

# Iraq's Third Voluntary National Review on the Sustainable Development Goals

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## 2025



PREPARED BY:

Iraqi Al-Amal Association

Together to Protect Human & Environment Association

COORDINATED BY:

Arab NGO Network for Development - ANND

## 1- Introduction

As part of its follow-up and review mechanisms, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in its paragraph 79 encourages member states to "conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven". These national reviews are basis for the annually held High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF); the main platform for the follow-up and review of the Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports summarize the country's efforts, policies, and initiatives aligned with the SDGs and highlight accomplishments, challenges faced, best practices, and lessons learned.

Iraq submitted its first Voluntary National Review reports (VNR) on SDGs in 2019 and the second on in 2021. The third VNR was presented during the 2025 High Level Political Forum and the process was led by the Ministry of Planning in collaboration with experts and with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

While the report presents several positive achievements and progress, its analytical section highlights persistent gaps that must be addressed to ensure equitable, inclusive, and sustainable development outcomes. The report addresses the 17 (SDGs) while emphasizing national priorities such as reconstruction, justice, governance, and investment strategies. Notably, it lacks a dedicated focus on empowering marginalized populations, specifically women, children, and individuals with disabilities. Moreover, many of the government's policies and initiatives are outlined without accompanying indicators that limits in-depth assessment and reflect significant shortcomings in monitoring, evaluation, coordination, and data collection practices with regard to the commitments under Agenda 2030.

## 2- Overview of Economic and Social Rights

Civil society continues to observe the persistent social and regional disparities in achieving sustainable development in Iraq. Although the report covers several important aspects of citizens' lives, such as housing, health, and education, it addresses these issues without sufficient depth.

### **With regard to the Right to Housing**

The report mentions the Iraqi government's initiative to establish 16 new cities—four of which have been contracted for implementation—aiming to address the housing gap affecting about 12% of the population by providing more than 100,000 housing units, with a focus on making these cities sustainable and modern.

However, civil society notes several fundamental points that were unclear in the report, including:

- No clear identification of the target groups, whether low-income families, displaced persons, or youth.
- Absence of clear mechanisms to ensure fair and equitable access to housing.
- Lack of indicators to measure the extent to which adequate housing is achieved according to international human rights standards.

Accordingly, while these housing initiatives are important, they still require further development to ensure the right to housing is achieved with social justice, equality, and accountability. Including initiatives under the 2018-2022 and targets set for constructing housing units were previously reviewed and considered insufficient compared with the needs of the population and the provision of durable, adequate housing solutions to people living in informal settlements, slums and refugee camps and, in the meantime, improving their living conditions and access to safe drinking water, water for general consumption, sanitation facilities, health care, education, public transport, electricity, waste disposal services and other services remained a key recommendation directed to Iraq in previous monitoring exercises<sup>1</sup>.

## **With regard to the Right to Housing**

The report mentions an increase in government spending on health, reaching 12.6% of total public spending in 2023, as well as the opening of new hospitals after a long hiatus, and the adoption of the Health Insurance Law in 2022, which aims to improve the quality of healthcare and expand coverage for vulnerable groups.

Nevertheless, tangible challenges remain, such as:

- High out-of-pocket health expenses compared to income levels.
- Unequal geographic distribution of health services.
- Absence of explicit guarantees to provide free healthcare services to the poorest groups.

Therefore, ensuring equity in access to effective and fair healthcare still requires further strengthening and practical implementation. Furthermore, as documented by ANND<sup>2</sup>, Arab Watch Report on the right to health in Iraq, access to quality health services depends on income since a high proportion of spending is out-of-pocket due to the lack of a proper health insurance system. Thus, public health services are limited to essential procedures, often of a lower quality than what can be obtained in the private sector. Ironically, private departments in government hospitals are usually cleaner and provide better services than the ones provided by the same hospital, mainly due to the additional financial incentives and fixed government salaries. Consequently, vulnerable classes, those below the poverty line, those with limited incomes, and even the lower middle-income groups are highly dependent on public services. Simultaneously, higher income groups can obtain higher quality services from the private sector. They can also travel to other countries such as Lebanon, Iran, India, Turkey, and Jordan for treatment, which is not usually reimbursed by the state. Health providers have lost the trust of beneficiaries, who are deprived of their rights in the public sector and usually exploited by the private sector.

Meanwhile, public health workers believe they are confined by routine, lack of funding, financial corruption, lack of space to grow, and fixed salaries regardless of the quality and quantity of services. The frustrating situation for beneficiaries and workers in the public sector has usually led to tensions and aggression. The absence of transferable medical records between the public and private sectors also hampers access to health. Health service providers often start from scratch with each patient, starting with medical history and other information that relies entirely on the patient's memory, increasing the chance of inappropriate or repetitive interventions and, thus, failure. The private sector is also highly disorganized and lacks structured communication channels between its providers. In addition to the above, women and girls are often deprived of access to adequate health services due to prevailing gender and social norms. For example, married rural women and those from religious families often consult gynecologists for all health matters to avoid going to a male doctor. Moreover, despite improving women's access to health services overall, the gap between rural and urban areas has increased dramatically, mainly due to patriarchal gender norms.

### **With regard to the Right to Education:**

The report affirms that free basic education is a constitutional right linked to development and social justice, and it reviews the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and population growth.

However, there is a lack of:

- A clear implementation plan to address school dropout rates or to improve the quality of education.
- Detailed analysis of gender and geographic gaps in education.
- Sufficient details on budgets allocated to education.

These challenges were documented by the CESCRR as well, noting the adoption of the National Education Strategy for the period 2022–2031,

yet recognizing that millions of school-age children in Iraq are not in school and the high drop-out rates in primary education persist, in particular for girls and the chronic underfunding of the educational system, including regarding operational and other costs such as teachers' salaries, school materials and school building maintenance remaining as concerns. Indeed, the report falls short of presenting the guarantees and practical policies needed to achieve educational equity, especially in rural and disadvantaged areas.

One key challenge for Iraq, and achieving sustainable human development is the rising public debt. The recent analysis by ANND<sup>3</sup> documents that although Iraq managed to reduce its external debt following the rescheduling of debts owed to the Paris Club and other countries at the end of 2004—based on the support and assistance convention signed with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which recommended that creditor states write off more than 80% of Iraq's outstanding debt—it is notable that external and domestic borrowing has increased from a variety of sources, despite higher oil revenues. Domestic and external debt has increasingly become one of the main sources for financing the government's general budget deficit. This, in turn, has had a significant impact on the structure of economic growth in Iraq. The continued reliance on deficit financing has led to a rise in both external and domestic debt. The continued reliance of successive governments on domestic or external borrowing to finance their operating expenses, even if allocated to salaries and wages, will ultimately lead to an increased burden of these debts through higher interest and public debt installments paid, which will certainly come at the expense of financing service and social projects. The size of the interest and installments due on the domestic and external debt, paid for the years (2021-2024) exceed the total investment allocations for the education, health, housing and municipal sectors by a significant margin, and that gap is subject to increase as the annual operating expenditures continue to rise, increasing from IQD 50,418 billion in 2020 to IQD 96,380 billion in 2024

(<https://mof.gov.iq/Pages/MainMof.aspx>). This affected the implementation of government programs to build schools and hospitals and create job opportunities. In turn, this was reflected in unemployment rates that reached 16.8% of the workforce, not to mention poverty, which reached 17.5% of the population (Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation, results of the 2025 socio-economic survey).

### **3- The Equality between Women and Men and Legal Reform in Iraq**

The recent amendments to the Personal Status Law have been heralded as a significant legislative achievement; however, there are substantial concerns from civil society regarding their implications. These amendments entrench sectarian discrimination, undermine the principle of equality before the law for all Iraqi citizens, and impose constraints on women's rights post-divorce, particularly in areas related to housing, alimony, and child custody arrangements. The amendments that took effect in February 2025:

- Strengthens sectarian discrimination in rulings.
- Allows child marriage and legalizes unbalanced marriage arrangements such as temporary marriage.
- Restricts women's rights to alimony, housing, and custody after divorce.
- Contradicts Article (14) of the Iraqi Constitution, which guarantees equality, as well as Iraq's commitments under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

This amendment is a legislative regression that requires thorough review or reversal to ensure compliance with the principles of justice, dignity, and equality. While some advancements have been made in promoting the empowerment of women and girls, there remains a critical need for a thorough evaluation of women's representation in leadership roles

within state institutions. Increasing the number of women in decision-making positions is essential for fostering genuine the equality between women and men.

Furthermore, the lack of a comprehensive legal framework for the protection against domestic violence, which remains stalled in parliamentary discussions, results in thousands of women and girls lacking legal safeguards. This gap not only exposes them to ongoing domestic violence but also has adverse repercussions for children and contributes to a broader culture of violence within society. Addressing these issues is paramount for advancing the equality between women and men, and legal reform in Iraq.

#### **4- Participation, Governance, and the Right to Information**

The report claims to be participatory; however, involvement was primarily restricted to governmental entities, with only a few sessions dedicated to disseminating the findings. Notably absent from the report is an acknowledgment of the significant contributions made by international organizations, foreign development agencies, UN bodies, and local NGOs that have actively participated in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. Additionally, the report was not disseminated locally, resulting in interested organizations and researchers relying on downloads from UN websites for access. It is also crucial to note that, as of now, there is no legal framework in place to ensure citizens' rights to information, despite the draft legislation having been pending in Parliament for an extended period.



## **5- Green Transition and Climate Action**

The report acknowledges the shift towards a green economy; however, it falls short in establishing clear metrics to assess the impact of green projects on society. Specifically, it lacks defined indicators for evaluating progress in energy transition, environmental innovation, and green employment. Furthermore, it overlooks the significant environmental and social innovations being spearheaded by universities, startups, and civil society organizations, which are pivotal in advancing a sustainable economy.

## **6- General Conclusions and Recommendations**

The third Voluntary National Review (VNR) represents progress; however, it does not fully embody a rights-based framework. Civil society in Iraq continues to advocate for comprehensive legal reforms, improved transparency, and genuine community engagement in the process. Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals requires practical policies that promote equality and justice, enforce accountability for violations, and go beyond theoretical formulations or untargeted initiatives. In this regard:

- Iraq must adequately follow up on the Iraqi Voluntary Review process with a clear road map, clear and measurable targets set, gaps and challenges identified. The accountability of all development actors in achieving sustainable human development must be sought, as well a structured dialogue mechanism between all actors, to ensure commitment to achieving the Goals.
- The forthcoming report should be formulated with a human rights lens, prioritizing the dignity and agency of individuals in national policy formulations.
- The drafting process for the next report must expand to incorporate contributions from academic institutions, labor unions, civil society organizations, and local community representatives.

- The current report underscores significant deficiencies in transparency, particularly concerning financial data. Enhancing transparency in data presentation will not only promote citizen engagement in sustainable development initiatives but also cultivate a sense of national belonging and ownership.
- A permanent dialogue mechanism is essential to facilitate broad engagement among government entities, research institutions, both international and local organizations, and private sector stakeholders. This platform should focus on monitoring the execution of the 2030 Agenda and ensuring coordinated, equitable progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.
- To enhance the report's effectiveness, it is crucial to engage universities, research institutions, and relevant organizations in the monitoring and evaluation process. This collaboration would foster accuracy, transparency, and comprehensiveness—elements currently deficient in the report.