



SHARING TO SURVIVE

Investigating the role of social networks during Yemen's humanitarian crisis



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Executive Summary

After nearly seven years of war, Yemenis are in the grip of a protracted crisis that has left over 20 million people—66% of the population—in need of assistance.¹ While external aid is saving lives in Yemen, it is not necessarily the main source by which Yemenis are coping with the ongoing crisis. Indeed, the Yemen response remains severely underfunded² and aid actors are unable to support the basic needs of many households. So how are Yemenis coping?

Experts on food security in Yemen,³ research from other contexts, and Yemenis themselves point to an obvious but under-recognized answer: households are relying on their social connections and support networks for survival. By understanding and monitoring informal social protection networks⁴ in conjunction with other context analysis and

¹ As of October 2021; OCHA (2021).

² UN Press Release (2021).

³ IPC (2018).

⁴ *Informal social protection* refers broadly to the “care and support...provided to family, community, and group members through social structures and social networks.” It occurs alongside formal social protection—external interventions that are designed to help individuals and households cope with poverty, destitution, and vulnerability—but also in its absence. In protracted crises, for example, where formal governance structures are weak to non-existent, people rely heavily on informal social protection measures to get by. See, for example: Carter, Roelen, Enfield, & Avis (2019); Calder & Tanhchareun (2014), p. 4.

conflict sensitivity initiatives, aid actors can better anticipate and proactively respond to the erosion of important sources of resilience and worsening humanitarian conditions. As research on the Somalia famine of 2011-2012 demonstrates, support networks can collapse suddenly, which may signify the rapid deterioration of humanitarian conditions.^{5,6}

Support networks are also a critical but overlooked topic in global efforts to localize external assistance. In 2016, the Grand Bargain emphasized the need to center local actors in the international aid system. But to date, localization has primarily been framed in terms of engagement between formal actors, particularly between international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs),⁷ and discussions have largely omitted considerations of the informal systems upon which crisis-affected communities depend for support.

Social connectedness refers to the sum of peoples' social linkages: the social networks on which they can draw; the extent and strength of those networks and the resources available within them; the nature of obligation that such networks carry; and the reciprocity presumed in terms of collective risk and mutual support. In Yemen, social linkages may be based on kinship ties, one's place of origin or residence, and/or their political affiliations. These categories of connections may facilitate access to different opportunities and forms of support, and have changed over the course of the humanitarian crisis. Studies across a variety of contexts show that social connectedness is inherently linked to social hierarchy and power dynamics; connectedness for one group may well spell marginalization or exclusion for another.⁸

This report is based on a qualitative study that was implemented in Taiz, Yemen's most populous governorate, which has witnessed some of the highest rates of violence and civilian fatality during the conflict. One hundred forty nine in-depth interviews with individuals directly affected by the humanitarian crisis in Taiz, as well as key informant interviews with those with firsthand knowledge of the context and dynamics central to the study were conducted, in order to help aid actors better understand how social connections are supporting coping and survival in Yemen. Ultimately, the report seeks to:

1. Contribute to the growing body of evidence on informal social protection networks and the critical role they play in enabling households to cope with and adapt to protracted crises;
2. Investigate the relational rather than individualistic nature of resilience in the context of protracted crises;
3. Inform the aid community about the nature and dynamics of social networks in Yemen so that external assistance can be designed to complement these networks and localized responses.



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5 Maxwell et al. (2016).

6 It is important to note that a conflict does not inherently signal a collapse or exhaustion of informal support networks. In fact, a study in South Sudan showcased that in some cases, conflict-affected households' social networks *increase* in size, especially in the context of displacement. Nevertheless, as support networks are a critical source of coping and survival in crises, understanding and monitoring their dynamics remains important for aid actors. See: Kim et al. (2020).

7 Some have criticized the moulding of national NGOs into "local replicas of international NGOs" in order to meet compliance demands of the existing aid system. In turn, the characteristics of national NGOs (e.g. context sensitivity, indigenous knowledge, local acceptance, etc.) that enable them to meaningfully engage local communities in their response are "replaced by the very attributes of aid underpinning perceptions of a system 'unfit for purpose'" (Corbett, Carstensen, & Di Vicenz 2021, p. 65-66).

8 Kim et al. (2020); Maxwell et al. (2016).



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KEY FINDINGS

How are households relying on their social networks to cope and survive in the protracted crisis?

- In Yemen, households have a history of providing their social connections with various forms of support. While the bases of social connectedness and the strength of certain types of connections have changed during Yemen's protracted crisis, the tangible and intangible resources mobilized through support networks have become critically important for households during the conflict. Ranging from food, money, labor, shelter, information about livelihoods, and emotional support and counsel, these resources have helped households meet their immediate needs and survive in the face of stresses and shocks.
- Given the resource scarcity in the context of Yemen's protracted crisis and the covariate nature of the conflict, households' connections with members of the global diaspora and access to remittances are particularly critical.
- Social connectedness, and by extension social exclusion, is dynamic and fluid in Yemen, shaped by norms that predate and have been disrupted by the conflict. Along with kinship ties, political affiliations, and place of origin and residence, the degree to which an individual or household is socially connected—or indeed, excluded—is further mediated by factors such as age, gender, social class, and livelihood.
- Resource-sharing is voluntary, rooted in social and religious norms that emphasize altruism and generosity. However, social norms concerning reciprocity suggest that when households are perceived to be capable of sharing resources yet opt not to, it may have implications for their social connections. Their unwillingness to share resources can diminish households' social standing within their wider community, resulting in potential social exclusion and limiting their ability to mobilize future support through their networks.

How has the conflict, resource depletion, and the COVID-19 pandemic affected social connectedness and households' ability to rely on their networks?

- At the outset of the war, material resources were liberally shared within social networks particularly in the absence of external assistance, which had yet to arrive in Yemen on a large scale.⁹

⁹ It should be noted that the Yemeni government was engaged in the provision of social safety net programs prior to the arrival of external humanitarian assistance at scale. Most notably, this included the Social Welfare Fund, a cash transfer program initiated in 1996, funded by the Government of Yemen, with partial financial support from the World Bank, the European Union, and the United States. However, the program was discontinued in 2015. After a two-year hiatus, the World Bank and UNICEF launched the Yemen Emergency Crisis Response Project Second Additional Financing, which uses the original database of Social Welfare Fund recipients as the basis for targeting assistance.

- However, seven years into the conflict, informal support networks are showing signs of exhaustion in Taiz. The humanitarian crisis has strained households' ability to mobilize material resources through their networks and households have become more dependent upon formal assistance. In some cases, limited capacity to share resources is fueling social tensions and placing an unsustainable burden on households.
- COVID-19 and preventative public health measures have restricted households' ability to engage in social functions important for building and maintaining ties with their connections. The pandemic also initially led to a devastating reduction of remittance flows,¹⁰ which, in combination with job losses and limited daily wage opportunities, put households and their resources under further strain.

How does the presence and delivery of large-scale external assistance affect these networks?

What are the implications for the design, provision, and monitoring of aid?

- In Taiz, external assistance is saving lives, alleviating suffering, and preventing widespread famine conditions. Aid helps to reduce the strain on households, mitigate household- and community-level tensions, and facilitate resource-sharing between socially connected households.
- However, external assistance has also strained social networks and, at times, inadvertently facilitated elite capture and households' exclusion from informal support networks. This is especially evident in the context of aid agencies' reliance on community committees to lead the selection of assistance recipients. While these committees help ensure community accountability and represent community perspectives during program implementation, they may also inadvertently facilitate exclusion and prevent some groups from receiving assistance.
- Participants discussed four reasons why aid actors are missing the opportunity to better integrate considerations of social networks into their programming: 1) limited contextualized understandings of social connectedness and informal support networks; 2) narrow and opaque selection criteria; 3) social exclusion and elite capture inadvertently facilitated through community committees; and 4) unclear parameters on aid sharing.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The report provides recommendations for donors, policymakers, and practitioners on the ways in which the aid community can account for and bolster informal support networks in their mandates. As humanitarian assistance dominates the current aid landscape in Yemen, the study and its insights are largely drawn from the humanitarian sector. However, these insights remain wholly relevant for the broader aid community as it grapples with how best to sequence, layer, and integrate longer-term interventions in protracted crisis settings.

I. Work to better understand informal social protection networks so that external interventions reinforce—and at the very least, do not undermine—critical sources of coping and survival. For many households in Taiz, social connections act as lifelines during Yemen's protracted crisis. To ensure that efforts to bolster resilience in Yemen do not inadvertently undermine the very strategies on which households rely to cope and survive during crisis, the aid community must:

a. Account for social connectedness in assessments and monitoring activities, ongoing crisis analysis, and early warning systems. At a minimum, such initiatives will help ensure that external interventions avoid inadvertently undermining informal support networks.¹¹ They may also assist

¹⁰ Notably, remittances have since rebounded in parts of Yemen and the Middle East more generally. See: Cash Consortium of Yemen (2021); World Bank (2021).

¹¹ To the authors' knowledge, social connectedness falls outside of the scope of existing information systems. The authors are working towards synthesizing insights across contexts to develop guidance on how aid actors can assess social connectedness in assessments, monitoring and ongoing crisis analysis, and early warning information systems.

aid actors' design and adaptation of formal programs to complement and bolster informal support systems. Moreover, through continuous real-time crisis monitoring activities designed to identify signs that support shared within social networks is waning, aid actors may be better able to anticipate and proactively respond to eroding local coping strategies. Such monitoring initiatives could entail tracking social attitudes towards community safety nets and households' willingness and ability to support social connections.

b. When evaluating program impact, account for local support systems and measure the impact of formal assistance on these systems.

Evaluations must seek to better understand the impact of external interventions on recipients' social networks. For example, what role did the assistance play in households' capacity to build new connections and/or strengthen existing ones? Concurrently, evaluations should work to assess the potential inadvertent negative impact of program participation and/or aid allocation on the recipient households (e.g. potential exclusion from informal support networks, emerging tensions with social connections, etc.). Lessons from such evaluations should be integrated into future policy planning, program design, and community engagement strategies.

c. Continuously monitor the secondary impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly on informal social protection networks.

In Taiz, the pandemic has created communication challenges and disrupted the social practices by which households maintain and build their social connections. It has also exacerbated conflict-related resource scarcity, further limiting households' ability to share resources within their social networks. Collectively, the pandemic is threatening to further disrupt a critical source of coping and survival in Taiz.¹² Given that the pandemic remains fluid in Yemen and its secondary impacts are likely to evolve, there is an urgent need to continuously monitor its changing implications for informal social protection networks.

2. Design programs and accompanying community engagement strategies in ways that support informal social protection networks. Protracted conflict, economic disruptions, and the COVID-19 pandemic are straining local support networks in Taiz and severely limiting households' resource-sharing capacities. In some cases, this is fueling social tensions, especially for displaced people who may be particularly dependent on social connections in the host community for support, but unable to reciprocate due to resource limitations. In order to mitigate the pressures on informal social protection networks, the aid community should:

a. Permit unconditional aid sharing, or at a minimum, stay consistent on messaging with respect to post-distribution reallocation of assistance.

Sharing external assistance, in particular food aid, helps households ensure future reciprocal support and fulfill their cultural and religious duties. Inconsistent messaging and restrictions on aid sharing, whether perceived or actual, are disrupting informal sharing practices and contributing to increased social tensions.¹³ In order to avert confusion and tension, aid actors should clearly and consistently message that households are free to share assistance at their own discretion.

¹² Mercy Corps research from Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Colombia also suggests that the pandemic and its economic consequences have strained relations within tribal, ethnic, and religious groups, and sowed seeds for new drivers of conflict. While the same phenomena may apply to Yemen, it is beyond the scope of this study and its analysis. See: Mercy Corps (2021).

¹³ There are instances when it may be necessary to target assistance based on highly specific household-level criteria. However such interventions must still be approached with social protection networks in mind. To address concerns regarding the nutritional needs of vulnerable populations (e.g. young children and pregnant and/or lactating women), aid actors can consider an integrated community-based management of malnutrition. Concern Worldwide, for example, successfully designed a community-based intervention in Chad that significantly and sustainably improved the nutritional status of young children and community resilience to shocks and stresses that adversely impact health and nutrition. See Marshak, Young, & Radday (2016).

3. Seek out and invest in opportunities to meaningfully partner with informal social protection efforts.

To date, the localization discourse has largely been framed in terms of engagement between formal actors, particularly between international and national/local NGOs. Yet these discussions have largely omitted considerations of the informal systems on which crisis-affected communities depend for support. As aid actors grapple with having to do more with less, it is increasingly important that they work with and through informal support networks, and seek out opportunities to meaningfully partner with or complement these networks. Aid actors should work to:

- a. Invest in crisis-affected communities' own initiatives.** In Yemen, much of the decision-making power in the relief effort remains concentrated in the hands of international actors, while the potential to strengthen crisis-affected people's own initiatives remains largely untapped.¹⁴ Practices such as survivor- and community-led crisis response (sclr) offer evidence-based guidance on how aid actors can work to more effectively support informal initiatives. Through community mobilization and facilitation, group microgrants, demand-led skills training, and locally relevant mechanisms for coordination, the sclr approach seeks to empower and support autonomous and collective self-help.¹⁵ Practices like sclr are intended to complement conventional external interventions and offer concrete opportunities to shift decision-making to people living through and responding to conflict.
- b. Pilot new approaches to community-based targeting to help** 1) address tensions related to category-based targeting that risk undermining informal support systems; and 2) account for hard-to-measure and localized bases of vulnerability and resilience, including social connectedness. While aid actors currently rely on community committees to support select aspects of the humanitarian response, meaningful community-based targeting requires the delegation of significantly more authority to local decision-making structures. This could include the authority to determine selection criteria, populate recipient lists, and manage community-level communications about assistance. These decision-making structures should be identified and vetted through rigorous assessments that consider their representativeness and the potential for certain groups to be excluded from participation. Further, aid actors should invest in monitoring and entrusted community accountability and reporting mechanisms to ensure that aid is being transparently allocated. Studies should accompany such efforts to document the feasibility and advantages of community-based targeting approaches in a context like Yemen.

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¹⁴ Colburn (2021).

¹⁵ Corbett, Carstensen, & Di Vicenz (2021).

ABOUT THE RESILIENCE EVALUATION, ANALYSIS AND LEARNING (REAL) AWARD

REAL is a consortium-led effort funded by the USAID Center for Resilience. It was established to respond to growing demand among USAID Missions, host governments, implementing organizations, and other key stakeholders for rigorous, yet practical, monitoring, evaluation, strategic analysis, and capacity building support. Led by Save the Children, REAL draws on the expertise of its partners: Mercy Corps and TANGO International.

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