

Recommendations to the United Nations and the donor community on strengthening the response to the COVID-19 epidemic.

International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) working in Jordan take the threat posed by COVID-19 very seriously, and support preventative measures taken by the Government of Jordan to limit its impact. Crowded living conditions, limited access to essential services, including healthcare, and economic vulnerability place refugee populations and vulnerable Jordanians at heightened risk. Many lack the coping mechanisms required to withstand an extended curfew, particularly the loss of household income. As the financial strain on households grows, both the number and severity of protection concerns will rise sharply. This is of particular concern outside the camps.

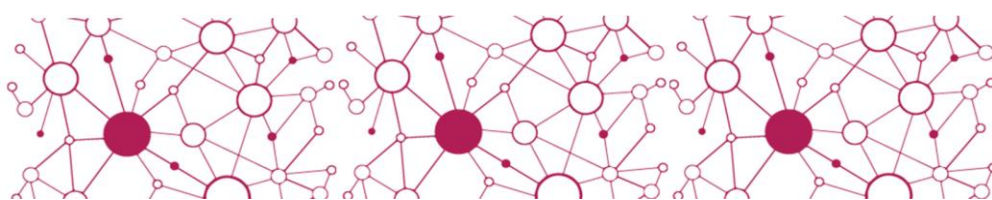
INGOs are well placed to play an important role in supporting the national response to COVID-19. Towards this end, we would like to make the following recommendations:

1. INGOs should be integrated into national contingency planning for areas outside of the camps

INGOs have long provided essential and specialized services and support to both refugee populations and vulnerable Jordanians. Many of our programs target support to areas outside the camps, including urban centers. These programs are implemented by experienced staff, are tailored to both the local context and beneficiary needs, and have allowed us to build strong relationships of trust with the communities we serve. INGOs are thus well placed to make a meaningful contribution towards the national response to COVID-19, particularly when it comes to the roll out of essential services and cash distributions to the most vulnerable. However, movement restrictions associated with the curfew announced on 18 March have seen many of our operations suspended in camps, and almost all of our in person operations suspended outside of the camps. While we support the curfew, exceptions must be made to enable the provision of essential services especially to those households most in need of support. Similarly, while we support the government's NAF COVID fund intended to provide assistance to 350,000 families using local charities and NGOs, suspending all INGO services in areas outside of the camps only weakens Jordan's capacity to cope with the fallout of COVID-19 and the enormous strain it is putting on households across the country. We have written to H.E Prime Minister Dr. Omar Razzaz expressing our hope that his Government utilizes our combined experience, expertise and service delivery know-how in its contingency planning for COVID-19, not just inside but also outside the camps. We ask that this message be reinforced by our donor partners in its interactions with the Government of Jordan. We have also reassured the Prime Minister that while the delivery of these services will require some presence on the ground, we are fully committed to operating them remotely wherever possible and reducing all non-essential movement. We are currently mapping both the type and geographical coverage of the essential services we can offer.

2. Criteria, procedures and timelines for movement approvals need to be clarified

Closely related to the above is the urgent need for clarity regarding the procedures and criteria for movement permits. To date, our efforts to secure movement approvals for critical staff working in camps have been both difficult and time consuming, while no movement approvals have been granted to allow the resumption of essential services outside of the camps. It is our hope that the new online e-permit system introduced by the Government will help to simplify the application process and shorten the time it takes to be granted a permit. It is regrettable, however, that all paper based permits previously issued to INGOs have been cancelled in the process. More broadly, we believe that e-permit approvals need to incorporate the following:



- a. A more holistic definition of essential services when determining movement exemptions to include WASH, solid waste management, emergency financial support, urgent protection assistance, and specialized services required to meet the needs of specifically vulnerable groups – such as the elderly and persons with disabilities – in addition to healthcare. Failure to provide these essential services endangers public health and will push people to leave their homes in contravention of the Government’s curfew if basic services are not provided and basic needs are not met.
- b. The number of permits approved must be sufficient to ensure that essential services can be provided by critical staff.

3. Programs providing tailored support to refugees must be protected

We appreciate the flexibility our donor partners have shown as COVID-19 continues to create multiple challenges in terms of both program outputs and operational modalities. We also recognize that repurposing grants provides a timely way to channel additional funds towards the fight against COVID-19. To better facilitate this process, a coordinated position needs to be adopted among donors, MoPIC, MoSD, other relevant line Ministries and INGOs, that includes updated procedures to simplify and fast-track negotiations with MOPIC over new agreements or the revision of existing ones (for example, changes in program modalities to enable the transition from cash for work programs to voucher and cash distributions). However, to properly address the challenges associated with COVID-19, additional funding is required. In particular, the repurposing of grants must not come at the long-term expense of our normal schedule of programs, which will be essential in the months to come. Nor should it replace recognition of the importance of providing tailored programs to better meet the needs of refugee populations and vulnerable Jordanians. Our collective experience shows that tailored solutions and purpose built programs are consistently more effective and provide better value for money.

4. Protection concerns must be pre-empted and mitigated

Failure to provide adequate support and essential services particularly to the most vulnerable, will quickly lead to an exponential increase in protection concerns across Jordan. Initial data suggests that many households are already having to cut back on food and do not have enough money to buy essential medicines or pay their rent and utility bills. These pressures are further compounded by the strain of living in crowded conditions for long periods of time. The threat of eviction; an increase in gender-based violence; the threat of incarceration should people be forced to leave their homes in search of money or food despite the curfew; the impact on school children unable to access the government’s online learning platform; and the dangers facing undocumented refugees who have no way of accessing subsidized healthcare and must now navigate police check points wherever they move – these are just some of the protection concerns likely to become more prevalent. Any further delays in providing services, including cash assistance to vulnerable communities living outside of the camps, will only accelerate this trend. Pre-empting and mitigating these protection concerns must be a core component of the response to COVID-19.

The Jordan INGO Forum and its members would like to take this opportunity to express our appreciation for the close partnership and support of UNHCR and other UN agencies, as well as the support we continue to receive from our donor partners. We would be happy to discuss any of the issues raised in this letter in further detail.

Sincerely,

The Jordan International NGO Forum (JIF)

