfortable with for their daughters.' (Female respondent, Baghdad)

Furthermore, other female participants further highlighted how access to start-up funding was also often intertwined with family dynamics and socio-economic status, explaining that entrepreneurs are often from wealthy families who can fund start-up costs. This suggests that families' perceptions of women have the potential to either limit or support young female entrepreneurs in providing them the necessary capital to start their own venture. However, family fears of judgement from others in society often reinforce societal norms and result in a lack of support for female entrepreneurship and autonomy:

'I can't, for example, work two shifts and come home late without anticipating judgment or unfavourable remarks from others, which would also annoy my parents.' (Female Respondent, Baghdad)

However, young women are still found to be optimistic. While participants highlighted family expectations as a barrier, few presented this as an insurmountable challenge. In most cases, women from across the study remained ambitious and motivated while acknowledging the additional challenges they faced because of their gender. Efforts to support young women must address familial and societal expectations, challenge gender norms, and provide opportunities for education and entrepreneurship tailored to their needs and aspirations.

Disabled Persons

Within the survey sample, 12 per cent of respondents identified themselves as young disabled persons. This research underscored that certain challenges faced by young people in general, are further compounded for disabled persons, particularly in areas such as education and employment. Despite the negative impact of these challenges on the perceptions of young disabled persons regarding their future, the findings revealed their resilience and resourcefulness in finding ways to try and overcome these barriers.

Across Iraq, educational attainment is lower among young disabled persons. For example, young disabled persons are more likely to have only completed lower secondary education (21 per cent) compared to their peers without disabilities (13 per cent) (see Figure 43 below). Additionally, significantly less young disabled persons completed tertiary education (22 per cent) compared to their counterparts without disabilities (39 per cent). Examining the reasons for discontinuing education among the cohort, disabled persons more frequently cited illness or sickness (16 per cent among disabled persons, compared to six per cent of those without).

Despite the lower levels of education attainment, there is a notable appetite for adult education among young disabled persons. This willingness is evident, with 57 per cent of young disabled persons expressing interest in enrolling in adult education to complete their interrupted education, compared to 41 per cent of those without disabilities. This highlights a significant demand for accessible educational opportunities among this group. This points to the importance of creating and promoting adult education programmes that cater to the needs and aspirations of disabled persons, enabling them to achieve their educational and professional goals despite earlier disruptions.

**Figure 43:** Educational attainment by disability
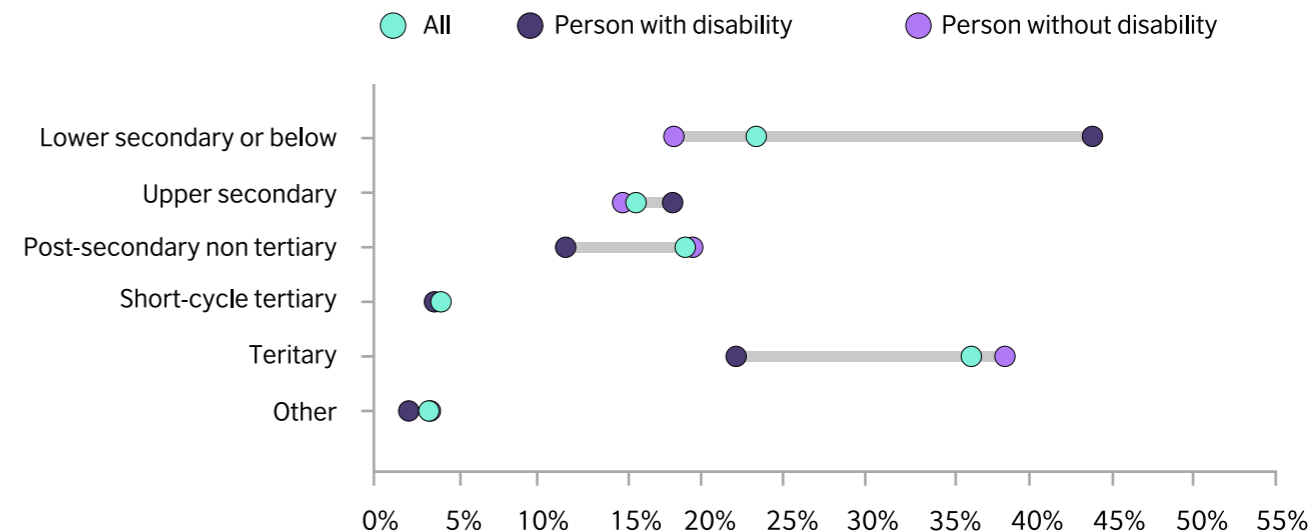
Turning to employment and optimism for the future, young disabled persons hold more pessimistic perceptions of their future careers. 32 per cent of disabled persons were pessimistic about their future careers in contrast to 19 per cent of those without disabilities. Qualitative research delving deeper into this issue reveals a pivotal factor influencing employment opportunities for young disabled persons: the availability of accessible workplaces tailored to their needs. As one participant shared:

'It's quite challenging for me to find employment, especially in the private sector. The typical workplace environment isn't suitable for me, as I need special accommodations like specific chairs and accessible bathrooms. Because of these needs, I don't believe traditional employment is the best fit for me.' (Male Respondent, Al Basrah)

Moreover, the need for accessible workplaces underscores broader challenges encountered by young disabled persons in employment. Notably disabled persons often navigate unique hurdles beyond physical accessibility. This includes challenges related to mistreatment and discrimination in employment, which were more acute for young disabled persons, as opposed to common issues for those without disabilities, like low wages and corruption (see Figure 44).
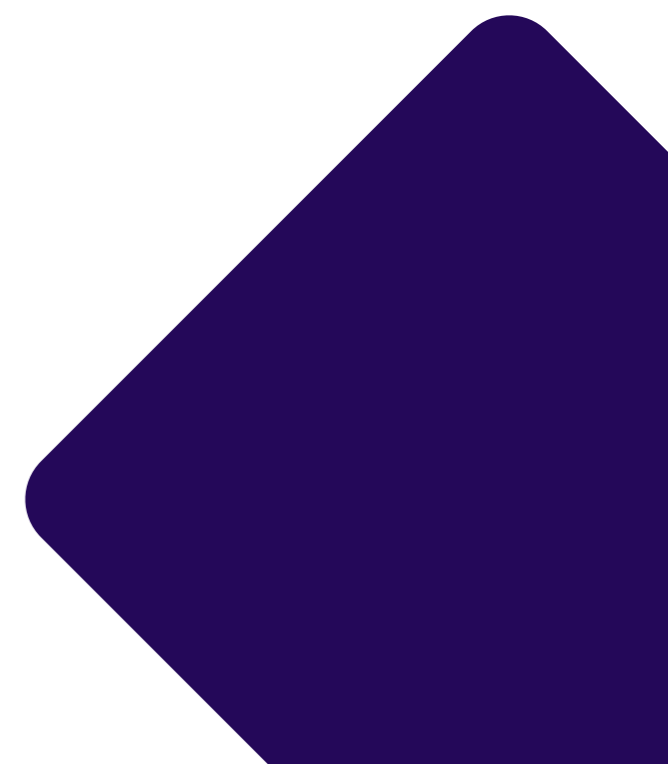
Figure 44: Top five main barriers facing young people in employment by disability
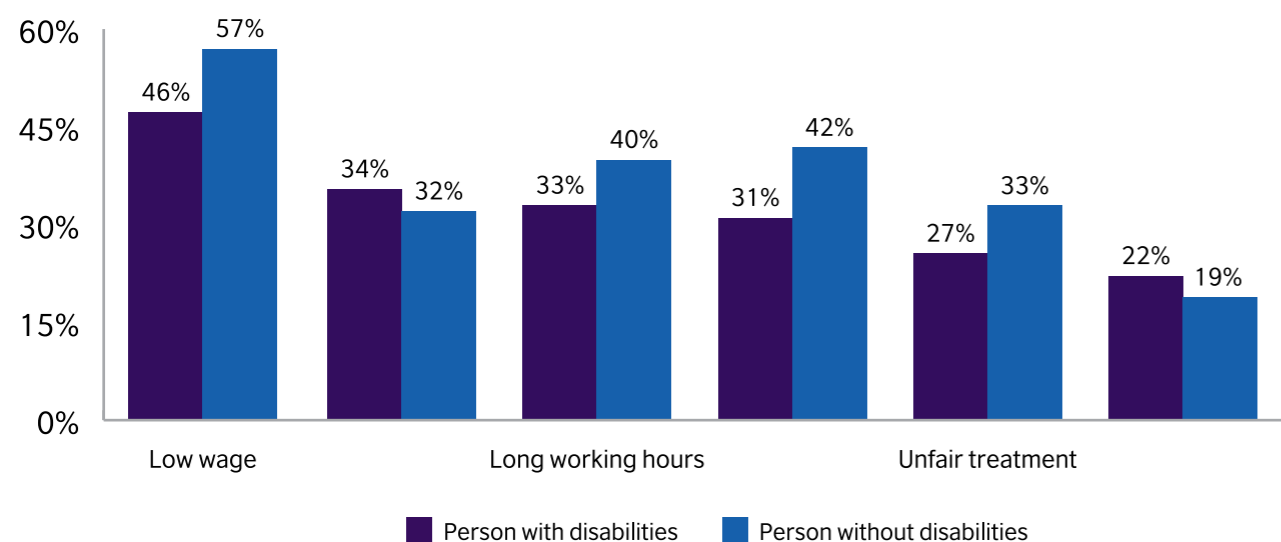
This underscores the complex nature of the obstacles encountered by young disabled persons in the workforce, highlighting the importance of addressing issues related to workplace culture and treatment.

Given these challenges in traditional employment, young disabled persons are significantly interested in starting their own business in the next five years (59 per cent). When explored in the qualitative findings, this desire was often framed as an alternative to employment in private companies or the government sector, which often do not or may not accommodate the needs of young disabled persons as mentioned above.

'Some of us, like my friend here who works as a translator, find it more feasible to have our own jobs where we can tailor the workspace to our needs. Companies or government sectors may struggle to accommodate all our requirements, so pursuing our own ventures seems like a more viable option.' (Male Respondent, Al Basrah)

Across various indicators, young disabled persons are more likely than those without disabilities to report that interpersonal relationships are difficult due to societal perceptions. Despite holding great value in fundamental aspects of Iraqi identity and values, such as getting married/having a stable relationship and family, young disabled persons are less likely to view this as realisable. Indeed, disabled persons are almost twice as likely (23 per cent) as those without (13 per cent) to perceive getting married or having a stable relationship as not easily achievable. Qualitative insights further illuminate this discrepancy, suggesting societal perceptions of the challenges that young disabled persons might face discourage other young people to enter into romantic relationships with them.

'It's possible that not everyone would be willing to marry a disabled person when they have the option to marry someone without disabilities. This could be because they may perceive it as more challenging or have concerns about the future.' (Male Respondent, Al Basrah)

Furthermore, a clear discrepancy emerges in the level of community inclusion experienced by young disabled persons compared to their counterparts without a disability. One-third (33 per cent) of young disabled persons reported feeling entirely disconnected from their local community, whereas only a quarter (25 per cent) of those without disabilities expressed similar sentiments. This highlights a concerning trend towards potential marginalisation and neglect of disabled persons within local communities.

Interestingly, while disabled persons may face challenges in community inclusion and relationships, this does not inhibit their aspirations to explore and experience new places. For instance, a notable outlier among disabled persons is their increased emphasis on traveling as a factor of personal success and happiness, with ten per cent prioritising it compared to only three per cent of those without disabilities.

Young disabled persons face compounded challenges in education, employment, and in societal acceptance impacting their future prospects significantly. The findings underscore the necessity for tailored support that address the unique educational, employment, and social challenges faced by young disabled persons, promoting greater inclusion and equal opportunities.

Urbanicity

Overall, 57 per cent of the sample lived in urban areas, 22 per cent in rural areas and 21 per cent in peri-urban areas. This reflects the increasing trend of urbanisation in Iraq since the 1930s. [127] The extent of the population living in rural areas was uneven across regions, with the Kurdistan Region having a larger proportion of respondents in rural areas (30 per cent vs 19 per cent in Southern Iraq).

Nationally, rural youth tend to have lower levels of education. For example, significantly more rural respondents reported achieving lower secondary education or below (43 per cent vs urban 17 per cent). In contrast, those living in urban areas are more likely to be educated at tertiary level (43 per cent) compared to rural areas (17 per cent) nationally, and in each of the regions. This is due to a lack of access to education for rural inhabitants. Indeed, rural inhabitants are more likely to say that they did not have the opportunity to

continue their education (16 per cent compared to nine per cent in urban areas) and that proximity of institutions was the greatest improvement needed in the education system (nine per cent vs six per cent in urban areas).

There are distinct differences in occupational trends and employment patterns between rural and urban inhabitants. Rural residents are more likely to engage in traditional roles, such as stay-at-home parenting and working in agriculture, forestry, or fishing, reflecting their aspirations (14 per cent said they wanted to work in that sector). They are also less likely to be unemployed (21 per cent compared to 28 per cent in urban areas), likely due to economic necessity (Figure 45). [128]

In contrast, urban youth are more inclined toward less traditional career paths, including higher rates of self-employment and work in diverse, often informal industries reported as 'not elsewhere classified' in the Next Generation Survey. Indeed, almost twice as many urban youths reported being self-employed (see Figure 46). This contrast highlights the varying economic landscapes and opportunities available in rural versus urban areas and supports previous research that urban youth have the financial flexibility to pursue less traditional careers. [129]

127 Hassan, M. K. R. (2023). Factors Affecting Urbanisation in Iraq: A Historical Analysis from 1921 to the Present. Urbanisation, 8(1), 61-78. https://doi.org/10.1177/24557471231169386.

128 ILO, 2024, Iraq National Strategy to prevent and reduce inequalities in the World of Work, 2028-2024., ILO.

129 ILO, 2024, Iraq National Strategy to prevent and reduce inequalities in the World of Work, 2028-2024., ILO.

Figure 45: Percentage of 'traditional' forms of occupation by location
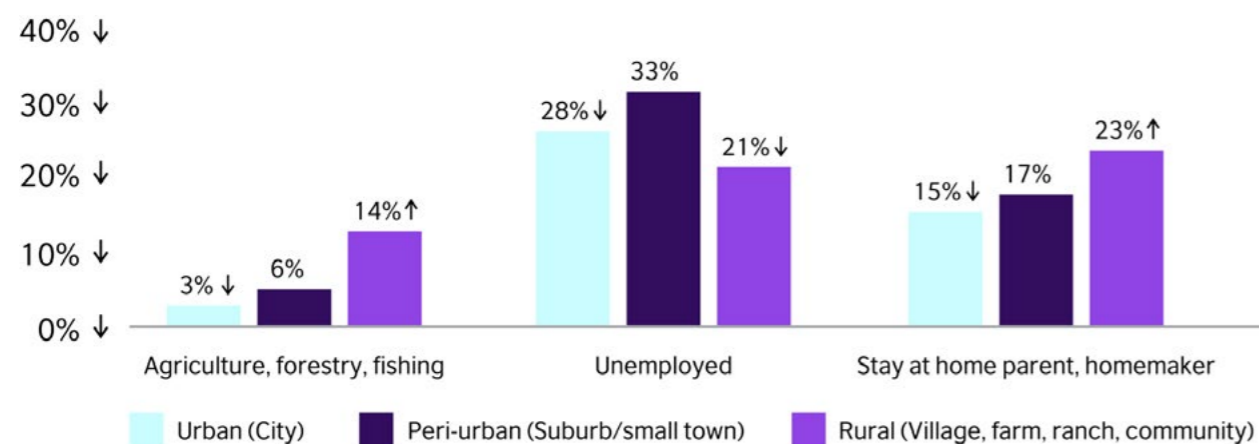
Figure 46: Percentage of less traditional' forms of occupation by location
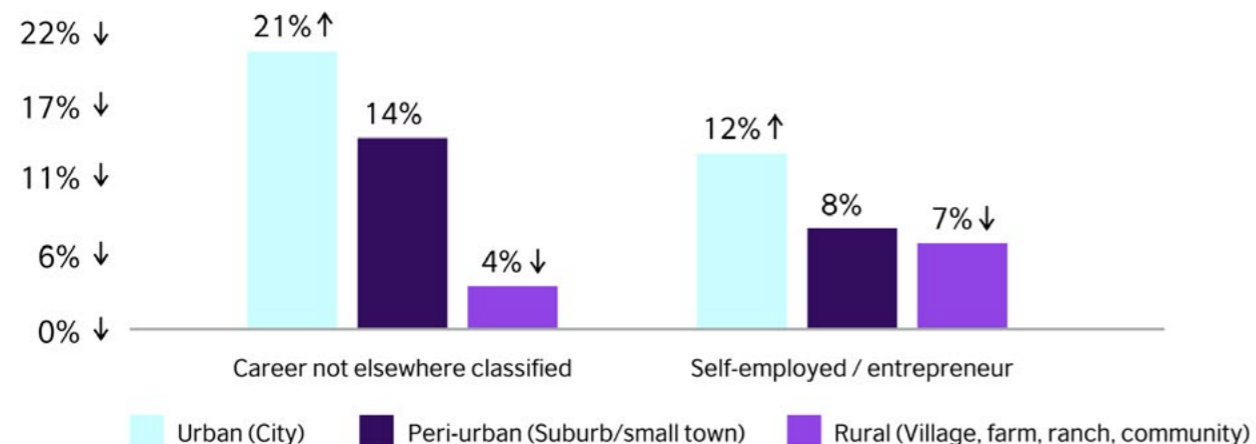
In line with this, rural inhabitants are more likely to report that they have a better standard of living than their parents (40 per cent vs 23 per cent for urban) and more likely to rate the standard of living as good (34 per cent in rural areas). Only 12 per cent of urban youth reported the standard of living to be good. This is a result of Iraq's cities accommodating more than 70 per cent of the population, with urbanisation continuing to grow. Significant numbers of people, particularly the poor, live in informal settlements and sub-standard housing, with a lack of basic services, polluted water sources and poor air quality. [130] Accordingly, the need for employment opportunities (55 per cent) and greater access to housing (22 per cent) are more common in urban areas. Societal issues like early marriage and early pregnancy are more prevalent in rural areas.
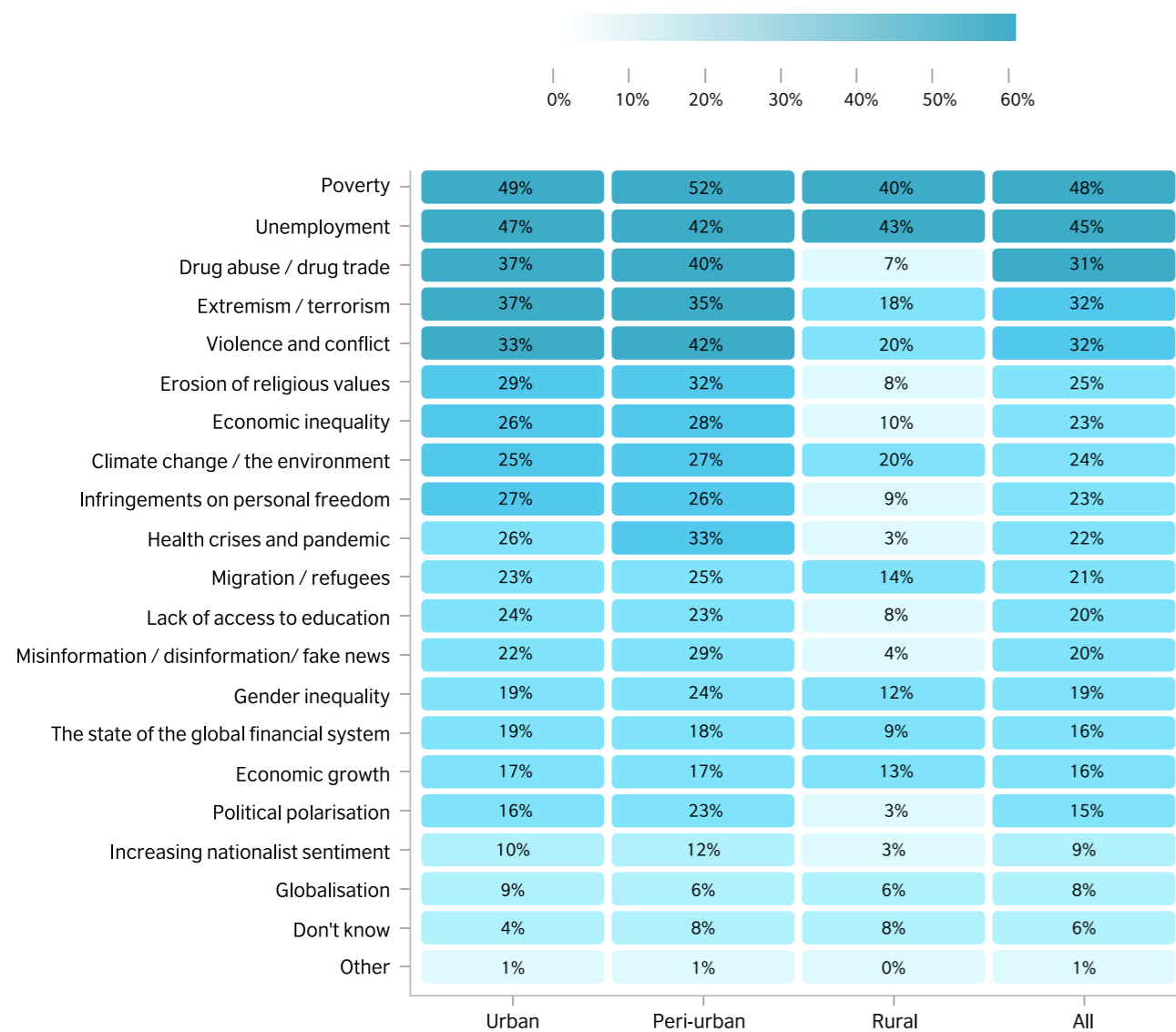
Perhaps due to their higher satisfaction with their standard of living, rural young people are less likely to consider moving to another country with only 41 per cent saying they would (compared to 50 per cent of urban young people). Those that did say that they would consider it found the United States of America to be more attractive than their urban peers (eight per cent compared to three per cent), but Canada (14 per cent), Germany (12 per cent) and Australia (ten per cent) are also attractive to many rural young people. Furthermore, and consistent with their lower level of education attainment due to the need for more opportunities, rural residents are likely to say that educational opportunities are the reason they would consider moving (34 per cent compared to 23 per cent in urban areas).

There is also significant difference in the views of urban and rural young people on the key global challenges. Rural youth are most concerned with poverty and unemployment, whereas urban youth show awareness of a broader range of global issues (see Figure 47). Greater emphasis on issues such as misinformation/disinformation, political polarisation, and infringements on personal freedom among urban Iraqis can also stem from the higher levels of educational attainment, better connectedness, and a more informed young public in urban vs. rural areas.

130 UN Habitat. (2022). Iraq country overview. https://unhabitat.org/iraq#:~:text=Iraq's%20 cities%20accommodate%20more%20than,air%20quality%20and%20climate%20change.

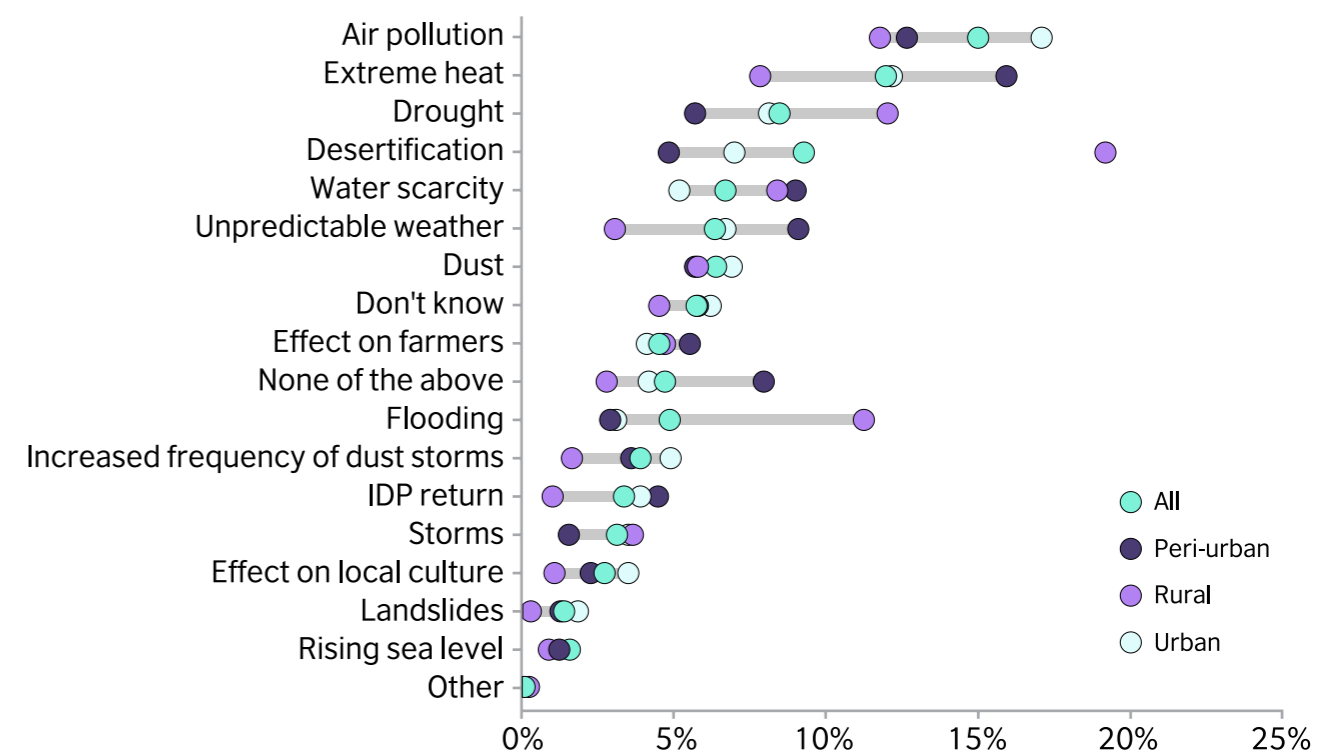**Figure 47:** Percentage of top global challenges identified by young people by location

	Urban	Peri-urban	Rural	All
Poverty	49%	52%	40%	48%
Unemployment	47%	42%	43%	45%
Drug abuse / drug trade	37%	40%	7%	31%
Extremism / terrorism	37%	35%	18%	32%
Violence and conflict	33%	42%	20%	32%
Erosion of religious values	29%	32%	8%	25%
Economic inequality	26%	28%	10%	23%
Climate change / the environment	25%	27%	20%	24%
Infringements on personal freedom	27%	26%	9%	23%
Health crises and pandemic	26%	33%	3%	22%
Migration / refugees	23%	25%	14%	21%
Lack of access to education	24%	23%	8%	20%
Misinformation / disinformation/ fake news	22%	29%	4%	20%
Gender inequality	19%	24%	12%	19%
The state of the global financial system	19%	18%	9%	16%
Economic growth	17%	17%	13%	16%
Political polarisation	16%	23%	3%	15%
Increasing nationalist sentiment	10%	12%	3%	9%
Globalisation	9%	6%	6%	8%
Don't know	4%	8%	8%	6%
Other	1%	1%	0%	1%

Figure 48: Area of climate concern by urbanicity

Overall, ensuring equitable access to education, employment, and resources for rural youth is imperative, yet fostering sustainable development and resilience in the face of global challenges and rapid urbanisation is also key to increase the optimism and standard of living for young people in urban areas.

Whilst overall concern about the environmental impact of climate change is largely similar by location (Figure above), there are variations in awareness of specific climate threats and who young people believe is most responsible in tackling them. For example, rural young people are more likely to think desertification (19 per cent vs seven per cent in urban) and flooding (11 per cent vs three per cent) are the most important climate concerns in their local area (see Figure 48). The impact of desertification has been detrimental on the state of food production and farming. The repeated droughts and rapid desertification that Iraq has experienced over the past three years have intensified the rural exodus to cities, as farmers are no longer able to work on their land. [131] Linked to the keen awareness of rural youth of the economic implications of climate change, they are more likely than urban youth to believe that national (36 per cent vs 24 per cent) and local (28 per cent vs 18 per cent) governments are responsible for tackling climate change.

131 France24. (2021). Iraq's Basra under pressure from rural exodus due to desertification, https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/focus/20221117-iraq-s-basra-under-pressure-from-rural-exodus-due-to-desertification/.

Regional profiles

Most of the sample lived in Southern Iraq (52 per cent), followed by North/Western Iraq (30 per cent), and finally the Kurdistan Region (18 per cent) (see Figure 49). While the demographic profiles are similar, there are important differences in educational attainment, employment, entrepreneurship and other key areas across the three regions.

Starting with education, educational attainment tends to be unevenly distributed across the country. North/Western Iraq has the highest percentage of people with less than lower secondary education (35 per cent), and the Kurdistan Region the lowest (nine per cent). In contrast, the Kurdistan Region has the highest percentage of those with short-cycle tertiary education (33 per cent compared to 16 per cent in North/Western Iraq and 24 per cent in Southern Iraq). This suggests that there are particularly high levels of vocational training in the region.

Unsurprisingly, youth perspectives on what should be improved in the education system differed substantially across the regions:

1. Infrastructure was a key priority for young people in Southern Iraq, who were more likely to cite infrastructure (19 per cent) than those in other areas (five percent in the Kurdistan Region and 16 percent in North/Western Iraq). Given years of conflict and damage to infrastructure, including schools, across the country, it is unsurprising that infrastructure is a priority for young people.

2. The curriculum is highlighted to be a pertinent issue in the Kurdistan Region where young people cited curriculum (36 per cent) more often than those in other regions and were also more likely to say that education did not prepare them for work well (51 per cent compared to 27 per cent in Southern Iraq). This along with the employment issues faced by young people in the Kurdistan Region (discussed in the next section) suggests the need for better [132]education-labour market alignment. One avenue to explore is career guidance. Despite only 33 per cent of those in the Kurdistan Region receiving this, they have the highest rate of satisfaction with career guidance among regions, with 55 per cent finding it useful.

When it comes to employment, young people in the Kurdistan Region are more likely to be unemployed and more interested in alternative pathways to employment, compared to young people in other regions. For instance, a higher percentage of those in Southern Iraq said that they are in full or part-time employment (23 per cent compared to 13 per cent in the Kurdistan region), and those in North/Western Iraq being more likely to be seasonal workers (nine per cent compared to four per cent in Southern Iraq).

Interestingly, there was significantly more interest in starting a business in the Kurdistan Region (76 per cent compared to 46 per cent in North/Western Iraq and 62 per cent in Southern Iraq). This suggests that the higher levels of unemployment in the Kurdistan Region (40 per cent) are prompting young people to seek alternative solutions to traditional employment, despite the similar percentage of entrepreneurs across all regions (ten to 11 per cent). Furthermore, young people in the Kurdistan Region are also more likely to consider moving to another country (59 per cent compared to 40 per cent in North/Western Iraq and 50 per cent in Southern Iraq). Again, this reflects an overall pattern of dissatisfaction with the educational and employment opportunities provided in the Kurdistan Region.

Overall, those in the Kurdistan Region and in North/Western Iraq have a less positive outlook on the present and the future. Comparing perceptions of the future across regions, we can see that those in the Kurdistan Region are more pessimistic about their future career, quality of life, local community, country, and global community than those in other regions, while those in Southern Iraq are more optimistic on these same facets (Figure 50). Furthermore, and in alignment with the above, those in the Kurdistan Region are more likely to rate their standard of living as poor (58 per cent compared to 32 per cent in Southern Iraq and 42 per cent in North/Western Iraq). Interestingly, people living in North/Western Iraq are more likely to think that the lives of young people are worse today than their parents' (64 per cent) than in other regions.

132 UNICEF, 2023, What we do: Education., https://www.unicef.org/iraq/what-we-do/education

Figure 49: Percentage of population in sample by region.

18% 30% 52%

- Kurdistan Region
- North/Western Iraq
- Southern Iraq

Figure 50: Percentage of young people who were pessimistic about their future outlook

Kurdistan Region   North/Western Iraq   Southern Iraq

The global community
My local community
My country
My future career
My quality of life

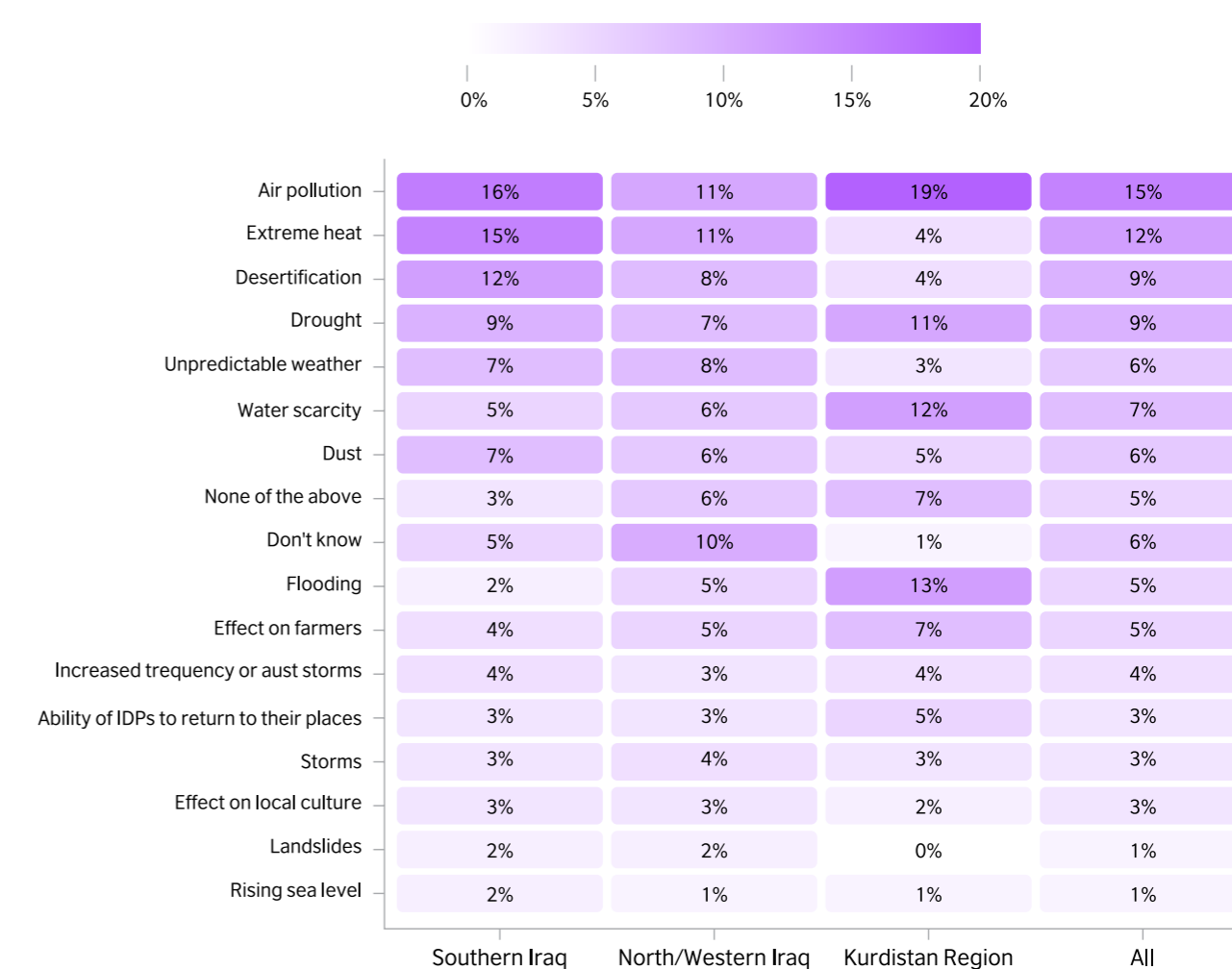0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70%

Figure 51: Percentage of young people who think that engaging with politics is NOT important by level and region
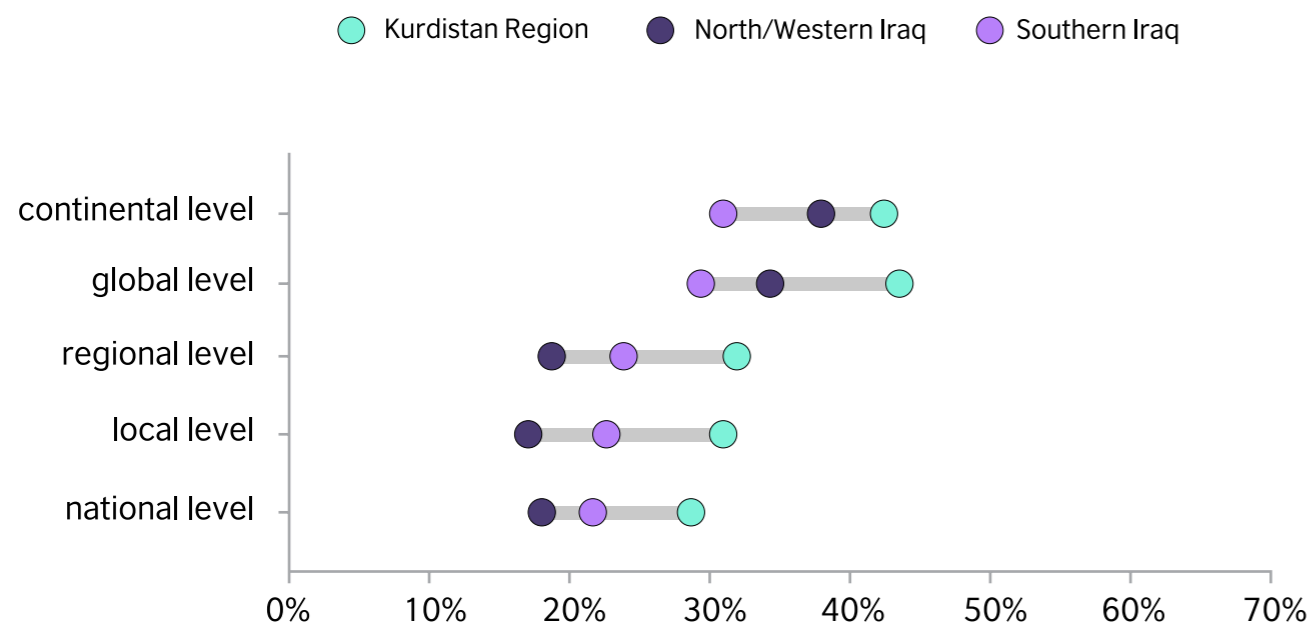
In line with their pessimism, those in the Kurdistan Region are also more likely to think that engaging in politics at any level is not important, whereas those in Southern Iraq feel the opposite and those in North/Western Iraq sit in the middle (see Figure 51). Young people in the Kurdistan Region are also more likely to say that they have no interest in increasing their engagement with politics (53 per cent compared to 33 per cent in Southern Iraq).

Figure 52: Percentage of young people concerned about climate issues by region

Concern about climate change varies by region, with key differences in the importance placed on specific climate issues. In North/Western Iraq there is the least concern about climate change with only 37 per cent expressing this sentiment, whereas in Southern Iraq and the Kurdistan Region 47 per cent were concerned. Furthermore, as expected, there are also variations in the most important climate concern by region, with water-based concerns (flooding and water scarcity) being most prevalent in the Kurdistan Region, and extreme heat and desertification being more common in Southern Iraq (see Figure 52).

3.6.5 Internally displaced people

Following turbulent times in Iraq's security situation, the UNHCR estimates that just over one million internally displaced people (IDP) remain in the country as of 2023, along with five million internally displaced returnees, and 25 internally displaced people's camps in the Kurdistan Region. [133] From the Next Generation survey, we found variations between internally displaced people and the general youth population on socio-demographic factors but also on perspectives and outlook. Overall, being internally displaced has a clear impact on young people. They are more likely than their non-displaced counterparts to hold significantly pessimistic views on the future, feel more dissonance with Iraqi citizenship, and be more concerned with everyday struggles rather than broader concerns like climate change.

Looking at their demographic differences, internally displaced people exhibit significant differences when it comes to their age, relationship status, and geography. Internally displaced people, in general, are older than the rest of the population, with 65 per cent falling into the 25-30 age bracket, compared to 48 per cent who are not internally displaced. They are also less likely to be single and more likely to be married (see Figure 53).

In terms of geography, the findings from our sample align with UNHCR findings regarding the geographic concentration of internally displaced people and returnees population in Iraq. The 2024 UNHCR Iraq Population Profile report found that internally displaced people are mainly concentrated around northern regions of Iraq (see Figure 54). [134] They are more likely to be in Northern Iraq with 61 per cent of internally displaced people and 82 per cent of returnees in these provinces, compared to 30 per cent for the overall sample and 18 per cent of those who are neither internally displaced people nor returnees.

Internally displaced people are also less urban than their non-displaced peers with only 36 per cent living in urban areas compared to 60 per cent of those who are neither returnees nor displaced. Young people who are internally displaced are also more likely to be living with disabilities (28 per cent compared to 12 per cent). Interestingly, despite more internally displaced people

living with disabilities, a larger proportion also stated that they know nothing at all about disabled persons (33 per cent vs eight per cent). Similarly, they were more likely to believe that disabled persons are a burden on society (49 per cent of internally displaced people disagreed with this statement compared to 76 per cent of non-displaced people who disagreed).
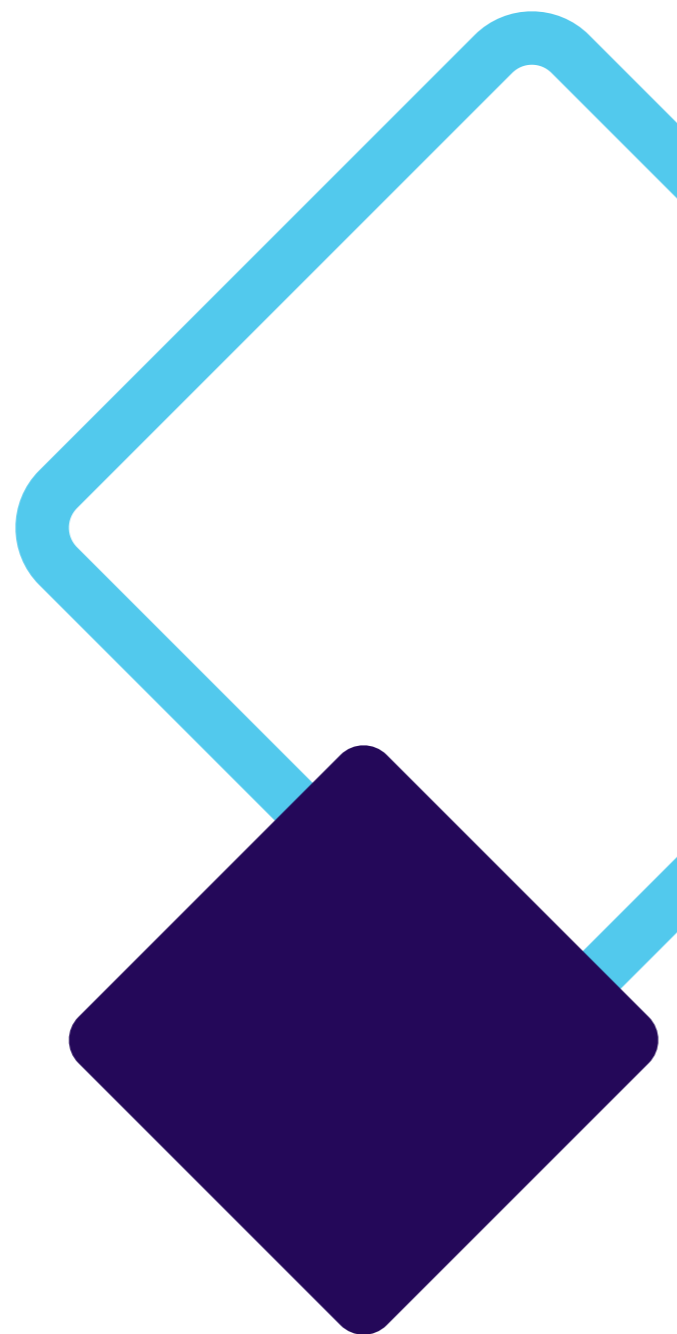
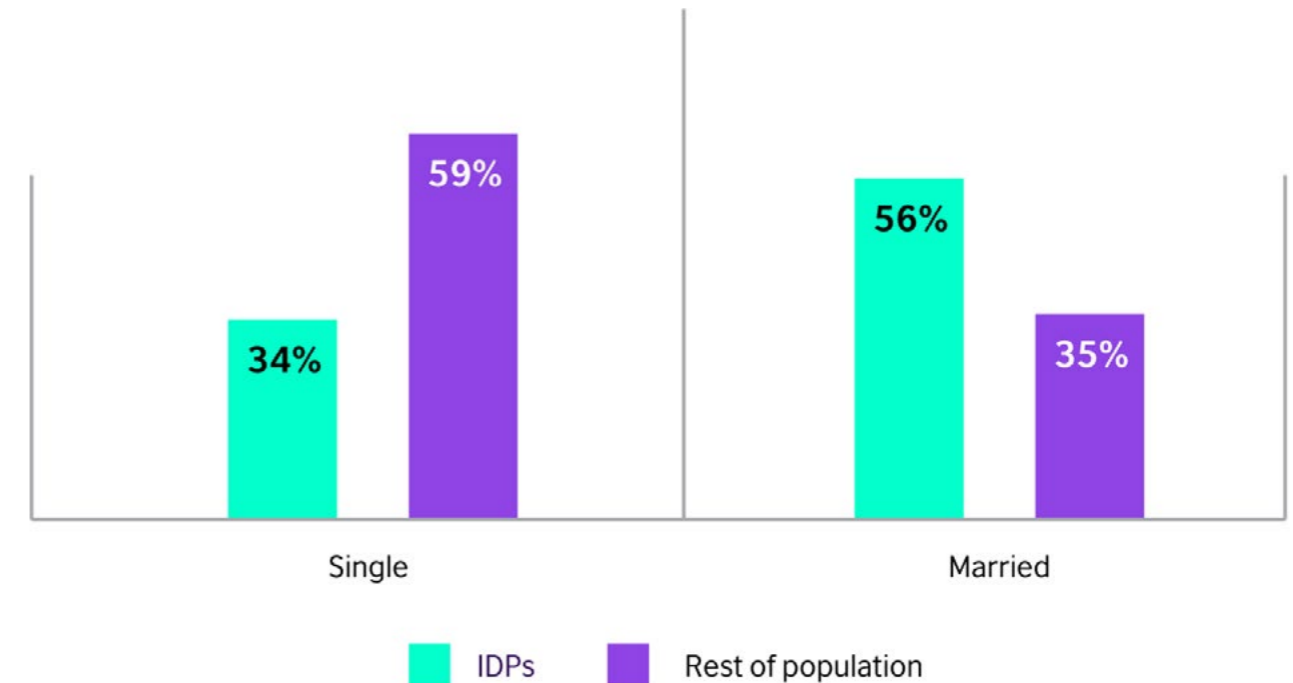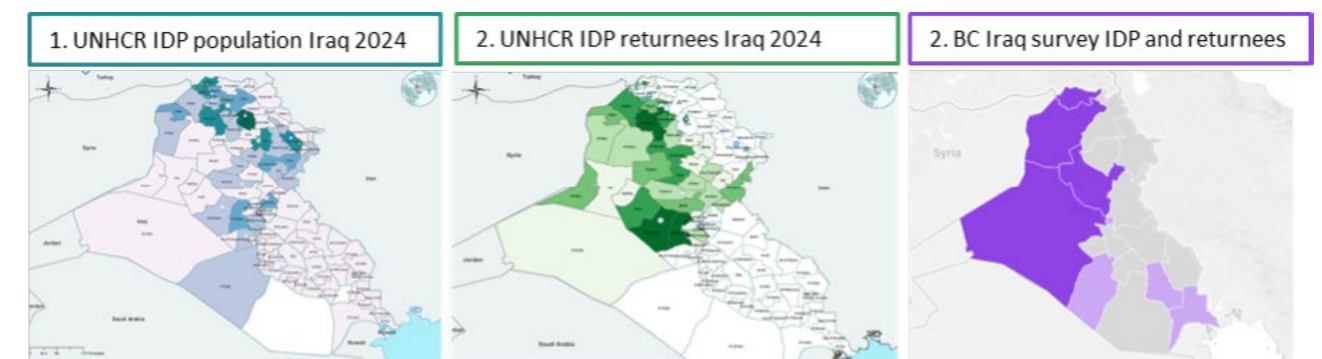**Figure 53:** Single and Married among IDP and rest of sample

Figure 54: UNHCR 2024 IDP and Returnee Maps, and Next Generation Iraq sample IDP concentration map

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133 UNHCR, 2023, Iraq Situation. https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/iraq-situation

134 UNCHR, 2024, UNHCR Iraq - Population Profile - Breakdown Overview - IDPs and Returnees., UNHCR. https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/106319

Exploring educational attainment and employment of young internally displaced people, survey results show that they are less likely to be students (18 per cent compared to 33 per cent), or unemployed and looking for a job (seven per cent vs 24 per cent), but more likely to be stay at home parents (27 per cent) and seasonal workers (23 per cent) (see Figure 55).

Qualitative insights underscore the challenges faced by young IDPs, such as educational setbacks due to displacement, yet also highlight resilience and determination to overcome adversities, also seen during the priorities exercise with young internally displaced people (see Figure 56).

'When I experienced displacement, it posed a significant challenge. You could say I was three years behind compared to where I was before. With no access to media coverage or the internet, I missed out on a few years of schooling. These circumstances were incredibly tough, but they didn't hinder my progress.' (Male Respondent, Ninawa)

However, despite the optimism expressed in qualitative discussions, the survey data reveals a contrast. Internally displaced people rate their standard of living lower than their peers with half (51 per cent) saying that it was bad or very bad (compared to 39 per cent of those who are not internally displaced) and only nine per cent saying it was good (compared to 17 per cent of those who are not internally displaced), indicating a perceived disparity in their quality of life. Interestingly, many displaced people feel pessimistic about how young people's lives are turning out. About 69 per cent of them think that young people today have it worse than their parents did, compared to 53 per cent of the general population. This feeling of disillusionment is supported by what young Iraqis living in displaced people's camps in Ninawa have shared about the tough challenges they face after being displaced.

'Life was extremely challenging; even the simplest tasks became difficult. For instance, buying necessities required traveling long distances to reach the nearest shops, and navigating dangerous and muddy roads. These obstacles made it tough to envision and pursue dreams and goals.' (Male Respondent, Ninewa)

Young internally displaced people have distinct preferences and sentiments regarding international migration compared to their counterparts. A higher proportion of internally displaced people see employment opportunities (28 per cent vs. 15 per cent) and quality of life (20 per cent vs. 13 per cent) as crucial factors influencing their desire to migrate to specific countries. This emphasis on economic and lifestyle considerations underscores the socioeconomic challenges confronting young internally displaced people in Iraq. Furthermore, more internally displaced people are not proud of their Iraqi citizenship (14 per cent versus eight per cent of the general population), indicating mixed feelings about belonging to Iraq.

Considering the issue of climate change, a smaller proportion of internally displaced people express concern about the environment (31 per cent compared to 44 per cent), suggesting a divergence in priorities and perceptions of environmental challenges. Instead, internally displaced people place greater emphasis on immediate concerns related to their displacement, with a significantly higher percentage identifying the ability to return to their places of origin as the most important concern (eight per cent compared to three per cent). This shows the significance of displacement-related concerns in their thoughts, suggesting, for this, reason environmental issues may be considered secondary priorities.

There are significant socio-demographic disparities and pessimistic outlooks among internally displaced young people compared to the general youth population. Internally displaced youth face obstacles in education, employment, and quality of life, reflecting the impact of displacement on their lived experiences. Despite their resilience, they express disillusionment about their current situation and future opportunities, emphasising the urgent need for targeted interventions to address their challenges.

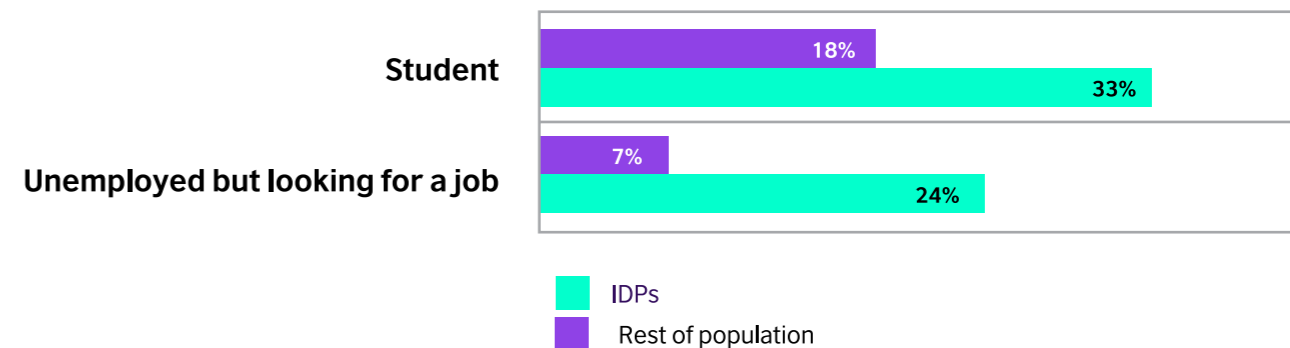**Figure 55:** Single and Married among IDP and rest of sample

| | IDPs |
| | Rest of population |

Figure 56: Priorities exercise and translation (Male Respondent, Salah ad Din).

Now/Presently	Next year	Future
"Stability and recovering [reclaiming] our home in Al-Doz"	"Returning to school"	"To obtain a seat in university" [The respondent meant to say to gain admission into a university]

Annex 3

The digital profiles of young people and sources of information most used are explored in Chapter 1: Profiles. The following annex provides an overview of the daily online habits of young people in Iraq, highlighting any significant trends.

Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram and Tik-Tok are the most used social media on a daily basis. Women were less likely to use Facebook (48 per cent compared to 64 per cent of men) and Twitter (48 per cent compared to 69 per cent of men) multiple times a day but were more likely to use Snapchat (31 per cent vs 19 per cent) multiple times a day (Figure 57).

Nearly three-quarters of young Iraqis use WhatsApp (74 per cent), Instagram (72 per cent) and Facebook (71 per cent) on a daily basis (see Figure 58). This shows that a high proportion of young people are invested in brands owned by Meta. For those using Meta services, those aged 25-30 were more likely to be using Facebook (63 per cent) and WhatsApp (68 per cent) multiple times day than those aged 18-24 (49 per cent and 54 per cent respectively), where the opposite was true for Instagram with 56 per cent of those aged 25-30 using it compared to 66 per cent of those aged 18-24.
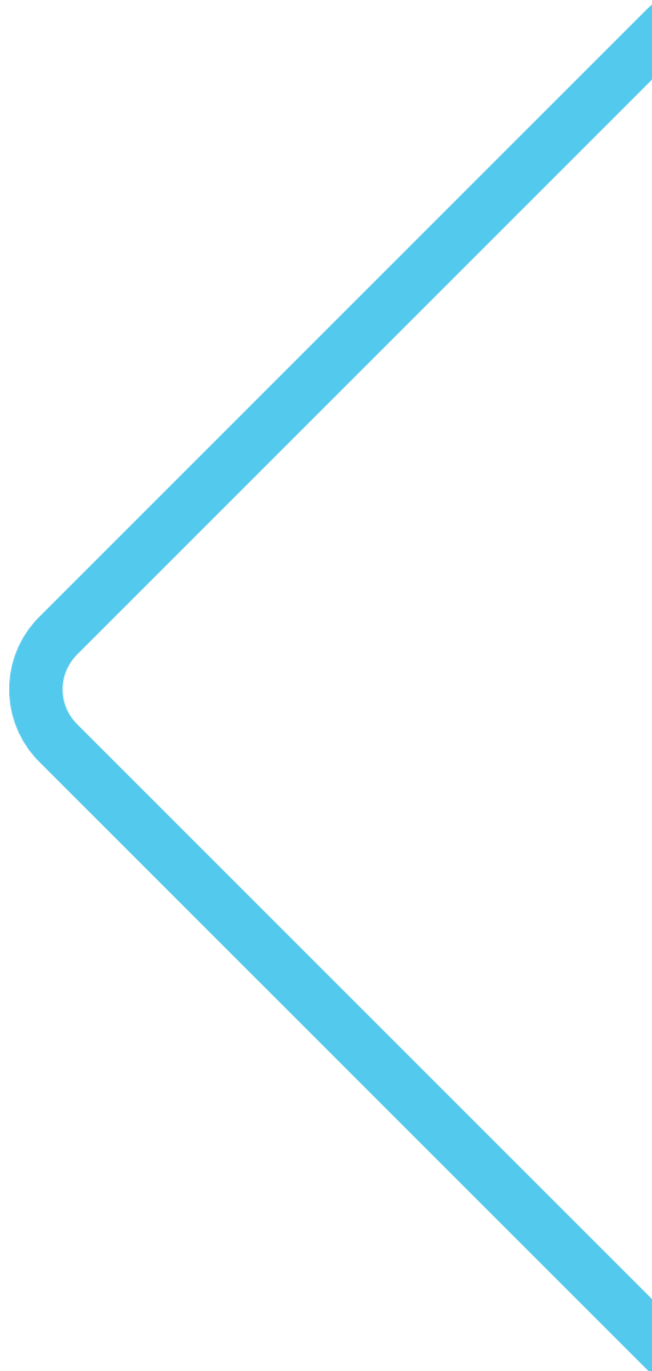
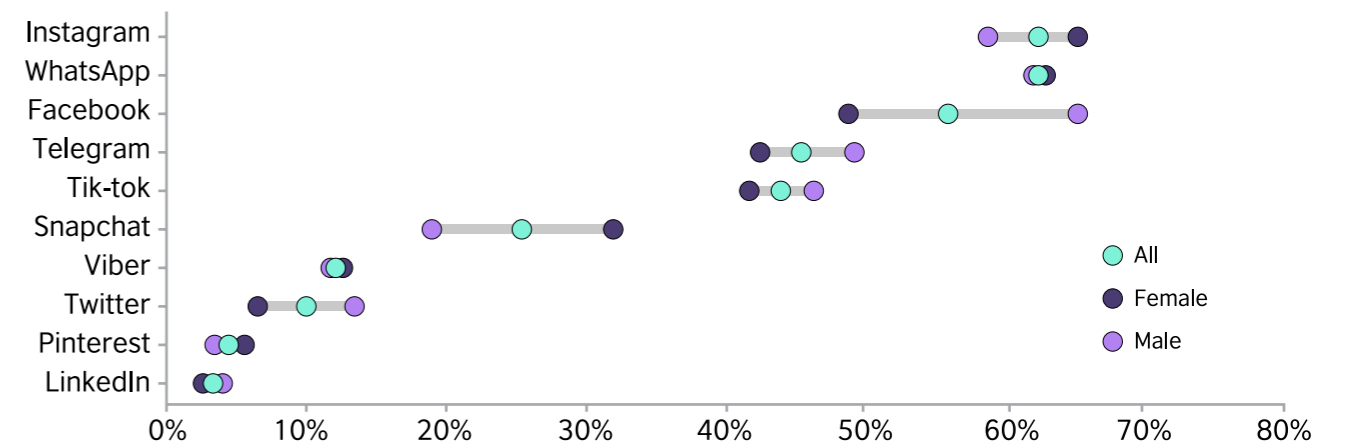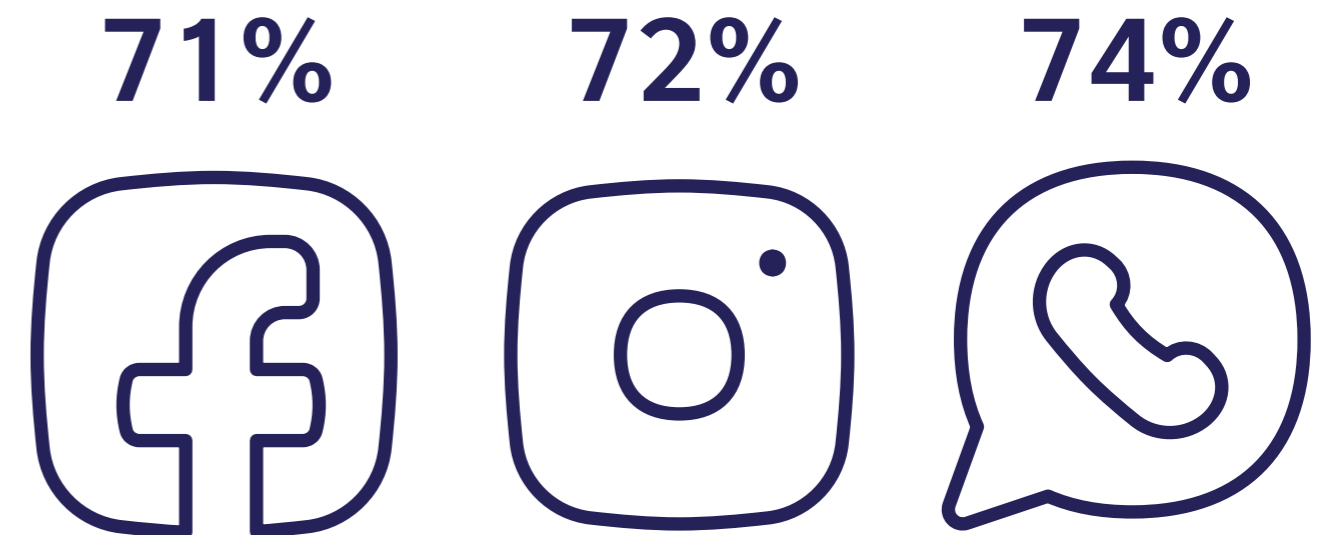**Figure 57:** Percentage of young people using social media multiple times per day by platform and gender

Figure 58: Most used social media sites daily

71%   **72%**   **74%**

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