



A New Recipe for Iraq's PDS:
**UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC PERCEPTION AS
A KEY INGREDIENT FOR SUCCESSFUL REFORM**

A Baseline Perception Study

Submitted to: WFP
Date: May 14th, 2023

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Acronyms

FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GOI	Government of Iraq
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IQD	Iraqi Dinar
KII	Key Informant Interview
SBC	Social and Behaviour Change
SSN	Social Safety Net
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats
MoT	Ministry of Trade
PDS	Public Distribution System
WFP	World Food Programme

Executive Summary

The Public Distribution System (PDS) of Iraq is the largest social protection programme in the country. Its aim is to distribute a monthly food basket of six items to eligible PDS recipients. This report delves into the public perception of the PDS, addressing four research questions: 1) What is the public opinion of the PDS in Iraq? 2) How is the PDS utilised in Iraq? 3) What are the barriers and motivators for registering for the e-card? 4) What are the views of the public regarding PDS targeting? The report draws on qualitative research spanning two months, comprising 16 focus-group discussions and 16 key informant interviews across the governorates of Najaf, Baghdad al-Sadr, Diyala, and Duhok. The findings will inform a nationwide communication campaign and a social and behavioural change strategy on PDS reform and will serve as a baseline for evaluating the project's impact.

The PDS is perceived as a crucial component of people's lives in terms of ensuring food security and freeing up finances for other essentials. However, even though the importance of the food basket was emphasised, this did not necessarily imply satisfaction with it. In contrast, the most common perception during the focus-group discussions was that the PDS had inconsistent or poor quality. The concerns were related to the commodities, quantity, and distribution.

The uses of the PDS vary. Most participants used the commodities, even if they were of low quality because they lacked the financial means to purchase better quality items. Many also sold or donated parts of their food basket in cases where the quality of the items was low, or if they could not afford transportation to pick up the basket. Some did not receive the food basket because of their financial status or because they had relocated.

Regarding the concept of PDS reform, focus-group participants' connotations were of "empty promises" of improved quality of items, adding new items, and better distribution. However, most were optimistic and saw that the motivation outweighed the barriers regarding digitisation in general and registering for the e-card specifically. On the other hand, targeting was perceived to have stronger barriers and drawbacks compared to drivers. The drivers and barriers of the two reforms are summarised below.

For digitisation, the drivers include the willingness to register, fast and easy registration, the perceived benefits of online registration, increased control, and the potential positive impact on reducing theft/corruption and improving distribution and quality. Additionally, it is perceived as mandatory and modern, and has the potential to reduce paperwork and bureaucracy. However, the barriers include the lack of information on registration and use of the e-card, digital illiteracy among food agents and some elderly people, lack of resources such as internet, devices, and staff, stigma around asking and answering certain questions, and distrust in the government's credibility and intentions.

As for targeting, the drivers include socially and religiously motivated charity, redistribution to people in need, functioning as a safety net, and being perceived as a right. However, the barriers include the fear of the effect on food prices and distrust in the government's intentions.

Background

Iraq's Universal Public Distribution System (PDS) was established in 1990 in response to food shortages caused by international sanctions. Until the security and economic crisis in 2014, ten subsidised items reached almost 99% of the population, with food baskets playing a critical role in meeting the minimum caloric needs of Iraqis. Today, according to the World Food Programme (WFP), households reportedly receive approximately six food items per person every month, including wheat flour (9 kg), rice (3 kg), sugar (1 kg), vegetable oil (1 litre), and pulses (1 kg). Recipients of the Social Safety Net (SSN) also receive an additional 1 kg of sugar, 1 litre of vegetable oil, and 1 kg of flour, as well as 200 g of tea and 250 g of milk powder. It is important to mention, however, that the food baskets change periodically.

The PDS is politically important due to its almost universal reach and being the country's largest social protection programme. To make the PDS more efficient and to strengthen social security support for the most vulnerable groups, the MoT with technical assistance from the WFP, is in the process of reforming the PDS through a multi-phased approach. The planned reform includes the introduction of improved targeting and digital solutions that will allow for efficiency gains in PDS processes. The Government of Iraq (GOI) has stipulated that individuals with a monthly income of over 2 million Iraqi Dinars (IQD) will be blocked from the programme. Digitalisation is ongoing, as the electronic ration card (e-card) has been introduced in the governorates of Najaf, Duhok, and Muthanna, replacing the current paper-based system.

To inform a nationwide communication campaign and social and behavioural change (SBC) strategy on the PDS reform in Iraq, as well as to function as a baseline to evaluate the project's impact, MAGENTA, an agency specialised in SBC, has been contracted by the WFP to undertake a study on the current perceptions of the PDS in Iraq.

Setting The Context

It is essential to note that the focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted between March 5-19. At the time, e-card registration had only been rolled out in Najaf. Therefore, the data collection took place during the period when people in Najaf were being asked to register for the e-card.

Methodology

The aim of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of public opinion in Iraq regarding the PDS, particularly considering its upcoming reform. To achieve this, the study aims to answer the following questions:

- What is the public opinion of the PDS in Iraq?
- How is the PDS utilised in Iraq?
- What are the barriers and motivators for registering for the e-card?
- What are the views of the public regarding PDS targeting?



Figure 2 Fieldwork, FGD with males 35-55

MAGENTA employed a qualitative approach, conducting 16 focus group discussions (FGDs) and 16 key informant interviews (KIIs) in four governorates: Najaf, Baghdad al-Sadr, Diyala, and Duhok. To capture diverse perspectives and create a safe space for expressing opinions, the FGDs were segregated based on age, gender, socio-economic status, urban/rural location, and included Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). "[Annex I - Sampling](#)" provides a detailed overview of the FGD participants and stakeholder interviewees.

All KIIs and FGDs were conducted in the local language (Arabic and Kurdish), and subsequently transcribed and translated into English. Thematic analysis was used to identify key trends in the data according to the study's main objectives. A coding structure was developed, and the transcripts were coded using the NVivo software to support the effective handling of a large and diverse set of qualitative data. The findings were analysed by exploring the drivers and barriers influencing the behaviour of the people in Iraq regarding registration for the e-card and acceptance of targeting.

Challenges And Limitations

Overall, the moderators reported high levels of engagement, where participants felt comfortable to take part and share their opinions freely during the FGDs. The FGDs were conducted by male moderators who were supported by female facilitators during the female FGDs. It was reported that this made the women feel more comfortable to express their opinions. The moderators also noted that IDPs were less engaged and slightly hesitant to share their views compared to the host communities.

There were some challenges in recruiting women aged 35 to 55 in Najaf and Diyala. To overcome this, the recruiters offered female participants the option to be accompanied by their brother or husband. However, no one was accompanied during the FGDs, but the recruiters found that having the option helped motivate women to participate and share their opinions. In Diyala, FGDs conducted during Ramadan were held after Iftar to ensure engaged participation.

Regarding the KIIs, some older "food agents" were initially hesitant to participate in the interviews, questioning whether the interviews were arranged by the government and could have a negative impact on their business. After explaining the purpose of the research, informed consent was given, and opinions were shared openly.

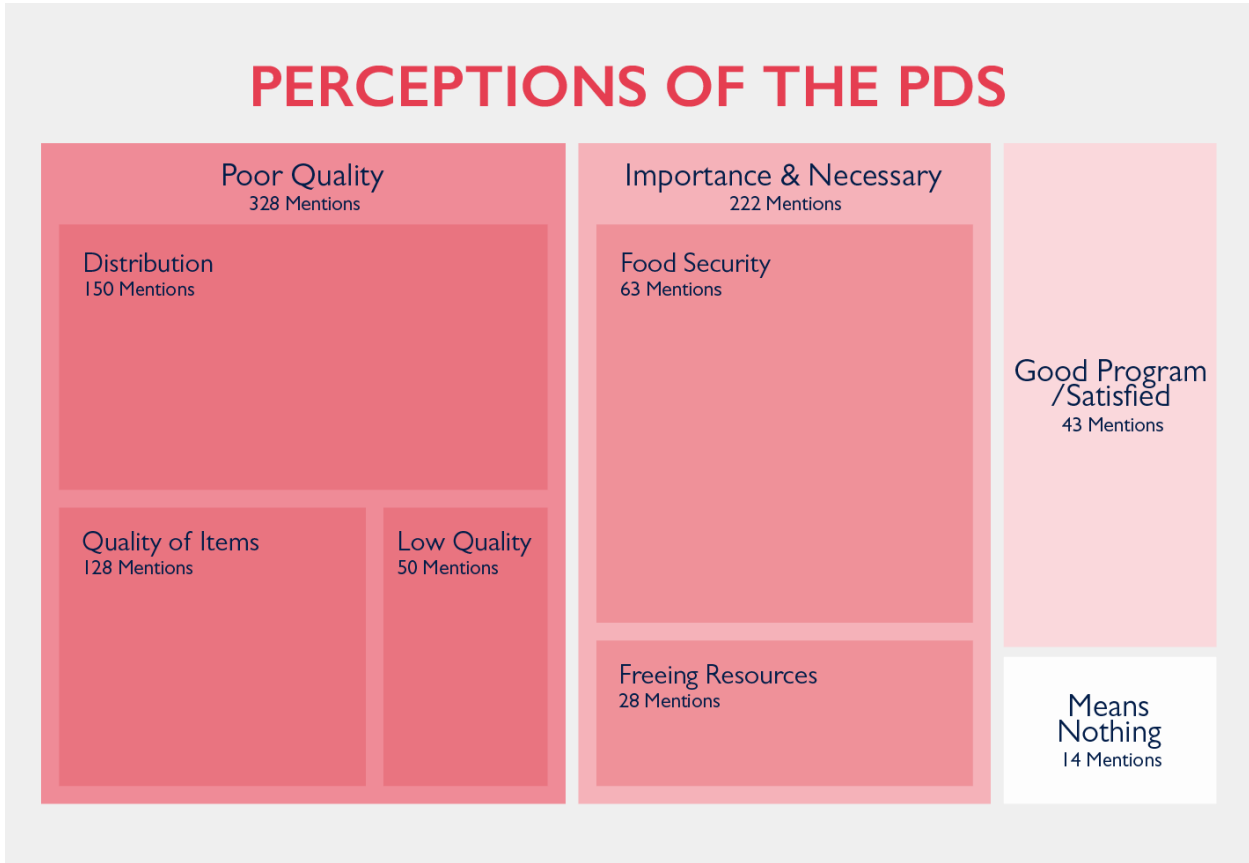
During the FGDs, the participants were presented with an accepted policy on targeting, where individuals with an income above 1.5 million IQD would be excluded from the PDS. This figure was outdated since the government had decided to increase it to two million IQD as per Letter 366, released in late 2022.

Making qualitative data measurable is challenging as it should not be quantified. To make the data comparable, the qualitative data is presented through hierarchy charts throughout the report. These charts indicate prominent themes that emerged during the FGDs and KIIs and are based on the coding structure developed by MAGENTA's research team. The hierarchy charts contain absolute and relative numbers of how often different themes were mentioned. It is important to note that the findings from this report should not be used for statistical purposes, as this would be misleading and inaccurate.

Perceptions of the PDS

This section of the report examines the public perception of the Public Distribution System (PDS) in Iraq, a topic widely discussed throughout the country. As one participant stated, "from the north to the south." Participants were asked to share their overall impressions of the PDS and its reputation within their community. Two primary themes emerged: firstly, the PDS is considered important and necessary in their lives; secondly, the quality of the PDS is perceived as low or inconsistent. These themes were further explored through follow-up questions to gather more detailed information about the PDS's quality and the significance of the food basket in their lives. The research tool containing the complete list of questions can be found in [Annex 2](#).

Figure 3 Hierarchy Chart: Perceptions of the PDS

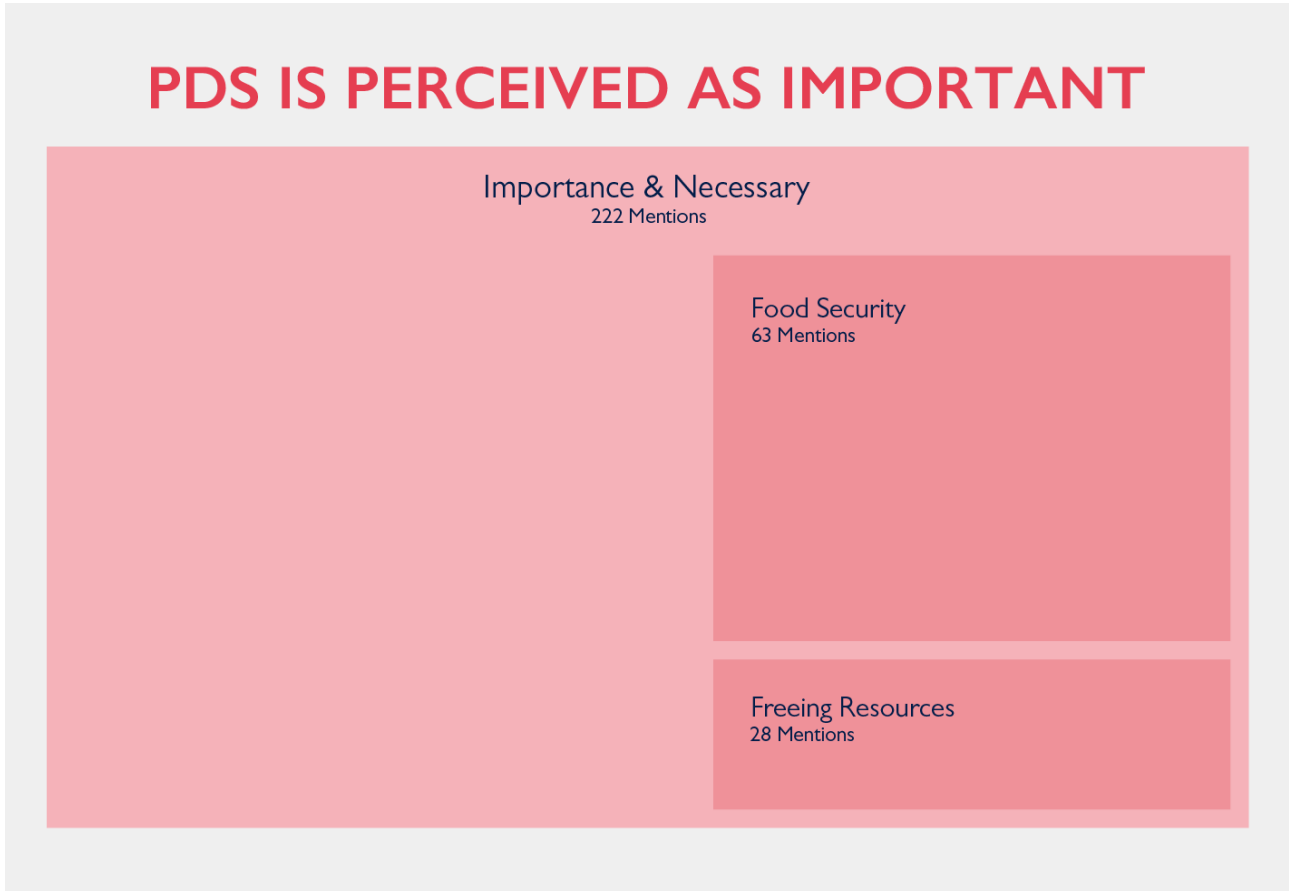


The figure above illustrates the distribution of the themes commonly emphasised during the discussions. "Poor quality" was referred to over 300 times, while "importance/need" was mentioned over 200 times. The findings indicate that the PDS was mostly associated with low quality, followed by the perception that it is important and needed.

PDS IS PERCEIVED AS IMPORTANT

Many Iraqis consider the PDS as important and necessary for their daily lives and the lives of others. During the FGDs, varying levels of urgency were revealed. Firstly, several participants emphasised that the food baskets are critical for feeding their families, and they cannot survive without them. This was particularly prevalent in Diyala and Duhok. Secondly, others viewed the PDS as a means to free up money to purchase other essential items.

Figure 4 Hierarchy Chart: PDS as important



The significance or indispensability of the PDS was cited over 200 times during the discussions. Roughly 60 of these references pertained to how the PDS supplies food for their families and other Iraqis, while about 30 references were associated with how the PDS enables them to allocate their money towards other necessities. These viewpoints will now be analysed in depth.

Food Security

During the FGDs, participants strongly perceived the PDS as critical for survival and food security, with a particular emphasis among those from Diyala and Duhok and those who identified themselves as poor or without stable income. They emphasised how food baskets were a "lifesaver," "put food on the table," and made them feel "safe from hunger." These participants viewed the PDS as a dependable source of food with regular access to essential products such as cooking oil, flour, and rice, which are crucial in Iraqi cuisine. Many stated that they could not afford these items without the food basket, particularly given the recent inflation and rise in food prices in Iraq. Overall, the PDS was deemed necessary, important, and meaningful in their lives. Participants from Baghdad al-Sadr and Najaf also acknowledged that the lives of many people in Iraq relied on the food basket.



"For me, food security comes to my mind. I think sometimes if we didn't have that, how would we live, or how would we be able to buy food?"

Female 25-34, Duhok Camp



The Role of PDS in the Family

Participants in the discussions emphasised that the PDS played an important role as a support system for families, assisting both mothers and fathers in their respective roles. Some men saw the PDS as essential in providing food for their families, particularly since 2003 and the recent upheavals associated with ISIS. In such situations, the PDS was seen as crucial in providing necessities that absent, kidnapped, or deceased fathers could not provide.



"It is critical to provide food for the family. As a family man, The wife and kids are counting on you to put food on the table. Also, because everyone is aware that life is difficult right now, practically all family members see the food basket as really significant."

Male 35-55, Baghdad al-Sadr



Some women also emphasised the importance of the PDS, as it aligned with their gendered role in the family of being responsible for preparing food and feeding their family. One participant even referred to the food basket as ‘the mother of the house.’ It is important to note that the food basket is not only seen as having nutritional value but also social value, with the latter perceived as independent of the quality of the former.



“As a housewife, it is very important to me because the items will be there at my disposal. It makes preparing food easier because you know it is there.” Female 35-55, Najaf



‘Better Than Nothing’

While participants considered the PDS to be essential, it does not necessarily mean that they are satisfied with it. When participants stated that the PDS is ‘good’ (mentioned around 30 times during the discussions), they mainly referred to the importance of the food basket in their lives. They expressed gratitude for having provisions to rely on. Many shared concerns about the quality of the PDS, which will be discussed in detail below. As a result, a few participants stated that the PDS was ‘better than nothing’ (due to poor quality) and that they had ‘no other option’ but to use the items since they cannot afford to buy them to meet their daily needs.

Freeing Money

The PDS was also viewed as necessary as it provides regular access to food, which allows participants to save money spent on groceries. This extra money was seen as a way to make their lives and expenses more manageable as it allows them to purchase other essential items. However, the urgency and importance of these items varied by location. In Duhok and Diyala, participants mentioned using the saved money to cover rent, electricity bills, childcare necessities such as nappies and powdered milk, school transportation, and clothes. In Baghdad al-Sadr and Najaf, participants mentioned using the saved money for medical care, electronics, and toys for their children.

PDS IS ASSOCIATED WITH POOR QUALITY

The FGD participants expressed a high level of concern regarding the quality of the PDS. In fact, it was reported that when the PDS is talked about in the community “70% [of people] are negative”. As illustrated in the figure, the most commonly mentioned theme related to the PDS was concerns about distribution (mentioned 150 times), poor or inconsistent quality of items (mentioned 128 times), followed by, and low quantity (mentioned 50 times). These findings indicate that the quality of the PDS is a significant concern among the Iraqi population. A detailed analysis of these themes follows.

Figure 5 Hierarchy Chart: Poor Quality of the PDS;



Poor Quality of the Food Items

There was a consensus across all FGDs that the basic items included in the food basket - oil, rice, and flour - are of inconsistent or consistently poor quality. Participants noted that these items frequently have an unappealing odour and are sometimes contaminated with insects or other visible contaminants. Despite many families relying on the PDS food baskets to subsist, the items were described as ‘unusable,’ ‘inedible,’ and of such poor quality that they ‘cannot be used for cooking.’ Some even claimed that it is common practice to mix the PDS food items - worth around 10-20,000 IQD - with private-market items (150-200,000 IQD) to prolong the use-period for an expensive, private-market bag of flour and mitigate the poor quality of the food basket. The only item considered to be of good quality in more than one governorate was sugar (Diyala, Najaf).

A difference in perception of the quality of the food items was evident, especially between supply-side entities - agents, managers - and the consumer base. On the supply-side, a food manager in Najaf claimed to be 'extremely satisfied' with the food basket and its quality. Interestingly, a flour agent agreed with the consensus that the rice and oil tended to be of poor quality, though omitted to make similar comments about the flour. Where issues with flour were mentioned, factories were blamed. This was consistent with a participant's view that the fault lies not with agents but with the suppliers. On the consumer side, there were cases, most notably in Duhok, in which participants claimed the quality of individual items was good. However, this was not the norm. Furthermore, wealthier PDS recipients - that is, those who were perceived to receive but do not necessarily rely on the food basket - were claimed to have a skewed perception of these items: 'rich people would say it is good even if it is not because they do not use it.'

The quality of the food basket is perceived to have worsened over time. Fond memories were related to the pre-2003 food basket:



"We used to get powdered milk, beans, lentils, rice, tea, and even cheese and biscuits', of which, in reference to the current practice of selling off PDS items, [they] hardly sold any to the agent." Female 25-34, Diyala



Insufficient Quantity

There is a clear contrast in the perception of the quantity of food provided between supply-side entities and PDS recipients. A branch manager in Najaf claimed that each food basket resulted from a "detailed study" and that "the right portion [was set] for each member [based on these studies]." However, the same participant acknowledged the problem, stating that although the quantities found in the food basket were not optimal, they are "all that can be provided, and people have to accept that as the reality." The dissatisfaction with the content of the food basket was even attributed to the recipients' "greed." The testimony of the participants contradicted these assertions. A resident of Duhok claimed to receive only one bag of flour per month to feed his family of ten. A female participant in Najaf reported that her food basket only lasts one or two weeks, meaning that she and her family spend more time waiting for the next food basket than they do subsisting on the previous one. The quantities of certain food items, such as oil, seem to differ across governorates; a participant in Duhok claimed that oil provisions were sufficient, but this was not the case in Diyala.

Similar to quality, the quantity of food basket items is perceived to have decreased over time. A participant in Baghdad al-Sadr recalled that special provisions were made during Ramadan as far back as

the 1980s; now, her whole family receives just 12 eggs for the same month. A Najaf participant stated that, in an unspecified period ("back in the day"), tea, salt, and even cleaning products were provided; now, just 30-40% of their daily needs are met through the PDS. Another participant recalled that, before 2003, the food basket contained 14 items; it has now dropped to six.

Distribution System

A key theme of the FGDs was participants' dissatisfaction with the system by which food baskets are distributed. Despite the fact that the food baskets are supposed to be distributed every 30 days, PDS recipients reported that they receive 5-8 food baskets a year, a frequency which falls below this official target. Some participants reported receiving a food basket every 40 days (Diyala, Baghdad al-Sadr). Some frustration was directed at the food basket items arriving at different times, sometimes necessitating one trip per item. A Najaf participant gave the example of rice arriving at the point of distribution, with flour following several days later. Because access to collection points, particularly in rural areas, can be difficult, the need to travel and collect individual items on different days poses a problem for many. This was reported to bring financial strain among some of the lower-income PDS recipients. A management level interviewee in Baghdad al-Sadr suggested that distribution schedules are understandably staggered in the urban context owing to the high number of shops to which the food baskets need to be distributed. Why individual food items are delivered at different times was not clarified. Further, an inconsistency of food items was reported, where some items from one month were discontinued the next month, or items that were advertised as being in a month's food basket did not materialise.

Supply-side issues reportedly extend to the distribution agents themselves, but this finding was location dependent. FGDs were generally positive or at least sympathetic to the work of distribution agents, although these views were not unanimous. Sub-governorate-level sampling would therefore be required to understand more granularly the perceptions of PDS recipients towards these distribution agents.

IDPs without full access to PDS: According to a study conducted by the World Bank in 2020, 14% of displaced households did not receive a ration of any kind even once in the 12 months preceding the survey. Those receiving some PDS benefits did not receive the full benefits that they are entitled to.

Source: Iraq's Universal Public Distribution System Utilization and Impacts During Displacement (World Bank, 2020)

Nonetheless, some participants shared their concerns about 'corruption' manifested by food baskets being partially or entirely stolen and then sold, with a pretext of supply-chain issues being given by the agent. This problem was mentioned in FGDs held in Diyala, Najaf, and Baghdad al-Sadr.

Section Conclusion

In conclusion, the PDS is perceived as important in people’s lives. It is considered necessary to ensure food security and to make life easier by freeing up money for other essentials. However, its importance does not mean that PDS recipients are satisfied with the quality and/or quantity. On the contrary, most associate the PDS with low-quality items, delayed or inconsistent distribution, and insufficient quantities.

Using the PDS

The people in Iraq appear to have varying uses for their PDS rations. While some use all the items provided, others only use a few, and some even consider the food basket items 'useless' and prefer to sell, exchange, or donate them. These differences can be attributed to various factors, such as financial status and the quality of the items. One notable trend among the responses is that people with lower incomes tend to use the food basket items, whereas those with better financial status are more likely to sell or donate them. Moreover, it is evident that consumption is higher when the quality of items is good, although poorer families who cannot afford market items are less affected by this trend.

PDS for Food Security

Numerous participants stated that they depend on the food baskets to fulfil their daily needs as they have no other options due to financial constraints. Several reported consuming all the items in the food basket, even if the quality was poor. This was especially true for those with low, unstable, or no income who could not afford better quality products. Participants with large families also found the PDS to be very important in meeting the nutritional needs of all members. This was noted across different localities.

“I am anxiously waiting for the food basket since our life depends on it. As workers, we don’t have constant income, so we have to wait for it. Even if it is incomplete.” Male 35-55, Diyala

“We have to eat the items even if they were damaged because we can’t afford good ones.” Female 35-55, Diyala

The most essential commodities were cooking oil and flour. Other items that are deemed important include rice, sugar, legumes, milk, tomato paste, and tea. While some participants classified the importance of items based on affordability, others did so based on replaceability. For instance, there are substitutes for sugar, such as dates, whereas other items like oil and flour were found to be *'absolutely necessary'* due to the lack of alternatives. If the quality is low, other uses were also indicated such as making *'Kufta Powder'* from rice.



"We eat it all at home. I don't sell any portions. When the rice is not good quality, I use it to make Kufta powder." Male 35-55, Baghdad Al-Sadr



A significant number of people also reported using some items of the food basket and resorting to the alternative uses, as elaborated on below.

ALTERNATIVE USES

Selling And Replacing

In each governorate, at least one participant reported selling some or all of the food basket commodities. Some noted that they sold the entire food basket due to the high cost of arranging transportation to the distribution point. Others faced difficulty picking up their items due to the long distances between the agents and the PDS recipients. Additionally, many people sold their items due to poor quality.



"We use the good items and sell the others to buy what we want from the market." Female 35-55, Najaf



Participants frequently reported replacing or exchanging items with other products from the agents' shop. Many people spent extra money on better quality products. Overall, participants who did not use their items preferred selling, exchanging, repurposing, or donating them instead of returning them. This could be due to the common perception that these rations are a right, which is discussed in more detail in the "Barriers to Targeting" section.

Donating

Several participants expressed a willingness to donate all or part of their food basket as a form of charity, motivated by their Islamic principles. They redistribute their baskets to those in need or arrange for them to be picked up from the shop. Some participants even have agreements with their agents to distribute their food baskets to the needy.



When the basket arrives, our agent calls and asks if we want it or not. If we don't, he boxes them and prepares to have them picked up by poor people."
Female 35-55, Baghdad al-Sadr



People also share their food basket items with their neighbours, relatives, and local bakeries. In some cases, they receive bread in exchange for the flour they give away. Some interviewees expressed a willingness to donate poor quality products to those in desperate need. However, one participant noted that the quality was so bad that they would neither use nor give it to anyone else.



"The cooking oil smells so bad. Still, people are knocking on doors asking for it."
Female 35-55, Baghdad al-Sadr



Gendered perceptions were also cited as a reason for donating items, with one participant stating that "as the man of the house, I am obligated to provide better quality food for my family."

Using Pds Card As An ID

Some interviewees reported that they do not use their food basket items but instead use the card as a form of identification for bureaucratic procedures.



"[People who are not in need of the food basket or the PDS] only have the PDS card because they use it in paperwork at governmental institutions." Female 35-55, Najaf



REASONS FOR NOT USING THE PDS

Ineligible for PDS Benefits

Several participants reported that either they or someone they know do not receive the food baskets. They believed that they were ineligible due to their relatively high income. One participant, whose husband owns a company, said they stopped receiving the food basket. She noted that the importance of the PDS is dependent on economic status, with its significance decreasing as wealth increases.

Outdated Profiles

Other reasons for not receiving or utilising the food baskets include relocating or living abroad. Participants mentioned the lengthy paperwork process, which means that people's information is not always updated, and as a result, PDS recipients are unable to access their food basket.

Do Not Want to Utilise the PDS

Participants reported that there are individuals who are eligible for and enrolled in the PDS but choose not to pick up their allotted items because they feel that they do not need them. This is primarily due to their stable financial situation and good income, allowing them to purchase higher quality items than those provided in the PDS food basket. Many considered this behaviour reasonable, stating that they too would opt for better quality items if they could afford them. Some participants expressed that the food basket provided by the PDS is of poor quality and therefore 'useless.' This indicates that the primary users of the PDS items are those with limited financial means and no other options.



"I do not collect it and do not follow up with it. I purchase all my groceries and foodstuffs from the market as they are healthier and better brands." Female 35-55, Najaf



Drivers and Barriers of the Reforms

The MoT, in collaboration with technical experts from WFP, is currently undertaking a reform of the PDS programme. This section provides an overview of two key ongoing PDS reforms: digitisation and targeting. First, we will examine general perceptions of the PDS reforms before delving into the primary drivers and barriers of the digitisation process and the expected targeting measures.

PDS REFORMS - ‘JUST WORDS AND NO ACTION’

When asked about any reforms of the PDS, participants immediately referred to false promises about improving the quality and quantity of the items in the food basket. Specifically, the PDS reforms were associated with adding new items to the food basket, such as milk, tomato paste, and eggs. Only one person mentioned the policy of people with an income above 1.5 million IQD (changed to 2 million in 2022) becoming ineligible for the PDS.

“We heard a few months ago that there will be more items added to the Food Basket, such as children's milk. So far nothing has been seen yet. So, I can't say any positive things about the reliability.” Female 25-34, Najaf

About 30 respondents expressed scepticism about the implementation of PDS reforms, considering them unreliable and mere promises without action. The reforms were seen as a "political play" to win votes, with promises being broken once the candidate was elected. The implementation of reforms to improve the quality and quantity of the PDS was perceived as empty promises. Similar doubts were expressed regarding the digitalisation process, although there was a greater extent of optimism expressed, which will be further explored below.

DIGITALISATION

This section focuses on the digitalisation aspect of the PDS reform, namely the e-card. The e-card is a digital replacement of the current paper-based system. To acquire the e-card, households would have to go to registration centres and provide their personal information. The initial registration must be done in person, as the head of household needs to verify the IDs of the household members. This process of re-registration includes additional questions that may have been previously asked (age and number of

household members). The new questionnaire has additional questions on demographics, socioeconomic status, and health (i.e. having household members with chronic diseases or disabilities).

Upon registering, PDS recipients are given a card with a PIN code. Two mobile applications were also introduced: the ‘Tamwini’ app where PDS recipients can change their information online from home, and the ‘Wakeel’ app allowing people to receive the food basket from different locations. The latter also registers whether the food basket is received or not, showing the number of commodities which differ in type and quantity among households.

As previously mentioned, the registration process for the e-card was ongoing in Najaf during the period of data collection. Some of the Najaf participants were registered when attending the FGDs, while others were not registered at that time. The registration for the e-card was not yet available in Duhok, Baghdad al-Sadr, and Diyala during the period of the fieldwork.

Awareness of the Reform

Most of the participants in Najaf (except for those in rural areas) and the majority in Duhok and Baghdad al-Sadr were aware of the digitalisation of the PDS. They knew that electronic cards were being introduced, but many had no further details. Some were aware that the process had started in Najaf, and others had heard that it would make the PDS process better by reducing paperwork, allowing online registration of family members, and controlling distribution. They received this information through TV news, Facebook, and their agents, as well as through friends and relatives. This indicates that digitalisation is already part of the public discourse in Iraq.

However, Diyala governorate was an exception, especially in rural areas, where around half of the participants heard about the digitalisation process for the first time during the FGDs. Even those who knew about it across the different locations stated that they had not received any instructions or detailed information about the next steps. This was emphasised among both the stakeholders (food agents and supply-side management) and the PDS recipients.



“Even though I am unaware of the specifics of how this new programme operates, I believe that people have participated in it and registered for it because they are optimistic about it.” Food Agent, Najaf



Willingness to Register for the E-Card

Despite PDS reforms having negative connotations, the participants across the different locations were to a large extent positive regarding digitalisation, and all reported their willingness to register to receive the e-card. This was also the case both among the ones who were already aware of it, as well as those hearing about it for the first time.

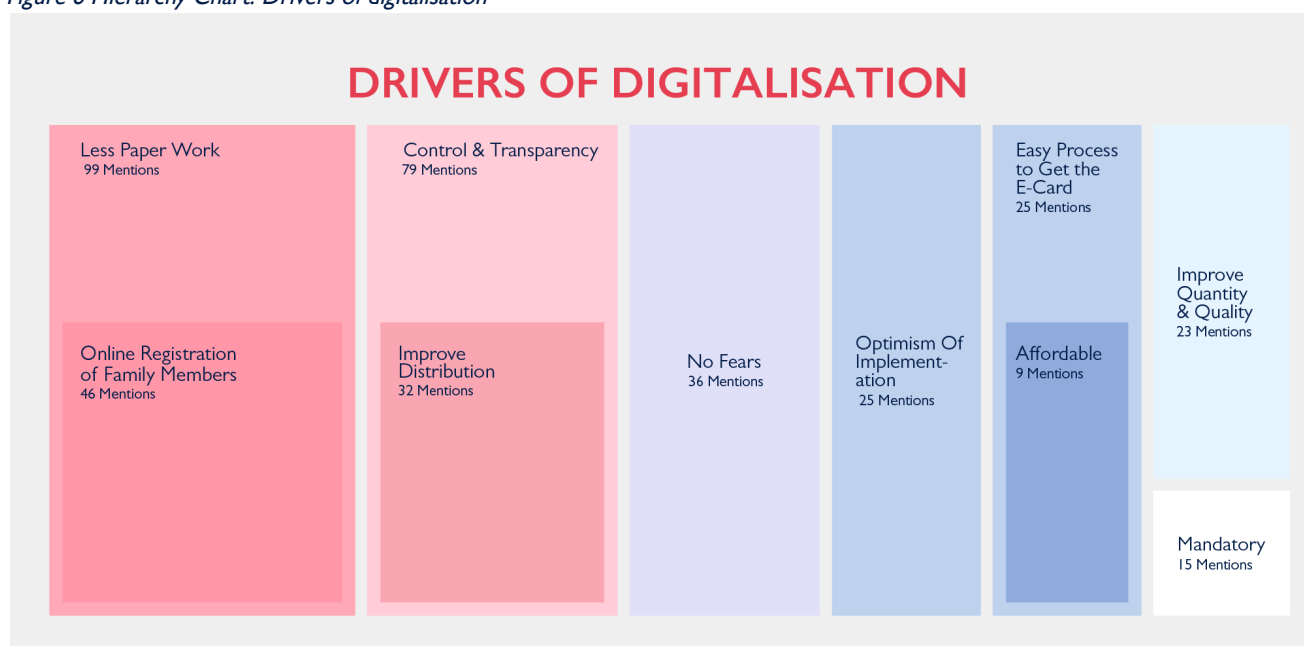
Registering for the E-Card

All participants in Najaf stated their intention to register for the e-card, but several had not done so at the time of the FGD. The reasons given were, firstly, that they had not had the time to do so yet; secondly, that they were waiting to ‘hear what people say’ about the experience. Overall, perceptions of the process were more positive than negative. People who had registered mentioned several drivers, ranging from the impression that it is mandatory, to the expectation of easier access to their food basket and the end of theft and/or corruption. The specific drivers and barriers to registering for the e-card are further investigated below.

Drivers of Digitalisation

Themes categorised as ‘drivers’ for digitalisation were referred to frequently (around 300 times) during the discussions. The figure below illustrates to what extent the different drivers were referred to. These motivators will now be investigated in greater detail.

Figure 6 Hierarchy Chart: Drivers of digitalisation



Optimism of Implementation

The effort to digitalise the PDS was welcomed by people across the different locations. It was appreciated that efforts to reform the PDS were being taken as registration had started in Najaf. Many were hopeful that it would spread to the rest of the country. Contrary to the ‘empty promises’ of previous reforms, people stated that they were optimistic about digitalisation. Some even indicated that it might be an important ‘first step’ in a series of reforms to make the PDS better.

This aspect of the reform is also seen as the future and a part of Iraq progressing and being a part of a ‘modern’ world. Furthermore, it was emphasised that they have already gone through similar processes,

such as getting a new ID card, money transfers and see it both as timely and something that probably will succeed as similar processes have been successfully implemented in Iraq previously.



“I’m pretty sure it will work! Right now, everything outside is being digitalised. All money transactions and many different aspects of life are being digitalised. I don’t think it is something that we should be concerned about.” Male 35-55, Diyala



“I think it is a good idea, it is a part of modern life. We have seen projects that went digital and saw some sort of benefits from it. I think this one will work too.” Male 35-55, Najaf



Less Bureaucracy and Paperwork

The e-card's role in reducing bureaucracy and paperwork was mentioned as an important driver for registering. Firstly, many mentioned the practicality of having a card digitally and ‘a *small plastic card that fits in one’s pocket*’. It was seen as both simpler and safer, as carrying around a piece of paper increases the risk of damage or loss.



“It is small and it can fit in a wallet very easily without being concerned about being damaged or not. As you know the old paper one was very thin and fragile.” Female 25-35, Najaf



Secondly, stakeholders and PDS recipients saw the prospect of not having to handle lots of government documents as a motivator. After registration, it was expected that all governmental documents would be registered on the physical version of the e-card and accessed through an app on their phone. Previously, the PDS number was used by the recipients for official purposes, and it was expected that they could continue with this practice using the e-card.

“The primary motivation for people to sign up for this new procedure is that, (...) from what I've been told, they contain all of your identity and information, including name, location, family members, driving licence, and any other information required. As a result, when you visit one of the governmental departments, you only need to bring one document instead of twenty.” Food Agent, Diyala

“This card is novel but extremely beneficial; instead of carrying thousands of documents and IDs when you need to deal with the government, all you need is your E-card ID.” Food Agent, Baghdad al-Sadr

Thirdly, the current paper-based system of adjusting family members for the PDS- this means to register a new family member in cases of birth or marriage, or removing a family member in cases of emigration or death- is seen as time consuming. This process was associated with a lot of paperwork, as documents need to be collected and stamped from different offices. PDS recipients therefore saw it as motivating to register for the e-card to do this online from their home. Alternatively, those who are less digitally literate could bring a physical version of the e-card to the relevant office. Both options are considered simpler and more time effective.



*“In the past, obtaining a card or piece of paper required visiting three to four different departments to obtain the necessary stamps, which granted them access to certain information. If they needed to make any changes, they also had to go through a lengthy process. Now, everything is just a click away.”
Management, Najaf*



*“It will help in registering a newborn baby in an easier way. Right now, it needs a lot of paperwork to do so.”
Male 35-55, Diyala*



Lastly, the food agents also emphasised that it would ease the process when people come to pick up the food by scanning the e-card rather than handling the paperwork and verifying the name. To sum up, the e-card was seen to reduce paperwork as it compiles all the relevant documents in one place, which can then be changed online.

Oversight and Improved Distribution

A primary driver for people to register for the e-card was the optimism that digitalisation would lead to increased oversight and control of the PDS. People anticipated that digitalisation would play an important role in monitoring both the supply side and the PDS recipients. Many were hopeful that increased control would, in turn, improve the distribution of the PDS, as well as the quantity and quality of the items. There was a consensus, both among the supply side (food agents and management) and the consumers (PDS recipients) across the different localities, that digitalisation would encourage transparency. The supply side was expected to get a better overview of shortages and surpluses in storage. Additionally, digitalisation would allow the number of PDS recipients collecting their food baskets to be tracked.



“Because it will be electronic, everything will be regulated, including who receives what, extras, and shortages.” Male 35-55, Baghdad al-Sadr



Both stakeholders and PDS recipients expect that this will lead to improved planning, resulting in more efficient distribution where all items will be handed out together and on time. Some PDS recipients expected to receive a notification when the food basket was ready to be picked up. Also, it was recognised that it would have a positive effect on the quality of the food basket, because its constituent items would not be stored for a long time.

“I think it will help controlling the process of the distribution and makes sure everyone receives his portion more efficiently.” Male 35-55, Najaf

Transparency Reduces Corruption/Theft

Another main driver motivating people to register for the e-card is the potential for increased transparency leading to a reduction in corruption and theft. Distrust was evident on different levels during the FGDs, with several participants expressing concerns that food agents might be corrupt and manipulating the quantity of goods to make a personal profit. Therefore, PDS recipients believe that digitalisation could help to reduce such thefts. The food agents themselves welcomed this increased transparency because they have experienced being subjected to such accusations when, in reality, the items were not received from the supplier. Digitalisation was seen as key to documenting whether items are received by the food agent, which in turn reduces the risk of theft as well as wrongful accusations.

“One of things that will make me eager to register is if it can reduce corruption and stealing portions from us.” Male 35-55, Najaf

“I believe it can have more control over agents. As it was mentioned earlier, some agents might steal or change the items in the Food Basket.” Female 35-55, Najaf

Both the FGD participants and the stakeholder interviewees also highlighted that this transparency would reduce the risk of PDS recipients manipulating the system. Examples include collecting their share more than once or not reporting when family members pass away or emigrate, which enables them to access more food. The food agents considered the process of updating family membership online by the PDS recipients preferable to the food agents having that responsibility themselves. This was partly due to their relief from the stress of asking people to de-register deceased family members. Examples were

given of situations in which PDS recipients became aggressive due to such requests. In conclusion, digitalisation is viewed as important in reducing corruption and theft in the PDS system, from the perspective of both suppliers and PDS recipients.

“I believe it is also good for transparency reasons; for example, there might be people who receive twice or use the card of other members of their families to receive the share; this can also resolve these issues.” Male 35-55, Diyala

Available Anywhere, At Any Time

It was also seen as positive that the e-card can overcome the current challenge of being connected to only one distribution centre. The process was seen as being easier when, for example, a family moved, to be able to pick up their basket from different places.

Figure SEQ Figure 1*ARABIC7 Place bound ration card

Place bound ration card: A household's ration card is linked to a specific local ration agent.

When moving to a new location, the household is required to establish an official residency, and only then can it start the process of transferring the linkage to a new agent in a new location and start receiving the assistance.

Source: Iraq's Universal Public Distribution System Utilization and Impacts During Displacement (World Bank, 2020)

Mandatory Registration

Several of the stakeholder interviewees and FGD participants suggested that making registration mandatory and completing it within a specified period would encourage people to register for the e-card. They proposed that the government should publish a policy on this. In Najaf, some were already aware that registration was mandatory. Threats were also seen as a motivator to register for the e-card. Some PDS recipients believed that they would lose access to support if they did not register, which was a legitimate concern. Several mentioned that they registered to ensure access to the food basket in the future. Some food agents also used threats to compel PDS recipients to register.



"I heard at some point they will stop giving the Food Basket to those who are still not registered for the e-card. I guess that will motivate a lot." Male 35-55, Najaf



"To be honest, we also terrified some of them; I told them they had to sign up or their food portion would be restricted." Food Agent, Najaf



Easy and Affordable Process of Obtaining the E-Card

After deciding to register for the e-card, the importance of an effective process was emphasised. Those who had already registered for the e-card in Najaf mentioned that the process was both "easy" and "quick". Their experience was that the registration centre was well-planned, they were prepared and gave the information they were asked for. Usually, the agent called or informed them to come with their ID card and old PDS paper to register. The process was completed quickly, and they were notified by the agent when their card was available for pick-up.



"It was very straightforward, they only asked for all family members IDs and the PDS paper. Everything was ready. I think that was good planning from the government." Female 35-55, Najaf



"My husband and I went together and did it in under 45 minutes. It was a quick process. Maybe the reason we did it once we knew about it, and it wasn't that crowded." Female 35-55, Najaf



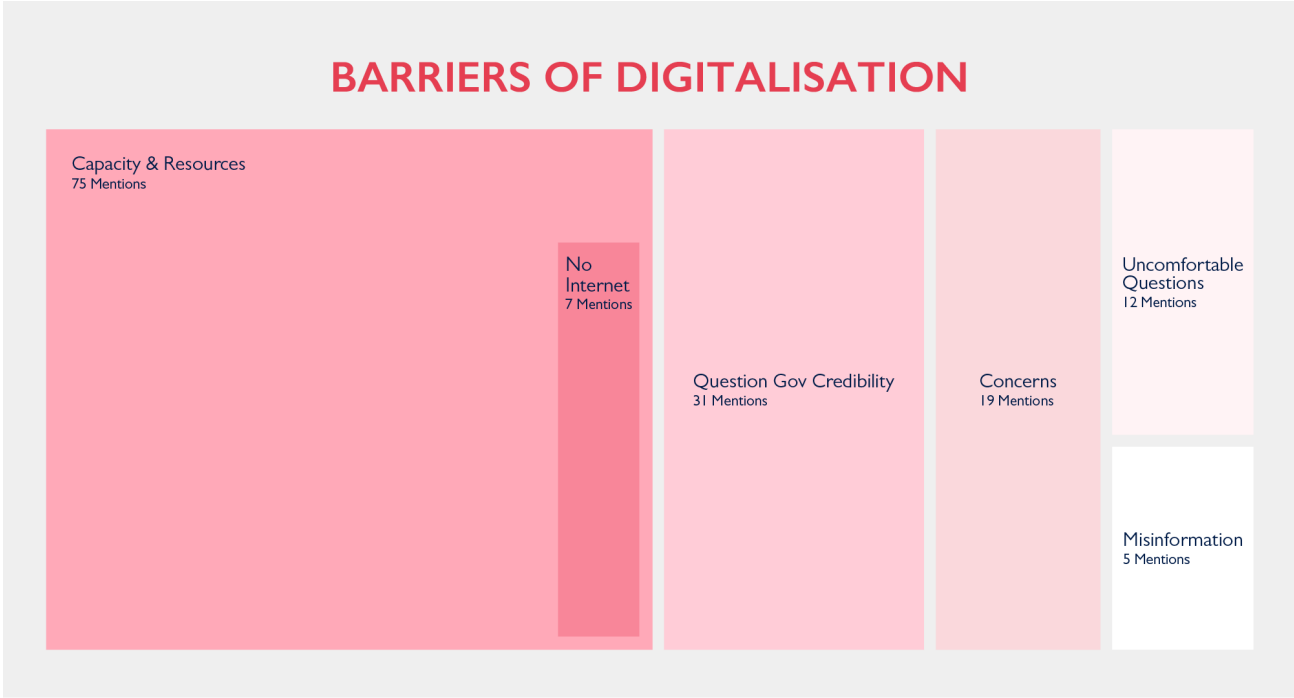
Many people highlighted the fact that there were hardly any queues, despite initial expectations. However, those who had not yet registered in Najaf stated that their reason for not doing so was a lack of time, indicating an expectation of a time-consuming process. It was recommended that several registration centres should be opened during the registration period or that people should be invited in pools (segregated alphabetically, or by birth month, etc.) to avoid crowds and expedite the process.

Furthermore, it was expressed a fear that the registration process would be costly, and it was suggested that the registration process should be **affordable** to encourage people to register for the e-card. Some PDS recipients in areas where the registration process had not yet begun proposed that the process should be free or charged a small fee of 5,000 IQD.

Barriers of Digitalisation

Despite the participants stating a willingness to register for the e-card, as well as their optimism about the digitalisation reform, several barriers were mentioned. A distrust in the government’s intentions behind, and ability to implement the reform was expressed as a barrier to the digitalisation reform. As for barriers of registering for the e-card, lack of resources and stigma around asking and answering questions were mentioned.

Figure 8 Hierarchy Chart: Barriers of digitalisation



Questioning the Government’s Credibility

A general lack of confidence in the government whether the digitalisation reform will be implemented in practice was expressed by both the PDS recipients and some stakeholders. Some had concerns that this was another hollow promise from the government. Even though registration had started in Najaf, the PDS recipients did not seem to be convinced that it would be implemented in the rest of the country. Hence, the government’s credibility was questioned.



“The Government has been making many promises that remained unaccomplished; I am not sure if this one is any better than the former ones. I doubt its implementation.” Female 25-35, Diyala



“If you ask me; it is a bit hard to believe that there will be any reforms because it has been like that since 2003. We have never seen any improvements. For example, they don’t revise the names and the list. Secondly, we always had our concerns about storing; this is not resolved either.” Management, Duhok



Questioning the Government's Intentions

The participants also expressed suspicion regarding the government's intentions behind the reform. PDS recipients across different locations and age groups felt that government actors would not implement changes unless it led to their personal gain. Some even stated that since digitalisation will increase control, it is likely not to be implemented because it will lead to the loss of benefits that government officials have ensured themselves. However, the benefits ensured were usually not specified, but some had heard that "traders colluded with government officials to bring low-quality items" to ensure a profit. Distrust was also expressed, thinking that the government will find new ways of manipulating the system.



“I don’t trust most of the governmental institutes nor the senior officials. They never do something unless they benefit from it somehow.” Female 35-55, Baghdad al-Sadr



“I don’t buy it at all. There must be a business deal. They don’t have any intention to make things better.” Male 25-34, Najaf



Many did also question the prioritisation of digitisation, as the quality of the items in the food basket was seen to be the most urgent issue of the PDS. Some worried that the digitisation would not necessarily lead to any improvements in the quality of the received items in the food basket.

“I think the MOT should follow the agent issues as well, not just listen to people. The reforms should not be only e card, but it should be in the whole process, quality of the foods, and the agents. If the agents don’t open their shops; the E cards can’t change anything about the process of the reforms so we need to take care of the agents as well and listen to them too.” Management, Duhok

Digitisation was met with doubt regarding its implementation both from the supplier-side and from the PDS recipients.

Capacity Concerns; Availability of Staff, Digital Literacy, and Technology

Both the stakeholders and the PDS recipients had concerns regarding the supply-side capacity, including the availability of staff, their digital literacy, the need for devices, and a 'solid system'. These were perceived as potential barriers to digitalisation.

Food agents across different locations were worried that the responsibility for implementation would be given to them without being provided with the necessary financial and human resources. They emphasised that their resources were already under pressure.

Both the food agents and the PDS recipients shared concerns that many food agents lack digital literacy. The food agents shared that they have been used to working on a paper-based system, and some reported having employees that have never worked on a laptop before. The interviewees from management mentioned a need to train or employ new staff that are digitally literate.

“The system is quite new to us, especially to some of the employees. I have workers that are unable to open a laptop. It will take some time for us to adjust.” Management, Diyala

“Some people in rural areas and remote locations will face problems using the internet. Not everyone has access or knows how to use it.” Female 35-55, Baghdad al-Sadr

On the PDS recipients' side, there was also concern about some "older" people lacking digital literacy and some not having stable access to the internet. While this issue must be taken into account, most found it solvable as people can go to the registration centre for assistance or visit internet cafes when needed.

The stakeholders emphasised the need for technical devices to be distributed to the supply-side. The managers who were interviewed expressed a need for laptops and phones to work on the new system, as they currently work without them and do not have the financial means to purchase them. It has been confirmed that the food agents will receive laptops, mobile phones, WiFi routers, and network components during the training phase until the completion of registration. The food agents also emphasised that if the laptops are not fast enough, it will lead to long lines during both the registration process and when people are picking up their food. WFP and MoT are in the process of developing an offline functionality to mitigate slower networks.

The importance of having a "solid system" was also emphasised among the stakeholders, as they expected to work mainly online after digitisation. This was important to avoid overloading the system with the large (and growing due to population growth) number of PDS recipients, and due to the situation of unstable internet connection and electricity cuts in Iraq. In summary, the lack of necessary resources was a concern and perceived as a barrier to digitisation and registration for the e-card.

Misconceptions and Confusion

PDS recipients across different locations had assumed that the registration for the e-card could be done online, from the comfort of their home, without needing to visit or queue outside the registration centre. While this is the case for registering new family members, it was a misunderstanding that the transition to the online e-card for previous holders could be done online from home. The head of the household must visit the registration centre for this initial registration.

“If you register at a registration location, you will not be alone; other people will be there as well, and it will be busy, whereas it will be easier to use the Internet from home.” Male 35-55, Baghdad al-Sadr

“That would be a great idea because you can do it from home, and it will save you a lot of time of going to the registration centre. Also, there might be a long queue that would be a nightmare, especially now when the temperature is getting warmer.” Female 24-35, Diyala

Food agents also reported that in Najaf, PDS recipients had assumed that the food basket would be replaced with a sum of money, available through the e-card. The food agents reported that this assumption was made by many from different segments of the population.

Questions Created Discomfort and Suspicion

Stigma connected to questions asked at the registration centre during the registration process was a barrier reported by stakeholders in Najaf. Both food agents and the management interviewees stated that some questions were found to be personal and uncomfortable to answer for the PDS recipients, and some were also uncomfortable for the food agents to ask. Examples of questions that were experienced as uncomfortable included those on income, car ownership, refrigerator ownership, hot water availability, and others. Food agents in Najaf mentioned that some PDS recipients skipped answering the questions, or even lied. Two reasons were given: Firstly, there was a fear that answering such questions would lead to a reduction in the items received through the PDS. Even answering "yes" to the question of whether they have a family member working in the health sector caused fear of a reduced allocation of the food basket.



“The only obstacles that I can see that make the process more difficult for us are some of the questions that the state asks, which either scare individuals away or cause them to lie about it, both of which I consider to be unnecessary.” Management, Najaf



Secondly, food agents reported that some PDS recipients refused to answer the questions due to their low trust in the government. They expressed suspicion about the government's motives in asking for personal information, with theories circulating about the government profiting at the expense of the population. Additionally, some PDS recipients were sceptical of food agents, believing they were working for the government and gathering information. As an example, some PDS recipients refused to provide their phone numbers, claiming they did not own a phone. Food agents questioned the accuracy of this information and whether it was provided out of fear. Consequently, some food agents viewed the questions as unnecessary and potentially undermining trust in the entire process.



“What is this, they interrogated, are we going to receive a salary from you, or are these payments from the government? Are you giving the government information that you stole from us? Whom are you employed by?” Management, Najaf



An unwanted consequence was that some food agents avoided asking such questions because it put them in uncomfortable situations. They saw them as ‘*unreasonable*’ and that they could write the answer themselves without asking, based on what they saw such as the PDS recipient’s appearance.



“What about a refrigerator or TV? Do you use hot or cold water? I sometimes avoided asking these questions when I could tell by the way the person looked (...) I believe they are unreasonable and might turn people away.” Management, Najaf



Section Conclusion

Different drivers and barriers influence people's acceptance of digitisation and their behaviour regarding registering for the e-card. The reform has a strong starting point as most participants have heard about the digitisation of the PDS (exception: some rural residents in Najaf and Diyala), and all showed willingness to register to get the e-card. Themes categorised as drivers were more commonly mentioned (around 300 times) during the discussion compared to the barriers (around 130 times). Drivers mentioned that can make people register for the e-card can be summarised as:

- By increasing control through digitisation, corruption/theft is expected to be reduced, and the distribution to become more efficient.
- Practicalities such as reducing bureaucracy, having a small card and/or app where all the important documents are collected, and being able to pick up the food basket from different locations.
- It is perceived as being mandatory.
- The opportunity to make changes online was seen as an important driver. However, it was a misconception that the initial registration can be done from home.
- A fast, easy, and affordable process of registering at the centre.

While factors perceived as barriers of digitisation and registering for the e-card are:

- Many question the government's credibility and intention to implement digitisation.
- Concerns were the lack of resources such as unstable internet connection, lack of fast devices, and not having enough staff to make the registration process efficient.
- Some of the food agents and PDS recipients lack digital literacy.

A FORESEEN REFORM ON TARGETING: DRIVERS AND BARRIERS

The planned reform foresees the introduction of improved targeting. The GOI has already approved that everyone with an income above two million IQD will no longer be eligible for the programme. However, there is no official register of income in Iraq, so indicators of socioeconomic status are being used to implement this policy.

This section will explore the drivers and barriers of introducing targeting to PDS recipients, by examining their reactions and openness to current and future targeting efforts, such as self-suspension.

Nearly universal coverage:

The World Bank (2020) reported 'While the PDS provides broad food security to the poor and vulnerable, it also covers more than 95 per cent of the non-poor and costs considerably more than a targeted safety net.'

Source: Estimating the Welfare Costs of Reforming the Iraq Public Distribution System- A Mixed Demand Approach (UNICEF, 2018)

Few Saw Drivers of Targeting

The barriers to targeting (mentioned around 150 times) far outweighed the drivers (mentioned around 40 times) in the eyes of PDS recipients. However, some were in favour of targeting when introduced to the policy where people with an income over two million IQD are excluded from the programme. No clear pattern emerged as to who shared this opinion; it varied between localities, age, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Ensure Food for 'People in Need'

Those in favour of targeting perceived how cutting support from 'rich' or 'elite' families would lead to that 'people in need' will be distributed a food basket of higher quality. Senior governmental officers were usually referred to as rich people, who are suggested to be excluded from the food basket. It was also an expectation that the freed budget should be used to increase the number of items and its quality.



"In my opinion, if they cut it from those rich people and give the poor people bigger portions would be better. Trust me, there are a lot of poor people in Iraq. More than you can imagine." Female 35-55, Diyala

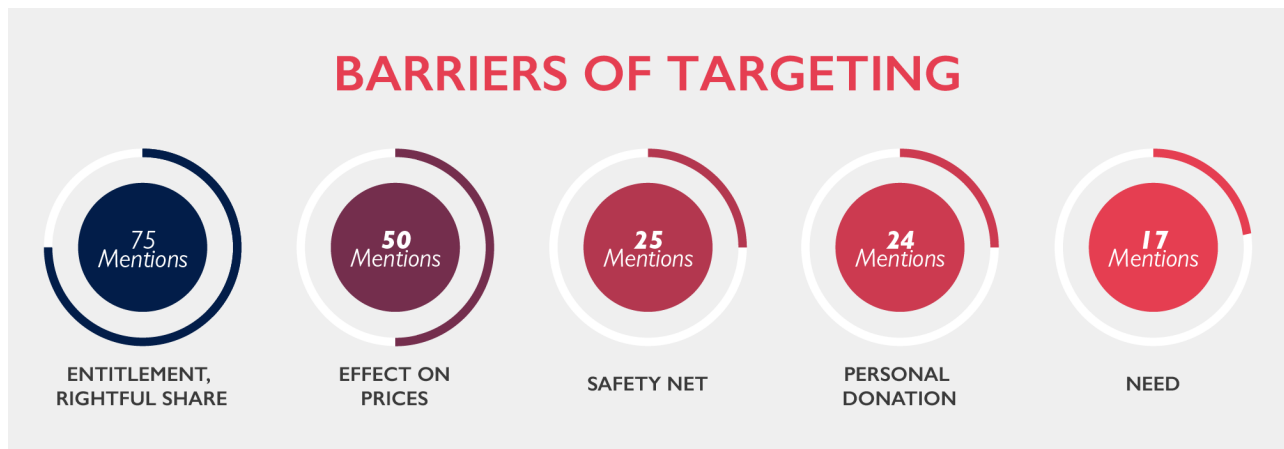


However, people wanted to ensure that (1) market prices are kept stable, not leading to an increase in the food prices, and (2) being ensured that people in need will receive an improved food-basket. This was also mentioned as barriers of targeting and will now be investigated in more detail.

Barriers of Targeting

Most were against the concept of targeting the PDS. Many also objected to the current policy of excluding people with an income above 1.5 million. Several reasons were given, including a feeling of entitlement and fears related to the effect on the food prices, if the living situation changes, as well as distrusting the government to distribute the freed resources fairly.

Figure 9 Hierarchy Chart: Barriers of Targeting



PDS As Iraqi ‘rightful Share’ Most PDS recipients viewed the PDS as an entitlement for Iraqi citizens, with some even referring to it as their "constitutional right" and "rightful share" of the national budget and oil revenue. There was a general sentiment that Iraq is a wealthy country due to its oil revenue and increasing the coverage from 98% to 100% would not affect anyone. Recipients felt that the PDS is funded by the people’s money and therefore should not be targeted. Some were even offended by the government treating the PDS as charity, as they saw it as a right.

“So, the government left everything else in the country that is fully corrupt and wants to make reforms in PDS by cutting people’s rights?! I totally disagree with that because I think it is their right. Even if it has no benefits [low quality of the products]”. Female 35-55, Najaf

“Whether poor or rich, you have the right to receive that. It is your share of the government’s income from oil.” Male 25-34, Diyala

Nevertheless, it was also expressed that the government has a duty to "help the citizens" because they have the resources (the oil revenue) to do so. It was also seen as a responsibility for the government to ensure "equality" between different segments of the population, and that this was achieved by distributing the PDS to everyone, regardless of their income level.

They argued that the PDS is not related to their income level, and it was seen as "unjust" that someone would have their food basket taken away because of their "hard work." The word "betrayal" was used in relation to the PDS being targeted, and several mentioned that people would take to the streets if the PDS was removed (a hypothetical scenario) or reduced. This indicates the political sensitivity of the PDS and signals clear expectations and responsibilities for the government from PDS recipients. However, the government's intent to fairly distribute the PDS was questioned.

Does the Government Intend to Distribute Fairly?

Most gave the impression that they would rather receive the baskets and personally decide what to do with it instead of delegating that decision to the government. They would rather hold onto their decision-making power and donate the baskets themselves. This is a further indication of people's distrust towards the government, as illustrated in the quote below.

"The government would steal it anyway. So it is better to be distributed and others will benefit from it." Female 25-34, Diyala

Distrust in the government made them prefer personal donations rather than letting the government target the PDS. They doubt the government would be able to identify those who are in need, and rather think it will end up in the pocket of the government officials.

"You cannot cut that from him because he is well-paid, we would rather give his share to someone who is more in need. The problem is I don't trust the Gov to do a better job with the budget. It will be stolen like many other ones". Male 25-55, Baghdad al-Sadr

Personal donations were also seen as distributing to someone who needs it, and as a way of balancing the market prices.

Fearing Increased Food Prices

Participants witnessed how prices drop when the food basket is distributed. They perceived that the food basket is having a beneficial effect on the market prices making food commodities affordable for consumers, and in helping “balancing the inflation”. Several also preferred personal donations, rather than targeting, to ensure that people in need access the food basket as well as keeping the market prices balanced. People feared that targeting will result in increased food prices and consequently having fatal consequences for poor families. To maintain the nearly universal distribution of the PDS was hence seen as in the interest of both the recipients and the government of Iraq.

“I believe having this food share is positively affecting the market and the current inflation. With distributing cooking oil and tomato paste in a large quantity; the existing ones in the market would be less expensive for consumers. Part of the current inflation is related to the fact that we only consume not produce; the only factor that can balance this inflation is the food basket because the poor cannot afford to pay for the existing prices.” Male 35-55, Baghdad al-Sadr

“I have a friend that doesn’t use his and he gives it to me. That will be to an advantage because the market will stay at its prices. I wish that 100% of Iraq gets it. In many cases, people take it and give it to someone else because they are in more need of it.” Male 35-55, Diyala

However, several saw it as possible to avoid an increase in the food prices, if the government had a good oversight and by controlling the market.

PDS as a Safety Net

Participants also want to have the option of using the items, even if they are not currently doing so. Targeting was opposed by many because they perceived the PDS as a safety net. Uncertainty was frequently mentioned, and PDS recipients accounted for unexpected things to happen, such as loss of income/employment, illness, increased prices, and changes in the security situation in Iraq. Several mentioned that even if someone has an income of 1.5 million (or higher) now, they took into consideration that this can change quickly, and therefore they might be in greater need of the PDS in the future.

Targeting and its Consequences for Different Socioeconomic Strata

As previously discussed, the participants emphasised the need for the food basket in Iraq. If targeting is introduced or the food basket is taken away, PDS recipients saw that it would affect everyone in Iraq. It is seen as essential for the survival of “poor people”, would have a significant impact on the lives of people in the “middle class”, and even the rich are seen to be affected indirectly.

“Poor people” were seen as those in most need of the food basket and would not be able to live without it. They defined this group as unemployed people, families without a stable income (such as contractors and farmers), families with many children, etc. As previously stated, many did not believe that the government would spend the money from targeting the people in need, and they feared that the same poor quality would be delivered. If it leads to an increase in food prices, it will also make it difficult for poor families to be food secure.

“Even rich people will be affected. If there isn’t food basket anymore, it will cause prices to go up and everyone has to pay more for food. But people like us will be the most damaged and it will cause hunger to some of us.” Female 35-55, Najaf

Middle income segments of the population were also expected to face challenges if the food basket were taken away from them (a hypothetical scenario presented during the FGDs). They will then not have money for other things such as transportation. It was a fear that many would become poor. It was also noted that 1.5 mill not necessary is enough to cover the food expenses for big families due to the current high prices in Iraq, and they saw that these people still would need their food basket. It would depend on each family.

“I disagree with that. It will be difficult for him if his salary is IQD 1,500,000, he has a family of ten people, and he pays rent.” Male 35-55, Baghdad al-Sadr

The participants think that ‘rich people’ would be least affected if the food basket did not exist (a hypothetical scenario presented in the FGDs). This group were seen as senior government officials and successful business owners, with an income of more than 4-5 mill IQD. Many think that these groups do not use the food basket anyway due to its low quality, and either give it away to someone in need or do not pick it up. Nevertheless, it was also stated that they would still be affected indirectly, as potential conflicts and tension likely can erupt if the poor or middle income does not receive the food basket.



“Iraq is a weak country and if its people become the enemy of their government, Iraq will end in a few months and unstoppable street battles will happen and there would be bloodshed. If they do that, they are cutting people’s food and to compensate they need to pay money to people who will not agree.”
Female 35-55, Duhok



Polarised Attitudes Regarding Self-Suspension

Most participants were in favour when being asked about their opinion of self-suspension from the PDS. 65 mentions in the group falls under the theme of drivers of self-suspension, compared to 34 mentioning barriers and not being in favour of self-suspension from the PDS. The drivers and barriers mentioned were:

Drivers for Self-Suspension

Self-suspension was welcomed by most participants across different locations and socioeconomic statuses. The **personal freedom** to do whatever they want with "their share" was seen as a key driver. Democratic principles were referred to by having the freedom to choose not to receive it. Several referred to the concept of charity, and some participants in Najaf saw it as religiously motivated. But only if "their share" would be distributed to "people in need."



“Yes, why not! Don’t they say Iraq is a democratic country? They should be free to do what they want with their PDS.” Female 25-35, Diyala



“Personally, I would agree to give up my food basket share only in one condition, and that is if poor families will receive my share and the money will not be spent on other matters that are not benefiting citizens in need.” Female 35-55, Najaf



Other factors mentioned that made people willing to give up ‘their share’ were having a high income and the perceived **bad quality** of the food commodities. They believe that this can increase the quantity and quality of the food basket for ‘people in need’.

If such a function were to be introduced, several points need to be ensured. Firstly, it was flagged that there must be an option to re-enter the PDS. As previously mentioned, the PDS was seen as a sort of safety net in case one's life situation changes. Therefore, it was mentioned that the ability to register again to continue receiving the PDS is important. Secondly, they want an assurance that 'their' food basket will go to someone in need and not someone who will trade it for money. Thirdly, there must be an easy and fast online function for people to take the step to do it.

Barriers of Self-Suspension

Even if many were positive to such an option, several thought that no one would opt out. Contrary to above, the argument of the PDS being **"their share"** was also seen as a barrier of self-suspension. Some FGDs participants did even get aggravated when the option of self-suspension was presented. Similar to the barriers of targeting, it was referred to that the food basket being their share of the oil revenue, "oil for food basket".

Furthermore, it was a belief that **Iraq has the resources** to give a food basket, of good quality, to the population. Hence, it was seen as a way for the government to detach themselves from their responsibility of distributing the oil revenue for the benefit of the citizens.

"Why should we have this option? Is this the best the government can do? Instead of making sure everyone in Iraq should be served in the best way possible. I'm sure they can provide the best Food Basket to all Iraqi people. Iraq is rich and can afford that." Male 25-35, Najaf

They believe that people will rather pick it up and **personally donate it** to someone in need. Which are reported to be a common practice until now. This reflects on what previously has been discussed, as people's lack trust in the government to distribute it fairly. Some of the participants- that described themselves as well off financially- said that they would likely not opt-out of the PDS as charity, but that charity rather was done through donating money, or giving away the food basket to someone they know.

"No one will unsubscribe from PDS. For example, I have an excellent financial situation and will donate money to someone in need." Male 35-55, Baghdad al-Sadr

Another barrier mentioned for participants not choosing self-suspension was the need for it to ensure food security due to high food prices and insecurity. Hence, leaving a need for the food basket either to be used or for freeing resources for other things needed.

Some confusions were identified during the FGDs, as some against the idea of self-suspension thought that it would mean that they will not access the paperwork identifying the number of family members that are important in bureaucratic processes.

“I disagree with withdrawing since it is a basic item; it is very vital as identification documents for the Iraqi individual, and I am confident that he will require it.” Male 25-34, Diyala

Section Conclusion

Most participants were not in favour of the idea of targeting nor the existing policy where people with an income above 2 million IQD are excluded from the PDS. The vast majority were not aware of the introduced policy. Most lacked motivation because recipients perceive the PDS as a “right” and a safety net, and many fear the effect on food prices. Many also distrusted the government's intent and would prefer to give their food basket as a personal donation rather than leaving it in the government's hands through targeting. However, there was more openness regarding self-suspension, referring to personal choices and potentially leading to increased quality of the PDS. Barriers echoed the concerns mentioned for targeting in general.

Communication Efforts

Available Information

Both stakeholders and the PDS recipients seemed to lack information on PDS reform and the next steps regarding digitisation. Several interviewees reported not knowing enough about the process where instructions and requirements are unavailable. Even in Najaf where the process has started, people, agents included, are not aware of how the e-card is to be used. As a result, there is a lack of clarity and trust. Participants also think this allows more room for rumours.

“People don't know about the process, and this may cause confusion and delay the whole process.” Food Agent, Duhok

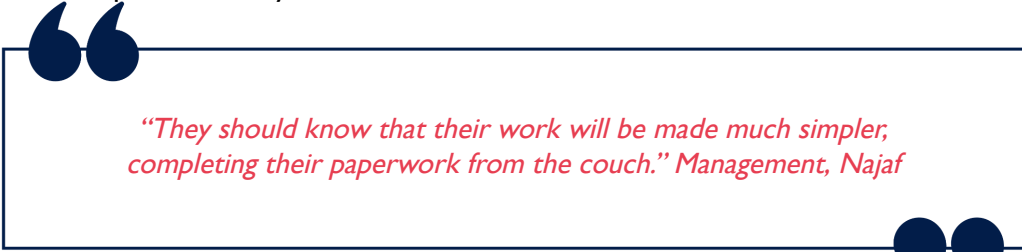
Those who have some knowledge on the topic have received their information online. This includes government websites and social media pages, with multiple mentions of Facebook specifically. Other sources include agents whereas communication between PDS recipients and service providers has been happening over messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Viber. Participants were also learning about PDS-related news through their friends, families, and neighbours.

Future Messaging

To tackle the issue of insufficient communications, interviewees were asked about the information they would like to receive, the messengers they would like to relay that information, and the channels they would trust to receive information from.

Messages – The ‘what’

Participants reported the need for new and updated information across several areas such as general guidelines for registration, family registration, moving, or changing agents. Participants had questions regarding pick-up locations, how the card looks like, and its uses in paperwork in governmental institutes. Informing the public of such details was found to be important to “minimise the window for error” and “reassure them that this process is straightforward”. In general, participants wanted to be reassured that the process is easy and smooth.



“They should know that their work will be made much simpler, completing their paperwork from the couch.” Management, Najaf

Participants expressed a desire to understand the potential impact of the digitisation process on the PDS system and its registration and distribution processes. Questions were raised about whether it would make it easier for Iraqis to add new members and improve the quality of food. Many participants suggested that highlighting the benefits would encourage people to register for the e-card. They sought reassurance that digitalisation would be advantageous for citizens.

Therefore, it was important to emphasise the drivers of PDS digitisation and reform. Participants identified the main benefits as selling points,

- **Transparency** through easily accessible and trackable information, which would allow people to know what items were received by the agent.
- Potential for **less bureaucracy** and streamlined registration processes, particularly for adding new family members.



“I will concentrate on how the digital world is better than the old paper-based systems and how faster it is to work with. For example, adding a new-born will be easier.” Male 35-55, Diyala



- **Design and durability of the e-card.** Participants believed that this was an important selling point since the e-card is more user-friendly than the old paper cards and less susceptible to wear and tear. Participants also noted that the e-card is more convenient as it can easily fit into their wallets, making it less likely to be lost.

While most found the benefits of digitisation to be rewarding, others reported that people would need to receive something in return to be persuaded, “such as a gift or an extra serving of food”. Other than that, participants reiterated the importance of hearing **testimonials** and success stories. Seeing people’s real-life experiences will allow them to trust the process. This is particularly relevant for those who do not believe in government reform.



“I think the best thing to do when it comes to encouraging people is sharing the success stories of those who did the registration.” Male 25-34, Najaf



“If people don’t see real-life examples, they won’t believe it.” Male 35-55, Najaf



When asked what would resonate with people in terms of messaging, a few taglines and slogans were suggested for the campaign.

1. *‘Come, it’s for your own sake’* - this slogan leverages the fact that the digitalisation process aims to reflect positively on the people. It suggests that the government is working to make people’s lives easier.
2. *‘Guarantee your right’* - this suggestion also focuses on the positive impact of the new PDS, which would make governmental paperwork easier and more transparent.
3. *‘A part of a blessing’* - this tagline centres gratitude and suggests that reform is a continuation to a project they should be thankful for whereas it provides them with necessary commodities (food baskets).

4. *'Towards a better Iraq'* - this one highlights how the project can help enhance the lives of Iraqis, making them feel proud of where they come from.

Overall, participants did seem to support – or even prefer – the idea of online registration provided there are clear guidelines on how to do it.

Messengers – The 'who'

Participants were asked to identify the parties they would like or trust as a messenger. They chose different sources based on knowledge, credibility, influence, and accessibility. For one, **agents** were thought to be the best option as they have access to information and know how to relay it. They are in constant communication with the government and are up to date with regards to the PDS reform. As such, they can directly share relevant news and information to the recipients. They were described as *'well-versed'* on both the old and the new processes of the PDS.

"They are well-informed from the government. They would be able to answer all questions and make sure everything is good if people have any fears/ concerns." Male 35-55, Najaf, Urban

Despite some complaints, participants expressed having good relationships with their agents for the most part. They are often described as trustworthy and influential and have already been persuading people to register. Some found them to be "the primary source of motivation", especially since they play a significant role in reinforcing governmental requirements.

"The agents are an effective method because they have a lot of influence; they can speak with the people and convince them that there is reform, and it does exist." Management, Duhok

Agents are also found to be relevant, accessible, and available. They are the main point of contact as they are easily reachable and there is consistent two-way communication between them and the PDS recipients.

"The agent is the first person we call to ask about the arrival of the food baskets or any information related to the PDS." Female 25-34, Diyala

Participants also wanted to receive information from the **government** itself. This could happen directly at government departments, certified offices, or centres, or through their online platforms. This is particularly common with regards to registration, where government staff would facilitate the process as they are designated to this specific task. It would also ensure information security.



“Registration should be done through a certified office, not any office, because we will be sharing private information and papers.” Male 25-34, Diyala



Senior officials are thought to be respectful and influential as well. The Prime Minister, Minister of Trade, and Governor are mentioned as examples of people who could encourage the public to accept and welcome the idea of PDS reform. They would also be able to answer people’s questions as they are aware of the system and its changes. The same applies to mayors who also have the trust of the people as elected figures.

Alternatively, the government could conduct their outreach via the agents, while also supporting them to do the job as best they can. One suggestion was to leverage the agents’ position in the community and offer them salaries and social security or their own share of items.

Yet, as previously discussed, many questioned the government’s credibility, and because of that reason it was mentioned that communication should come from the government as it needs to put in the work to “make amends” and regain the people’s trust.

Questioning the Government’s Credibility

Many participants thought it important to utilise **public opinion and word of mouth** for this campaign. Sharing personal experiences within social circles would encourage people to register, especially as they witness the change first-hand. Participants expressed wanting to start with themselves and then extending to their neighbours, family members, and relatives.



*“I think convincing the community starts with the community itself.”
Female 35-55, Najaf*



The campaign could also receive support from messages by elders, influencers, tribal leaders, and/or religious figures. "Mukhtars" and "Sheikhs" were found to be persuasive and trustworthy, especially because Iraqi people value their elders. They not only know their local communities but are also respected for their honesty. Religious figures and scholars such as "Mullahs" and clerics can also be very influential in motivating people. There was also a mention of the "Marajia"¹ as well.

Channels – The ‘where’

Participants expressed different preferences for media and channels where they would like to see PDS messaging shared or disseminated. A common choice was **social media**, specifically on government channels, and through advertisements. Facebook was the most frequently mentioned application throughout the data collection. Regarding text messages, participants suggested using WhatsApp, Viber, and Telegram. When it came to videos, which seemed to be preferred over text, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat were mentioned.

TV and radio commercials were another suggestion that could be used to give people a better understanding of the reform process. Some participants noted that these media, however, might be more effective in reaching an older audience as television is not as popular nowadays. While many trusted news channels as reliable sources of information, with specific mention of the Al-Sharqiyah channel, one person expressed a lack of trust in media personalities.

“People think everyone is colluded with the government in some sort of scheme. People stopped trusting anyone that is on TV.” Female 35-55, Baghdad al-Sadr

Some participants also mentioned **traditional printed media** such as billboards, banners, and posters. They suggested distributing them in bus stops, important roads, and popular hang-out spots such as tea shops. Additionally, it was expected that food agents would have printed materials to hand out to PDS recipients.

Other suggestions fell under the category of **face-to-face communication**. This included house visits and public talks to educate people about how the system works. Targeting places where people gather socially was another proposed tactic.

¹ Marajia: the main doctrines of Shiite Islam followed by all Shiite people. At times, announcements are made to be followed by all Shia followers.

Participants noted that the manner of communication was important for this method. They reported that information needed to be shared in a calm and patient way rather than aggressively. People were more cooperative and responsive when spoken to kindly. One person shared that this was particularly applicable when dealing with elderly, uneducated, and fatigued individuals.

“I believe agents should be trained on how to influence the people. They need to be provided with lots of information about the process so that they know how to explain it to the people.” Food Agent, Duhok

Section Conclusion

Overall, participants expressed a lack of sufficient information about the PDS reform process, particularly in terms of its usage and benefits. They want the project to be straightforward and requested more information on how it will benefit them. They emphasised the importance of real-life experiences and testimonials in building trust between the government and the people. Participants also stressed the need to receive information from trusted sources. Most identified their food agents as knowledgeable and accessible, but others preferred to hear directly from relevant ministries and governmental figures, community elders, and religious leaders.

Regarding the dissemination of messages, participants suggested various channels and media. Most preferred social media for wide reach, with Facebook being the most named application. Some also suggested traditional media such as TV, radio, and printable materials. In-person interaction was another preference, especially if the communicators were trained on their communication skills.

Conclusion and Recommendations

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the PDS has a poor reputation among people in Iraq, particularly in comparison with the pre-2003 basket. While it is recognised as crucial in ensuring the food security of many and helping them afford other perceived necessities, it does not meet people's expectations. Most participants associate the PDS with low quality.

The low quality has led to actions such as exchanging, selling, or donating the basket. The findings suggest that consumption is higher when the quality is good. However, poorer families who cannot afford items in the market seem to consume the commodities regardless of their quality.

An overall doubt of the ability and intent for implementation was evident when generating feedback on the two reforms: digitisation and targeting. Participants questioned the government's credibility and intentions, with reforms being commonly seen as empty promises only implemented if government officials get something in return. Still, the government was seen as a suitable messenger to convey any reform-related news or information to the public. Agents were a popular choice among the participants as well, given their proximity and trustworthiness.

Moving forward, most participants were willing to register for the e-card, referring to several perceived benefits of increased supervision, better distribution, and higher quality goods. However, there were some concerns regarding available resources, such as designated, digitally literate staff equipped with technological devices. An analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) can be found in [Annex 3](#).

Perceptions on targeting saw more barriers than drivers, where the PDS was seen as an entitlement and a safety net. Many also expressed fear of reduced food security if targeting leads to increased food prices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Targeting Criteria

- Targeting must consider the number of family members, not just the head of households' monthly income. Two million Iraqi dinars may not be enough for a family of seven or eight people, especially if there is monthly rent.
- In addition to socioeconomic status, health conditions should be considered. Responses implied the need for a higher income ceiling if there was an ill family member.

Logistical Support

- Support the food agents with resources (training and devices)
- Technological expertise from the government as the PDS recipients might need support, which could be offered in person or via social media.
- Cooperating with telecommunications and internet companies to ensure that food agents have access to stable internet at subsidised rates (especially in rural areas)

Interpersonal Upskilling

- Participants had noted the importance of interpersonal skills. They thought relevant people, and particularly agents, need to be trained on how to relay information and communicate with others.

Strategic Communications And Community Mobilization

- Messages from the ministry about ensuring control over food prices and ensuring that there will be no increase in prices. This can be achieved through subsidising local products and limiting imports.
- An interview with the Minister of Trade to discuss the importance of digitisation and targeting, and to answer the most common questions. We can provide the questions beforehand.
- A fully trained team from the MoT should be allocated to answer audience questions and comments on social media. As we have noticed, there is no engagement with the audience on the Ministry's social networking channels.
- There must be clarity and transparency regarding the goals behind the targeting and self-suspension, such as a statement from the ministry officials behind the reasons for this step, how it was taken, and why people should consider this matter.
- The messenger is as important as the message. We suggest cooperation with famous and respected public figures to be ambassadors of this campaign, such as influential clerics, athletes, and volunteers in the humanitarian field.
- Testimonials and publicity are important to overcome concerns about empty promises, showing that the process is ongoing. This might contribute to improving people's perceptions of the PDS.

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Annex I- Sampling

FGD SAMPLING

	Najaf	Baghdad al-Sadr	Diyala	Duhok	Total
25-34 years	1 female (rural)		1 male (rural)	1 male (urban)	6
	1 male (rural)		1 female (urban)	1 female (IDP camp)	
35-55 years	1 male (socioeconomic status 1)*				10
	1 female (socioeconomic status 2)*	1 male (rural)	1 male (urban)	1 male (IDP camp)*	
	1 male (urban)	1 female (urban)	1 female (rural)	1 female (rural)	
	1 female (rural)				
Total	6	2	4	4	16

* Socioeconomic status 1: Most vulnerable (person living in a household with only one breadwinner in the family, employed in casual/ informal labour in agriculture, construction, not a regular source of income etc.)

* Socioeconomic status 2: Wealthy strata (person living in a house that is owned, regular income/ stable high-salaried job in the public sector ex. Officer grade, or in the private sector ex. firm manager, director etc)

*IDPs: access facilitated by WFP

KII SAMPLING

	Najaf	Baghdad al-Sadr	Diyala	Duhok	Total
Food Agents	2	1	3	2	8
Management*	4	1	1	2	8
Total	6	2	4	4	16

*Management: team leaders of food agents, MOT enumerators, branch manager

Annex 2- Data Collection Tools

FGD GUIDE

Total time: 1.5 h

	Information about the FGD (filled by note-taker)
Date	
Location	
Number of Participants	
FGD Details (gender, age, socioeconomic status)	
Facilitation Duration	
Presence of Recording	
Name of Facilitator	
Name of note-taker	

Introduction (5 Min)

Introduction And Purpose

Hello everybody, my name is X (name of facilitator), and this is Y (name of note-taker). We work at Think Bank which is a research organisation based in Erbil. We are currently supporting MAGENTA and the Ministry of Trade (MOT), conducting focus group discussions in Duhok, Najaf, Diyala and Baghdad al Sadr.

First of all, thank you so much for giving us your valuable time for this important discussion. The purpose of this discussion and research is to understand what people in Iraq think about the PDS and what role it has in your lives. The insights you share today are very important and will inform a communications campaign for the population in Iraq. Your perspectives are therefore welcome, to make sure that messages resonate well with the population.

Informed Consent Procedure

We are carrying out multiple discussions such as this one to hear from community members such as yourself. Of course, there is no right or wrong answer. Please feel comfortable to express yourselves freely during the discussion, and we ask that all that we talk about here today stays within this group.

As we are around 6-8 people who will discuss together it may be difficult for Y (name of note-taker) to capture everything that you share, and your thoughts are very important to us. Therefore, if you do not mind, we would like to record the discussion. If you would prefer not to be recorded, please let us know now and we will respect your wishes. And as you were previously informed, the discussion will last around 1.5 hours. When you agreed to participate, you were asked to sign a consent form. If you have not done so, please let me know now.

Setting The Ground Rules During Discussion

Before we start our discussion, I would like to read out some key points to remember as we begin our discussion

- WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU. We would like everyone to participate and highly encourage everyone to share their views.
- THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS. Every person's experience and opinion are important, whether you agree or disagree. We want to hear a wide range of opinions.
- WHAT IS SAID IN THIS ROOM STAYS HERE. We want everyone to feel comfortable sharing when sensitive issues come up.
- WE WILL BE RESPECTFUL. We want to take turns to talk, so we can all hear your opinions and experiences.

Introduction (5-10 Min)

The purpose of this section is to warm up the participants to be comfortable sharing their experience, and to get a better understanding of their background.

1. Please introduce yourself with name, age, and what you do for a living?
2. Do you/ your household receive the PDS food basket?

Perceptions Of The Pds (15-20 Min)

The purpose of this section is to get a better understanding of people's perceptions of the PDS and aims to explore if any rumors or misconceptions exist. It will also reveal what is known of the planned PDS reform.

3. If I say, 'Iraq Public Distribution System' (PDS), what is the first thing that comes to mind?
4. What is the PDS known for?
5. What is said about the PDS among your peers?
 - a. If you think back to the last few weeks, was PDS a topic for conversation? What was said?
6. How would you describe the quality of the PDS services? (**Probe:** agent, type of food, reliability etc)
7. Have you heard about any proposed reforms of the PDS?
 - a. What is said?
 - b. Where did you get this information from?

Use Of The Pds (15 Min)

This section seeks to understand what role the PDS has in peoples' lives and how it is used/ what is done with it. This will give valuable insights for messaging on the targeting aspect of the reform.

8. In one sentence, what does the PDS mean to you?
9. How important is the food basket to feed your household in the months when you receive it? Please elaborate
 - a. What items are of particular importance for your household?
10. Do you/ your household pick up the food basket every time it is distributed? Why/ why not?
11. Why do you think that some people do not pick up their food basket when it is distributed?
12. After you receive the food basket, what do you do with it?
 - a. Is any part given back to the agent? Please give examples
 - b. Is any part given to relatives? Please give examples
 - c. Is any part given to people in need? Please give examples

Registration For The Electronic Ration Card (20 Min)

This section will focus on the digitalisation aspect of the PDS reform. The level of awareness, fears and hopes will be explored.

Questions to be asked in DUHOK, DIYALA AND BAGHDAD EL-SADR (the registration is not yet rolled out there):

13. The PDS are in the process of digitalisation where you can register to get an electronic ration card for the PDS. Has anyone heard about this? If yes:

- a. What did you hear?
- b. Where did you get this information from?
- c. What do you think about the digitalisation of the process?

Let me give you some information. In Najaf citizens are currently registering to a modern digital system designed to make the process more efficient. To register for an electronic ration card, everyone who receives PDS has to go to a registration center and provide some information about their household.

14. What are your initial thoughts on this?
15. What do you think are the benefits of registering and receiving such electronic ration card?
 - a. Is there anything you consider that could be easier to do online? (Probe: what about adding a new child, what about obtaining a new card, what about separating households)
16. Do you have any fears related to registering for the e-card?
17. If your mission was to encourage people in your community to register for the e-card, which steps would you take to achieve this?
 - a. From where would you start and why? (Probe: why do you believe this will be effective?)
 - b. What needs to be in place to do so?
 - c. What information do you need?
 - d. How would you like the information to be presented? (Probe: platform, design,)
 - e. Who do you trust to give such information?
 - f. Who in the community or neighborhood do you think can influence people to register for the e-card?
 - g. What channel do you think is suitable to share information on the PDS reform to the community?

Questions to be asked in NAJAF only (because the registering has been rolled out there):

Let me give you some information. In Najaf citizens are currently registering to a modern digital system designed to make the process more efficient. To register for an electronic ration card, everyone who receives PDS has to go to a registration center and provide some information about their household.

18. In your opinion, what are the benefits of registering and receiving such e-card?
19. Do you have any fears related to registering for the e-card?
20. Did anyone here register for the e-card? Why, why not?
21. Please take me through the process of registering for the e-card
 - a. What motivates you to register for the e-card?

- b. What makes it easy to register for the e-card?
 - c. Is there anything making it difficult to register for the e-card?
22. How do you use the e-card?
23. How did you hear about the PDS registration?
24. If your mission was to encourage people in your community to register for the e-card, which steps would you take to achieve this?
- a. From where would you start and why? (**Probe:** *why do you believe this will be effective?*)
 - b. What needs to be in place to do so?
 - c. What information do you need?
 - d. How would you like the information to be presented? (**Probe:** *platform, design, logos*)
 - e. Who do you trust to give such information?
 - f. Who in the community or neighbourhood do you think can influence people to register for the e-card?
 - i. What channel do you think is suitable to share information on the PDS reform to the community?

Perceptions On Targeting (20 Min)

This section aims to understand perceptions on PDS targeting, and whether people are willing to de-register/ opt-out

A modernized PDS system can help make Iraq more food secure, and to make sure that the people who need help the most can always access it.

25. Today, around 98% of the population in Iraq receive PDS. What do you think about that?
- a. What are the benefits of nearly universal coverage of PDS?
 - b. What are the drawbacks of nearly universal coverage of PDS? (e.g. could the money be spent better on something else)
26. Who do you think would be most affected if the food basket does not exist? Please elaborate
- a. What do you think would happen to this segment of the population if the food basket did not exist?
27. Who do you think would be least affected if the food basket does not exist? Please elaborate
- a. What do you think would happen to this segment of the population if the food basket did not exist?
28. If there existed an option where you could choose to de-register / opt-out from the PDS, would you be open to that? Why/ why not?
- a. What feelings emerge when you think about that?
 - b. Are there any situations you could consider that?

- c. Is there anything that could motivate you to do so? (Probe: what if you choosing to de-registering will ensure food to someone in need?)
 - d. Is there anyone you would expect to de-register? Why, why not?
29. The Gol has already approved a PDS targeting criteria where anyone earning more than 1.5 million IQD per month should be excluded from PDS. What do you think about that?
30. The PDS is aiming to improve the overall process, and reviewing the targeting criteria has been discussed. In your opinion, can targeting be a good idea? Why/ why not?

Conclusion, Questions, Thanks And Goodbyes (5 Min)

Thank you all for participating with us in this discussion today, and for being honest about your opinions. Your input is very important to us and is strictly confidential. I thank you for your time.

31. Before we wrap up, do you have any last comments or recommendations?

Thank you for the time to answer our questions!

KII Guide

Introduction (5 Min)

Welcome and thank you for coming and participating in the interview. I'm X and this is my colleague Y from ThinkBank. We are conducting several interviews with stakeholders working on the Public Distribution System (PDS) in Iraq.

MAGENTA is contracted by WFP to develop a SBCC strategy that aims to (1) support the ongoing PDS reform effort led by the MoT, (2) encourage eligible vulnerable citizens to register in order to validate the PDS database, and (3) tackle misinformation about the PDS reform.

The purpose of this research is to better understand the perceptions, knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs of PDS beneficiaries in order to inform a strategic communication campaign and tailor its messaging to resonate with the target audience. The findings will be included in a research report delivered to WFP Iraq and presented to MoT.

- Duration 45 min
- Recording

Opening Questions (5 Min)

1. Please introduce yourself. What is your name, what is your role, and how long have you been working with the PDS?
2. Can you give a brief introduction on what role you and your organization have regarding the PDS reform?

Perceptions On The Pds Reform (15 Min)

3. Based on your experience, how is the PDS perceived by people/ the beneficiaries in X (*Najaf/ Duhok/ el Sadr/ Diyala*)?
4. What perceptions regarding the PDS reform have you come across in your line of work?
 - a. What is being said? By whom?
5. What misconceptions/ misunderstandings or misinformation have you come across?
 - a. By whom? (*Probe: Displaced groups? Age groups? socioeconomic status? rural/urban....*)

6. In your work in the field, have you come across any fears related to the PDS reform? Please elaborate

Registration For The E-Card (10 Min)

7. In your opinion, what changes are needed to make it easy for people to register for the PDS e-card?
8. Based on your experience/ in your opinion, what are the main barriers related to registering for the electronic ration card?
9. Based on your experience/ in your opinion what are the main drivers related to registering for the electronic ration card?

Communication Campaign (10 Min)

10. Are people talking about the PDS in X (Najaf/ Duhok/ el Sadr/ Diyala)?
 - a. What is being said?
 - b. By whom? (e.g social influencers, media, social media, different generations etc)
11. What would make your job easier promoting the PDS reform?
 - a. What communication materials would you like?
12. If you would develop some slogans for a communication campaign on the PDS reform, what would it be?
13. Based on your experience, what messages tend to resonate with people in X (Najaf/ Duhok/ el Sadr/ Diyala)? What is important to keep in mind?
 - a. What would you focus on?
14. Is there something you would avoid? Why?
15. What do you think is the best channel for sharing information about the PDS reform to the community?
16. Based on your experience, who can best motivate/mobilize the community to register for the electronic ration card?

Conclusion, Questions, Thanks And Goodbyes (5 Min)

Thank you all for participating with us in this discussion today, and for being honest about your opinions. Your input is very important to us and is strictly confidential. I thank you for your time.

17. Before we wrap up, do you have any last comments or recommendations MAGENTA should keep in mind developing the communications campaign?

18. Any last comments or recommendations we should deliver to WFP?




Thank you for the time to answer our questions!

Annex 3- SWOT Analysis

SWOT ANALYSIS: DIGITALISATION

<p style="text-align: center;">S</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">STRENGTHS</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">W</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">WEAKNESSES</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">O</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">OPPORTUNITIES</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">T</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">THREATS</p>
<p>Willingness to register There is an optimism and openness among both PDS recipients and the supply-side towards adopting digital registration processes.</p> <p>Fast & easy registration Digitalisation offers a streamlined and efficient registration process, saving time and effort for both PDS recipients and suppliers.</p> <p>Update on the go Convenience of having all paperwork in a durable plastic card, ready to be accessed at any time allows PDS recipients to manage and update the household information easily.</p> <p>Reduced theft & corruption Potential positive impact on reducing theft and corruption both on the recipient and supply side by gaining improved control and oversight.</p>	<p>Lack of information on registration & uses of the e-card Insufficient knowledge or awareness regarding the process and benefits of digitalisation may hinder adoption.</p> <p>Digital illiteracy among food agents and recipients Individuals who are not familiar with digital technologies, like elderly people, may struggle to adapt to online registration, limiting their participation.</p> <p>Lack of resources (internet, devices, staff) Inadequate availability of internet access, devices, and trained personnel could hinder the effective implementation of digitalisation efforts.</p> <p>Distrust in the government Scepticism or lack of trust that the government will implement the reform. The government's lack of credibility may lead to reluctance to register.</p> <p>Stigma around asking and answering certain questions Social stigma or cultural barriers may discourage individuals from providing certain information during the registration process.</p>	<p>Mandatory and modern perception The perception that digitalisation is mandatory and aligned with modern trends may encourage broader adoption and compliance.</p> <p>Potential to increase the government's credibility If the digitalisation succeeds, the government might regain its credibility regarding implementing reforms.</p> <p>Increased oversight and improved distribution Digitalisation provides the PDS recipients and the suppliers with greater control over the distribution process, with the potential to improve the quality of the commodities and distribute it fairly.</p>	<p>Empty Promises People fearing that this is yet another unfulfilled promise from the government could discourage them from registering for the e-card.</p> <p>Potential exclusion of digitally disadvantaged groups Digitalisation efforts may unintentionally exclude individuals or communities with limited access to technology, exacerbating digital divides and inequities.</p> <p>Technical infrastructure limitations Inadequate technological infrastructure, including unreliable internet connectivity or power supply, could hinder the smooth functioning of digital registration systems.</p> <p>Registration in association with targeting some were hesitant giving personal information while registering for the e-card exposing a risk for people not to register fearing to lose PDS support.</p>

SWOT ANALYSIS: TARGETING

<p style="text-align: center;">S</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">STRENGTHS</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">W</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">WEAKNESSES</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">O</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">OPPORTUNITIES</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">T</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">THREATS</p>
<p>Redistribution to people in need The targeting reforms would effectively redistribute resources to individuals in need.</p> <p>Increased quality Targeting is seen as having the potential to better distribute the resources by increasing the quality and quantity for those in need.</p>	<p>Entitlement The PDS is seen as a "right" and as Iraqis' share of the country's oil revenue making people oppose targeting. It is rather perceived that the support should be increased to 100%.</p> <p>Distrust in the government's intentions Targeting is seen as taking away a backup plan in cases of crisis or economic instability.</p> <p>The PDS is seen as a safety net Inadequate availability of internet access, devices, and trained personnel could hinder the effective implementation of digitalisation efforts.</p> <p>Fear the effect on food prices the PDS is seen to keep the food prices low, and raise concerns that targeting will make the market prices increase, affecting the broader population.</p>	<p>Personal choice and autonomy To self-suspend is perceived to be a personal choice of giving away "their share".</p> <p>Potential to increase the government's credibility If the digitalisation succeeds, the government might regain its credibility regarding implementing reforms.</p> <p>Increased oversight and improved distribution: Digitalisation provides the PDS recipients and the suppliers with greater control over the distribution process, with the potential to improve the quality of the commodities and distribute it fairly.</p>	<p>Practise personal donations The food basket is donated based on social, cultural, and religious motivations. Moreover, it is emphasised that it is a personal choice to give it away, and lack of trust leaving this responsibility to the government. Additionally, a fear of the effect on the market prices made personal donations preferred over self-suspension and leaving the redistribution to the government.</p> <p>Charity language Language indicating that the PDS is charity from the government might provoke recipients as it is seen as their right. If donated, it is rather perceived as a personal choice/ charity from the recipients.</p> <p>Political resistance and opposition Different segments of the population may oppose targeting reforms due to several reasons: 1) perceptions of the PDS as a right and people's money 2) distrust in the government's intentions 3) responding to potential reduced food security if targeting results in increased food prices.</p> <p>Lack of information people are not aware of the existing policy on targeting, which leaves a vacuum for misconceptions and rumours to circulate.</p>