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 underfunded[2] 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 networks[4] in conjunction with other context analysis and 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]

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.
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).

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.

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.

1. **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 sustainability 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.

Matt Styslinger, Mercy Corps

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

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

Background

CRISIS, COPING, AND SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

A growing body of evidence showcases the critical role that social connections play in households' ability to cope and survive in protracted crises. Whether the crisis is a natural disaster or man-made, informal social protection networks are a powerful source of resilience.[16] Studies from a variety of contexts make clear that much of the actual assistance that crisis-affected households and individuals receive does not come from international aid agencies or governments, but rather from people's own networks: neighbors, friends, relatives and in some cases broader groupings of kin such as clans or ethnic groups.[17] These networks may include international diasporas that maintain close links with home communities, but they may also be highly localized and cut-off from outside sources of support.

16 USAID Center for Resilience (2018).
17 Kim et al. (2020); Maxwell et al. (2016); Anderson, Brown, & Jean (2012); Greene et al. (2021); South et al. (2012); Dunlop & Ellina (2018).

The **resilience** of individuals, households, and communities is derived from their capacity to protect and advance their well-being in the face of stresses and shocks—like conflict, drought, loss of livelihoods, or pandemics.[18] Such resilience capacities are derived from and strengthened by both objective and subjective factors.[19] *Objective* factors refer to more tangible aspects of resilience, such as assets, livelihood strategies, and financial capital. *Subjective* sources of resilience account for the less tangible aspects, such as social norms, psychosocial factors, power, and marginalization.[20] There is now a growing recognition that both tangible and more subjective elements of resilience must be accounted for in the interventions that seek to build and strengthen resilience.

In the face of a disaster, households' social connections and the resources available through their networks are central to their capacity to endure and recover, with local networks often better able to quickly coordinate disaster response and post-disaster recovery.[21] Such networks have also been critical in understanding communities' adaptive capacities in the face of climate change, helping communities plan and recover from disasters where state institutions are largely absent.[22] The evidence base is also rich with examples of the ways in which social networks and social connections support coping capacities[23] and facilitate risk smoothing and resource-sharing at the individual, household, and community level.[24] In Ethiopia, one study investigating informal support networks in rural communities found that networks often provide essential resources during times of need.[25] The authors of the study posited that such networks provide key opportunities to establish forms of mutual insurance that could later protect community members against small idiosyncratic shocks.[26] Indeed, much of the evidence base points to a reality in which communities are often their own first responders during and following crises.[27]

These findings hold true in contexts affected by conflict as well. In Somalia, one of the most important factors determining how well households survived the 2011-2012 famine was the extent and diversity of their social networks and households' ability to mobilize resources through their connections.[28] In South Sudan, where formal governance structures are weak or totally absent, social networks have helped facilitate access to critical information for safe passage when fleeing violence.[29] Socially connected households, many of whom were largely dependent on single-staple food aid, were also able to improve their food security and were more optimistic about their ability to cope and recover in the face of future shocks.[30] Similarly in Syria, the link between informal social protection networks and household resilience was found to be pivotal. Better food security outcomes, higher expenditures, and better housing conditions were all linked to the strength and quality of households' connections with others outside of their community.[31] In Yemen, communities in the Taiz governorate and across the country worked together to fill the void left by the collapse of public services. In some cases, their efforts have helped to literally keep the lights on, with local businessmen banding together to install street lights as part of broader efforts to secure shared interests, preserve livelihoods, and increase safety by rebuilding their neighborhoods.[32]

18 Petryniak, Proctor, & Kurtz (2020); FSIN (2014); USAID Center for Resilience (2018).
19 Adger, Barnett, Brown, Marshall, & O'Brien (2013).
20 Jones & Tanner (2017).
21 Aldrich & Meyer (2015); Wall & Hedlund (2016); Saferworld & Save the Children (2020).
22 Adger (2003).
23 Dercon, Hoddinott, & Woldehanna (2012).
24 Bernier & Meinzen-Dick (2014); Fafchamps & Lund (2003).
25 Hoddinott, Dercon, & Krishnan (2009).
26 Ibid.
27 Aldrich (2012).
28 Maxwell et al. (2016).
29 Stites, Humphrey, & Krystalli (2021).
30 Kim et al. (2020).
31 Howe, Krystalli, Krishnan, Kurtz, & Macaranas (2018).
32 El Deek, Abdo Ahmed, Salem, & Hart (2018).

Aid actors can maximize impact and avert inadvertent harm by designing and adapting interventions to better account for and complement informal social protection networks.[33] As indicated in South Sudan, opaque targeting and vulnerability criteria in some cases strained people's social connections. Households that received cash transfers faced significant pressure from community members to share cash, or otherwise risk being excluded from key systems of reciprocal support.[34] Another study found that divergent understandings of vulnerability and targeting led to increased tensions and violence in some parts of South Sudan, where cultural norms and focus on equality as the basis for distribution clashed with humanitarian actors' "equity-based interpretation of impartiality."[35] There is a growing recognition that "rigid imposition of externally designed protocols," which are largely divorced from locally-led initiatives, are not fit for purpose.[36] They can also contribute to the disempowerment and loss of dignity for affected populations. Yet, such top-down ways of working continue, with the aid community missing opportunities to "strengthen crisis-affected people's own initiatives, ideas and inclination to help each other."[37]

STUDY OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research presented in this report is motivated by three overarching objectives. First, it contributes to the growing body of evidence on informal social protection networks and the critical role they play in enabling households to cope and adapt in protracted crises. In Yemen, now in its seventh year of conflict, anecdotal evidence strongly suggested that households were relying on their social networks to cope and survive. Experts on food security,[38] research from other contexts, and Yemenis themselves all pointed to the extraordinary social solidarity of the Yemeni people as having prevented further deterioration of humanitarian conditions.[39] However, there was a lack of data to confirm this explanation, and to the authors' knowledge, there had been no concerted effort to understand the bases and dynamics of social connectedness in Yemen.

> **Social connectedness** refers to the sum of people's 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, as described below, social linkages may be based on family or tribal ties, one's place of origin or residence, and/or one's political affiliations. These categories of connections may facilitate access to different opportunities and forms of support, and may have changed over the course of the humanitarian crisis. Studies across a variety of contexts showcase that social connectedness is inherently linked to social hierarchy and power dynamics; connectedness for one group may well spell marginalization or exclusion for another.[40] Factors that either contribute to or differentiate the strength of a particular person's connectedness include gender, age, lineage of clan, ethnicity, social class, livelihood, wealth, political interests, and business partnerships, among others.[41]

Second and relatedly, in examining the linkages between social networks and households' ability to cope and survive in Yemen, the report seeks to investigate the relational rather than individualistic nature of resilience in the context of

33 Without accounting for social networks, aid actors may also overlook signals for new drivers of crisis. An assessment in Borno State in Northeast Nigeria found that the protracted nature of the crisis exerted pressures on the informal support systems, leading not only to an exhaustion of a critical coping strategy but also eruptions of new conflict. See: Mercy Corps. (2018).
34 Kim et al. (2020).
35 Ibid, p. 8; Santschi, Gwora, & White (2018).
36 Corbett, Carstensen & Di Vicenz (2021), p. 65.
37 Ibid, p. 67.
38 IPC (2018).
39 Ibid.
40 Kim et al. (2020)
41 Ibid.; Maxwell et al. (2016).

protracted crises.[42] As this study reveals, households are deeply interconnected, with social connections crossing geographic, temporal, and social barriers. These social connections and the resources leveraged through households' networks emerge as a critical factor in households' ability to meet immediate needs, seek safe refuge and passage, and provide much needed emotional reprieve.

Third, the study is intended to inform the aid community about the nature and dynamics of social networks in Taiz[43] so that external assistance can be designed to complement these networks and localized responses. It also challenges the dominant framing of local actors in Yemen, which, in international circles, tends to narrowly focus on armed actors and their disruptive effects on formal assistance.[44] The study instead highlights the agency and resilience of conflict-affected communities in Yemen, flagging opportunities for the aid community to better account for such critical informal sources of resilience. As conversations among aid actors continue to shift towards an emphasis on localized responses, informal social protection networks could play a pivotal role.[45] Yet, to date, the extent to which they have been considered in discussions about localization is minimal.

With these overarching objectives in mind, the study investigated the following three research questions in the Taiz governorate of Yemen:

1. **How are households relying on informal social protection networks to cope and survive in the protracted crisis?**
2. **How has the experience of conflict, resource depletion, and the COVID-19 pandemic affected social connectedness and households' ability to rely on their networks?**
3. **How is external assistance affecting informal social protection networks? What are the implications for the design, provision, and monitoring of aid?**

Ezra Millstein, Mercy Corps

42 Stites, Humphrey & Krystalli (2021).
43 For consistency, throughout the report, the governorate is referred to as "Taiz." Others refer to the governorate as Ta'izz or Taizz.
44 Much of the reporting and research on humanitarian assistance in Yemen highlights concerns about the redistribution of assistance on the basis of patronage and political affiliations. This includes reporting discussing **aid obstruction by political and conflict actors** and **the focus on "economic profiteering" by conflict actors**, with little to no attention paid to the agency of conflict-affected community members and their initiatives to improve the well-being of their wider communities.
45 Globally, the goalposts for localization, developed as part of the consultative process following the Grand Bargain, have continuously shifted and commitments to channel funding directly to local actors have weakened. Despite continued public commitments to meaningful partnerships for local and national NGOs, only 0.4% of humanitarian assistance reached local actors in 2018. Across protracted crises contexts—including Yemen—efforts to build meaningful partnerships with local actors and support localized responses have faltered or, at worst, failed to materialize. See: Peace Direct (2021); Development Initiatives (2018).

OVERVIEW OF THE YEMEN CONFLICT[46]

Nearly seven years of conflict has devastated the economy, infrastructure, and population of Yemen, with the war "continu[ing] to harm civilians, drive displacement in the region, and restrict humanitarian access."[47] The conflict in Yemen began in 2014 following the capture of the country's capital, Sana'a, with armed actors demanding lower fuel prices and a new government.[48] The failure of negotiations in January 2015 led to the ousting of former president Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi and the resignation of his government. The following months would see the launch of a devastating combination of economic isolation and air strikes by the international coalition.[49] Although the conflict has witnessed many shifting frontlines, the battle for major cities such as Taiz, Sa'ada, Sana'a, and al-Baydah have been some of the most destructive. In particular, the battle for control of Taiz Governorate has entailed some of the most intense clashes seen during the war, with an ongoing blockade in place at the time of publication.[50] Other cities have also witnessed periods of intense violence and displacement.[51] Hudaydah, in particular, has been subjected to some especially intense episodes of violence because of the economic significance of its ports, which facilitate the flow of more than 70% of Yemen's fuel and basic commodities imports.[52]

Estimates show that the conflict has resulted in the deaths of more than 100,000 Yemenis, and the internal displacement of over 3.6 million.[53] UNOCHA estimates that another 672,000 Yemenis are likely to be displaced by the end of 2021.[54] Meanwhile, the UN-backed peace negotiations have made little progress. While the 2018 Stockholm Agreement "averted a battle in the vital port city of [Hudaydah]," experts agree that there has not been much success in the implementation of the provisions stipulated in the accords, including the exchange of thousands of prisoners, the cessation of hostilities in Hudaydah, and the creation of a joint committee to de-escalate the tensions within Taiz.[55]

While conflict actors have continued to battle for control of Yemen's key cities, the war has had an outsized impact on the country's economy and infrastructure. Even prior to the conflict, Yemen faced numerous development challenges including extreme poverty, high rates of food insecurity, and water scarcity, ranking in the bottom fifth of the Human Development Index.[56] Yemen's healthcare sector has also struggled to address numerous coinciding public health emergencies, including the COVID-19 pandemic, widespread malnutrition and a cholera epidemic that has resulted in more than one million suspected cases since its outbreak in 2016.[57] A 2019 assessment by the UNDP found that damage to infrastructure as a result of the conflict was widespread, with the overall cost estimated between four and five billion USD.[58] The same assessment found that the ongoing war has set Yemen's development back by 21 years.[59]

The conflict has both exacerbated root economic issues and created new ones, including the devaluation of the Yemeni Riyal[60] and the fall of the oil industry.[61] The absence of basic services[62] and the extralegal taxation of imports by conflict actors have only further aggravated this state of economic warfare.[63] The economic conditions for many households in

46 In order to ensure the security of both in-country researchers and study participants, politically sensitive discussions and references to specific conflict actors are excluded from all study outputs. The study team recognizes that these issues and dynamics are likely relevant for the topics under investigation, and where possible, secondary literature is leveraged to attempt to address these gaps in this report.
47 Global Conflict Tracker (2021).
48 Montgomery (2021).
49 Robinson (2021).
50 Fuller (2018).
51 Ghobari & Mokashef (2018); Magdy (2021).
52 BBC News (2018).
53 UN News (2021); IOM (2021).
54 OCHA (2021).
55 Robinson (2021).
56 UNDP (2020); Moyer, Bohl, Hanna, Mapes, & Rafa (2019).
57 ECDHR (2021).
58 Moyer et al. (2019).
59 Ibid.
60 ACAPS (2020).
61 Ghobari (2020).
62 Middle East Monitor (2019).
63 United Nations (2021a).

Yemen have been worsened by salary suspensions invoked in 2016, only some of which have been reinstated in the past two years and only in certain parts of the country.[64] Moreover, opportunities within the private sector have diminished, with many skilled laborers losing their jobs, resulting in increased rates of unemployment across all sectors.[65]

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the humanitarian situation in Yemen, adding further strain to humanitarian infrastructure, which was already tasked with responding to the food security, livelihood, and protection needs of millions of Yemenis.[66] Early surveys during the pandemic found that rates of food insecurity were accelerating in Yemen, with many households being pushed deeper into poverty as a result of worsening economic conditions.[67] Further, the pandemic and accompanying stringent regulations on Yemeni expatriates living in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, coupled with the loss of jobs caused by the global economic contraction, have hampered the flow of remittances,[68] a major source of income in Yemen.[69]

OVERVIEW OF HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

In 2021, despite a worsening humanitarian crisis, intense conflict, and a disastrous macro-economic situation, humanitarian assistance has declined, heightening fears of famine.[70] Indeed, donors at the 2021 Yemen pledging conference fell short, committing only half of the 3.85 billion USD needed to fund UN humanitarian assistance operations in the country for the coming year.[71] Overstretched and underfunded, aid actors continue to provide lifesaving assistance to Yemenis,[72] addressing urgent food security and social protection concerns through the provision of food and cash assistance, shelter, sexual and reproductive healthcare, and education.

Through the combined efforts of more than 200 organizations, the aid community was able to reach nearly 10 million Yemenis during every month of 2020.[73] Food assistance remains the primary modality of support, with targeting criteria standardized by agencies including UNOCHA and ECHO. Through its distribution of food baskets and vouchers, the World Food Program aims to reach more than 13 million Yemenis each month, making it one of the largest emergency responses in the world.[74] Moreover, through its partners, USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance reaches more than eight million people per month through a combination of in-kind assistance, cash and vouchers, and programming that aims to strengthen household purchasing power and rehabilitate food security-related livelihoods.[75]

Despite significant efforts, humanitarian infrastructure in Yemen has come under extraordinary pressure over the past several years—a situation compounded by the global COVID-19 pandemic and significant funding shortfalls. Aid actors are also contending with the challenges of operating in a conflict context, with the conduct of the parties of the conflict severely hampering aid actors' ability to reach populations in need[76] and to conduct timely and accurate data collection.[77]

64 al-Tamimi (2019).
65 Nasser (2012); Middle East Monitor (2019).
66 OCHA (2021).
67 NRC (2020).
68 (2020). Notably, remittances have since rebounded in parts of Yemen and the Middle East more generally. See: Cash Consortium of Yemen (2021); World Bank (2021). The Sana'a Center Economic Unit
69 IOM (2020).
70 Lowcock (2021).
71 UN Press Release (2021).
72 In a "tragic tale of humanitarian hypocrisy," the biggest aid donors to Yemen (Saudi Arabia, United States, and United Kingdom) are the very perpetrators of the conflict (Kyriacou, 2017; Financial Tracking Service (UN OCHA), 2020) . While external assistance is an essential source of support for those affected by the ongoing crisis, aid alone is woefully insufficient to respond to or ameliorate the humanitarian devastation. A national ceasefire, resumption of political settlement, and the end of the war are required to put an end to the "worst humanitarian catastrophe in the world" (Allen & Riedel, 2020).
73 OCHA (2020).
74 UN Sustainable Development Group (2021).
75 USAID (2021).
76 OCHA (2020).
77 Maxwell, Hailey, Baker, & Kim (2019).

Indeed, a report by the Overseas Development Institute revealed communication between international and local aid actors is "controlled, politicised and intimately bound up in conflict dynamics," limiting Yemenis' ability to provide feedback and report concerns.[78]

As of May 2021, over 16 million people—more than half of Yemen's population—are estimated to be food insecure (Integrated Food insecurity Phase Classification (IPC) Phase 3+), with 50,000 people facing famine-like conditions (IPC Phase 5).[79] Over two million children under the age of five are enduring acute malnutrition with nearly 400,000 expected to suffer severe acute malnutrition in 2021 if they do not receive timely treatment.[80] In Taiz, indiscriminate and enduring violence, compounded by the lack of aid and disruptions to food and supply distribution,[81] has led to a significant proportion of the population suffering from extreme food insecurity and poverty. The governorate remains an epicentre for chronic malnutrition and famine-like conditions.[82]

Ezra Millstein, Mercy Corps

78 El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, Al Jeddawy, & Holloway (2020), p. 7.
79 World Food Programme (2021).
80 Ibid; Islamic Relief (2021).
81 IDMC (2021).
82 Human Access (2021).

Matt Styslinger, Mercy Corps

Methods

Composed of members of Mercy Corps' Research and Learning and Humanitarian Analysis teams, researchers from Feinstein International Center at Tufts University, and Taiz-based researchers, the study team employed qualitative methods to address the three research questions (Figure 1):

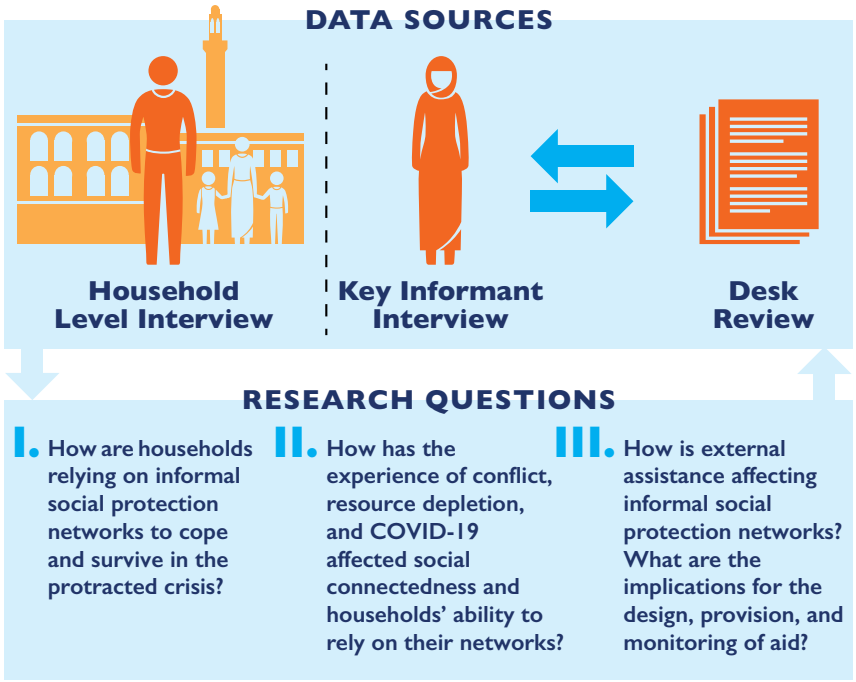

Figure 1: Data sources and research questions

Between July 2020 and February 2021, the team conducted 149 household-level in-depth interviews and key informant interviews.[83] Iteration was central to the study's approach, with study instruments, areas of investigation, recruitment strategies, and analysis informed by and adapted to insights emerging from the interviews as well as ongoing desk review.[84] Collectively, these efforts helped tailor the study to the context. They also allowed the study team to respond to emerging operational challenges, and helped to facilitate a common understanding of culturally nuanced insights.

83 The study protocol has been approved by Tufts Social, Behavioral, and Education Research Institutional Board and relevant local authorities.
84 Srivastava & Hopwood (2009); Le, Lanthorn & Huang (2019).

DESK REVIEW

The study team conducted an iterative desk review of peer-reviewed journal articles, reports, assessments, and news articles produced by peer organizations, research institutions, and news agencies. The search focused on documents that discussed social connections, social networks, and humanitarian assistance. It also examined literature on the localization of humanitarian action or locally-led responses, focusing on the role of informal social protection networks and affected communities rather than that of local organizations. The review helped the study team take stock of existing knowledge on issues central to the research questions, and inform the study design. It also iteratively informed the study's recruitment of key informants and participants, and helped to identify areas for further exploration in interviews. For example, the devastating psychosocial impacts of the conflict and its effects on participants' social networks emerged as an area for further exploration through the desk review (and was confirmed by key informants as well as household-level interviews). Moreover, the desk review aided in the triangulation of emerging insights from interviews and analytical discussions, and complemented gaps in the study data.

INTERVIEWS

Household level in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with 85 individuals directly affected by the humanitarian crisis in the three study sites in Taiz (*Study Sites* callout box).[85] Participants were purposively sampled to include men and women of diverse socioeconomic standing, livelihood, rural or urban residence, and age. The semi-structured IDIs explored participants' experiences during the crisis, how they coped, and the role that social connectedness played in their ability to get by in a serious humanitarian emergency. Interviews also examined participants' perceptions of external assistance and the ways in which it affected their social networks.

In order to complement insights emerging from IDIs, the study team also conducted 64 key informant interviews (KIIs) with context experts, journalists, community and religious leaders, humanitarian staff in Yemen, external aid actors, and members of the Yemeni diaspora. Key informants were identified initially based on the study team's review of the literature and through team members' professional networks and/or referrals. Thirty-nine Taiz-based key informants with firsthand knowledge of the study sites and dynamics central to the study were interviewed by Yemen-based researchers. Globally, 25 additional KIIs were conducted by the US-based study team members.[86] Careful attention was paid to recruit key informants with varied areas of expertise and perspectives to capture divergent perspectives.

Given COVID-19 precautions, all interviews were conducted via telephone or virtual platforms, such as Zoom. IDIs and Yemen-based KIIs were conducted in Taizi Arabic by Yemen-based researchers. KIIs were conducted in English by other members of the study team. With participants' informed consent, most interviews were audio recorded, translated (if necessary), transcribed, and analyzed in English. Researchers also took notes during and immediately following the interviews. The study team held regular meetings to debrief, discuss findings, and iteratively revise study instruments and recruitment strategies based upon progress, emerging themes, and saturation. Following the transcription of interviews, data was coded using Dedoose and analyzed inductively, which allowed the study team to pay attention to patterns that emerged from the research without assigning pre-determined analytical categories.[87]

The report includes direct quotes from study participants. Authors have made every effort to preserve their voices; however in certain instances, quotes have been lightly edited to facilitate comprehension. As interviews were conducted on the basis of anonymity, the report does not identify sources.

85 All IDIs were conducted via telephone using a recruitment and interview approach developed for a study of the Somalia 2010-2011 famine. This methodology was designed for, and proved highly effective at, accessing participants who cannot be reached in person, as well as for the quality of information generated. For additional information on this approach, see Maxwell et al. 2016.

86 Given Tufts University's ethical review board restrictions, the study team did not conduct any KIIs with those residing in the European Economic Area.

87 Patton (1980).

STUDY SITES

Interviews were conducted in three locations in the Taiz Governorate of Yemen: Jabal Habashi, Saber Al-Mawadem, and Taiz City (Figure 2). Located in southwest Yemen, Taiz has the highest population density in the country, with an estimated population of 3.4 million (2017 census).[88] Since the beginning of the conflict, the governorate has been under siege and a major hotspot of the war.[89] The presence of multiple armed groups has resulted in protracted insecurity and instability, with devastating consequences for economic activities in the governorate. The restrictions in mobility have also severely impacted the livelihoods of many households in Taiz. Throughout the conflict, Taiz has been affected by a series of shocks and stresses. Agriculture, which is the main economic activity in the governorate, was hugely impacted by frequent heavy rains, floods, and outbreaks of desert locusts.[90] Heavy rains and floods also caused damage to roads and infrastructure and led to the spread of waterborne diseases such as cholera, dengue fever, and diphtheria.[91] During the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiz had the second highest number of recorded cases, reaching close to 1,500—likely a vast underestimation.[92]

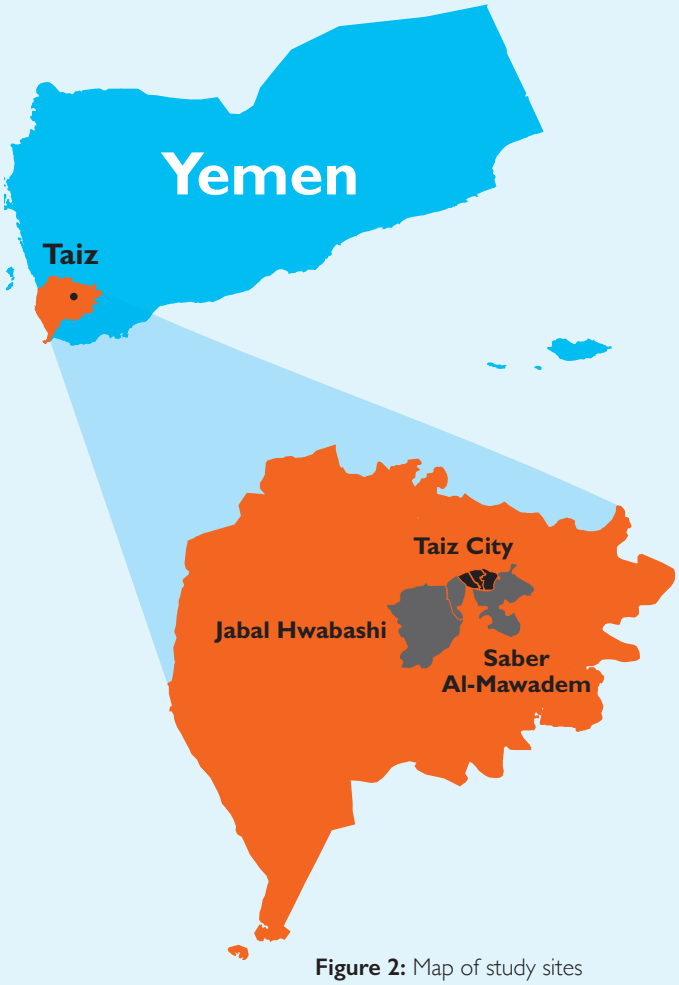

Figure 2: Map of study sites

Jabal Habashi is a contested district between the warring parties. It has seen violent skirmishes throughout the conflict and consequently experienced high levels of displacement.[93] The main economic activities in the district are agriculture and livestock. However, damage caused by shelling and airstrikes, as well as the increase in fuel prices and farming-related costs, has limited farmers' ability to cultivate their lands.[94] Participants from Jabal Habashi, compared to those from Saber Al-Mawadem, frequently discussed receiving significant support from the expatriate community. Economic migrants abroad, most often in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), maintained strong ties with their connections in Jabal Habashi district, and remitted cash, food assistance, support for medical treatment, and project funding. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and stricter visa requirements imposed by the Saudi government, many migrants have recently returned.[95]

88 Knoema (2017).
89 Al-Madhaji (2020).
90 Major heavy rains and floods occurred in May 2016, August 2017, and April 2020.
91 Relief Web (2019); Alghazali et al. (2020); Alghazali K.A. et al. (2019); WHO (2020a); WHO (2020b).
92 WHO (2021).
93 UNHCR (2021).
94 Abdulwasea (2020).
95 IOM (2021); Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor (2020).

Saber Al-Mawadem, like Jabal Habashi, has experienced high levels of violence, especially at the beginning of the conflict. However, the district has also observed long periods of relative calm, with skirmishes erupting sporadically. Consequently, Saber Al-Mawadem has seen less displacement compared to Jabal Habashi.[96] It is currently under a partial siege, with the district divided between armed actors. In March 2021, the district experienced renewed fighting between the warring parties with neither able to make any notable advancement. Similar to Jabal Habashi, agriculture and livestock are the main economic activities, but heavy shelling since 2016 has caused significant damage to farmlands, severely impacting crop production.[97] As the costs of agricultural and livestock inputs have skyrocketed, many have become reluctant to farm as the cost of inputs outweigh revenues.[98]

The districts of Salh, al-Mudhaffer and al-Qahirah constitute **Taiz City**, the third largest city in Yemen, with a population of 466,968 (2004 census).[99] Population size has been in flux over the course of the conflict, with reports suggesting that the population decreased significantly due to displacement, especially during the most intense periods of fighting.[100] The city has witnessed much fighting and has been under siege since August 2015.[101] Access to the city remains largely blocked, leaving it under the control of warring parties.[102] The prolonged conflict over control of the city has resulted in great instability and insecurity, mobility restrictions, and the deterioration of public services.[103] In addition to agriculture and livestock, industry and private enterprise constitute the main economic activities in Taiz City, which have all been negatively affected by continued conflict.[104]

Matt Styslinger, Mercy Corps

96 Displacement Tracking Matrix (2021).
97 Mwatana for Human Rights (2018).
98 FAO (2021).
99 Yemen National Information Center (2014).
100 Crisis Group (2019); Al-Sakkaf (2019).
101 Farouq (2021).
102 Ibid
103 Al-Yabari, Martini, & Albess (n.d.).
104 Yemen Ministry of Planning & International Cooperation (2018).

LIMITATIONS

Limited network coverage challenged data collection efforts in Taiz, especially in rural areas. While accommodations were made to mitigate the network issues to the extent possible (e.g. rescheduling calls, asking participants to move to locations with better coverage, etc.), the study represents the perspectives of participants who were able to establish telephone connections with in-country researchers. Relatedly, unreliable internet connectivity in Taiz limited the duration and quality of team debriefing sessions on virtual platforms, challenging the ability to stay up-to-date on emerging insights and iterate study instruments and recruitment strategies in a timely manner. The connectivity issue was compounded by the substantial time required to transcribe, translate, and check the quality of each interview transcript. In response, debriefing sessions were complemented with alternative debriefing techniques (e.g. offline written summaries and reflections, debriefing sessions in smaller groups in lieu of the whole team, feedback on written and translated products, etc.). A bilingual Taizi team member played a central coordination role overseeing all incoming data and their translations, as well as liaising between the Arabic-speaking Taiz-based and English-speaking US-based team members to ensure prompt resolutions to emerging issues in the study. An additional limitation relates to restrictions laid out by local authorities and security constraints, which determined where the study team was able to conduct IDIs and KIIs in Taiz. In turn, this study and its insights may not be generalizable to the governorate and Yemen more broadly. Finally, in order to ensure the security of in-country researchers and participants, politically sensitive questions about the conflict and armed actors were excluded from the interviews and in all study products. While the study team recognizes that these issues are likely relevant to the topics under investigation, specific examination, discussion, or presentation of these topics was explicitly avoided. Where possible, secondary literature is leveraged to attempt to address any resulting gaps in the report.

Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

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

KEY FINDINGS

- 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.

In Yemen, households have a history of providing their social connections with various forms of support. This tradition, which long predates the war, is often rooted in social and religious norms (*Resource Sharing Norms* callout box). However, over the course of Yemen's protracted crisis, the tangible and intangible resources that are shared within informal social protection networks have become especially critical for households' resilience. As one participant explained, "people have learned to survive on the bare minimum…The social support system is the only thing that is holding [the] people together."[105] This section describes the types of support that households are sharing with their social connections, and the ways in which these resources are facilitating their coping and survival.

> *People have learned to survive on the bare minimum… The social support system is the only thing that is holding [the] people together.*
>
> — Female NGO worker, Taiz

TYPES OF SUPPORT

Socially connected households share a variety of resources with each other, including food, money, labor, shelter, information about livelihood opportunities, emotional support, and advice. Such resources are facilitating households' ability to survive on the bare minimum, and allowing them to stave off hunger, to seek safe passage and refuge in their displacement, and to recover from conflict-related injuries. While participants emphasized the critical importance of material support in their capacity to cope and survive during the conflict, they also discussed the significance of intangible forms of support relayed through informal support networks.

Remittances

Cash and, to a lesser extent, in-kind remittances are a key form of material support that is shared between socially connected households. A member of the Yemeni diaspora remarked that, "the luckiest people in Yemen are people who have someone outside of the country, in the Gulf, Europe, or the US... All people living outside Yemen are sending money."[106] Cash remittances from social connections in the diaspora are critical to allowing Taizis to meet their immediate needs, for example by facilitating the purchase of food items in local marketplaces where prices have surged due to the conflict and blockades. Access to such support helps households secure much needed resources that would otherwise require them to take on debts from nearby shop owners and grocers in order to meet their immediate needs—an unavoidable reality for a number of participants in the study. At times, unused portions of remitted cash are shared further with other social connections or used to contribute to social functions such as weddings and funerals.

However, not all households are as fortunate, with many lacking access to diaspora connections. This is especially the case for the Muhamasheen—a sizable minority population whose caste-based exclusion has been linked to their historical status as descendants of migrants from East Africa—who often lack access to both internal and external sources of support. Rurality is another important factor that influences access to remittances from overseas. Indeed, an ACAPS study on remittance networks in Yemen found that in Taiz "some rural areas have less access to remittances in general and when access exists, it is usually secured via relatives employed in lower skilled and lower paid work abroad."[107]

105 Key informant interview with female NGO worker, November 18, 2019.
106 Key informant interview with male member of Yemeni diaspora, October 10, 2020.
107 Updated citation: ACAPS (2021), p. 13.

Food

Food, often in the form of humanitarian assistance, is another resource frequently shared between socially connected households during the conflict in order to help offset hunger and bouts of food insecurity. At times, participants described sharing food even when there were insufficient amounts available for their own consumption. As one participant described, "Your conscience does not allow you to eat while your neighbor is hungry. Even if I have food only for one day, I would still share with my neighbors. The one who does not feel for others cannot expect others to feel for him."[108] Sharing food aid is a widespread and important source of informal support for households. However, increasingly insufficient humanitarian assistance as well as restrictions placed by some aid actors on informal aid redistribution are challenging households' ability to support their social connections.[109]

Your conscience does not allow you to eat while your neighbor is hungry. Even if I have food only for one day, I would still share with my neighbors. The one who does not feel for others cannot expect others to feel for him.

— Unemployed male, Taiz

Safe Passage and Refuge

Households that were forcibly displaced, especially at the beginning of the conflict when violence first erupted, described relying on their social connections to facilitate safe passage and refuge. To a great extent, social connections determined the range of options that they had when they fled. Participants who experienced displacement discussed relying on their connections, most often kin, to determine where they would flee and seek support to meet basic needs (e.g. shelter, water, food, cooking gas, care while recovering from injury, etc.).

RESOURCE SHARING NORMS

In Taiz, resource sharing is motivated by cultural and religious norms, which determine the terms under which socially connected households seek and offer support to one another. Participants described a strong normative expectation that friends, neighbors, and kin help one another, particularly in the context of war-related hardship. These expectations are informed and underpinned, in part, by what participants described as their religious duty to ensure that one's family and neighbors do not go hungry—even during times when resources may be scarce. While resource scarcity in Taiz has, to a large extent, limited the amount of material support that households can extend to one another, the norms underpinning this support remain largely unchanged after nearly seven years of crisis. As one participant explained, "In our region, what you have in your home, you share it with your neighbors...If your friend or neighbor does not have food, you have to help them regardless of how small or big your help might be."[110]

While resource sharing was most often described as being altruistic in nature, and free of explicit obligation, participants also explained that providing support to others is at times tied to a household's social and religious standing. Sharing material support is a means by which some Taizis are able to maintain and expand their social networks and protect their reputations. For many, religious duty and the pursuit of a divine reward further

108 In-depth interview with unemployed male October 27, 2020.
109 Discussed further in the "Unclear parameters on aid sharing" section of the report.
110 In-depth interview with male NGO worker, October 25, 2020.

motivates resource sharing. As one male participant explained, "If you share, it improves your image in front of God and your neighbors. You earn their respect."[111] A key informant similarly explained that "your ability to feed people in your household and your community is tied to your social status."[112] In some cases, resource sharing may also be a means by which households actively try to build their social status, with one participant explaining that "some people offer help only for fame, or to be known in their community."[113]

While abiding by sharing norms is an important means to maintain and potentially expand social networks, a failure to do so may damage a household's reputation and undermine their relationships with other community members—particularly if that household is perceived as possessing a wealth of resources.[114] As a key informant explained, if a family that has the wherewithal to support their connections fails or refuses to abide by sharing norms, "it reflects poorly on [them] and it looks like you are not playing your role in your community. You lose face, and keeping face is important in Yemeni culture. Generosity is seen as an important value. If you do not share, it has the ultimate impact of lowering your social standing if someone in your community finds out."[115]

In rare cases, participants explained that Taizis feel so compelled to abide by resource-sharing norms that they may consciously sacrifice their own well-being in the short term in order to maintain their ability to share with others. As one key informant explained, "It is very difficult to adhere to these [sharing] norms. You find people adopting what might be termed "negative" coping strategies in order to avoid having their name blackened by failing to participate in what is expected of them. They go further into debt, for example. You're already in a difficult situation, but you're willing to take on more debt or sell assets that are crucial for the survival of your own family just so that you can participate in what is expected of you."[116]

These narratives demonstrate the powerful sense of social and religious duty that informs households' social networks and resource sharing. They also showcase the need for aid actors to take a nuanced approach to their consideration of informal social protection networks in Taiz. On one hand, social networks allow households to cope and survive, and are an important source of resilience for the crisis-affected communities in Taiz. On the other hand, it is important to interrogate the social and religious commitments that membership in social networks may entail for households in Taiz—commitments that many are unable to meet in a context characterized by widespread need and limited resources, but nonetheless feel compelled to uphold.

Emotional Support

Emotional support is another important form of intangible support that participants, especially women, described sharing in the context of conflict-related trauma and daily stressors (*Psychological Impact* callout box).[117] Participants explained that simply knowing that they had friends and family to lean on and openly share their troubles with was critical to their ability to cope during the conflict. Many participants also explained that their social connections, especially with members of the Yemeni diaspora, offered much emotional support. A key informant explained, "There is emotional support that comes

111 In-depth interview with male Aqil, September 7, 2020.
112 Key informant interview with male scholar, September 28, 2020.
113 In-depth interview with male IDP, September 1, 2020.
114 Participants and the in-country researchers emphasized that there is no ill-will directed at those who are unable to share.
115 Key informant interview with male researcher, September 19, 2020.
116 Key informant interview with male scholar, December 1, 2020.
117 In defining "daily stressors," Miller and Rassmusen (2010) argue that "armed conflict undoubtedly has profound effects on those who experience it directly. However, organized violence also generates or exacerbates a host of highly stressful conditions or daily stressors, such as poverty, social marginalization, isolation, inadequate housing, and changes in family structure and functioning" (p. 8).

with knowing that there is family abroad that will do everything in their power to support family in Yemen should anything happen."[118]

In the context of an ongoing crisis where many were surviving on very little, being able to rely on one's connections to mobilize appropriate resources provided relief. Indeed, there is a growing consensus that psychosocial factors play a significant role in households' resilience; an individual's sense of aspiration, self-efficacy, and confidence are critical in facilitating their ability to cope and recover from a shock, and escape and remain out of poverty.[119, 120]

There is emotional support that comes with knowing that there is family abroad that will do everything in their power to support family in Yemen should anything happen.

— Female NGO worker, Taiz

Ezra Millstein, Mercy Corps

118 Key informant interview with female member of Yemeni diaspora, October 13, 2020.
119 USAID Center for Resilience (2018).
120 Mercy Corps' research in South Sudan found significant positive associations between households' social connectedness score and their resilience, even when controlling for a host of household- and community-level characteristics. Households' ability to rely on their social connections informed their perceived ability to cope and recover from future shocks; and conversely, households who were unable to share sufficient levels of support through their networks reported significantly lower levels of confidence in their own resilience-related capacities (Kim et al. 2020).

PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACT OF WAR AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

The war has had a devastating effect on people's psychological well-being. In Taiz, participants often spoke of constant exposure to extreme modes of violence, militarization of civilians, lack of basic services, poverty, absence of economic opportunities, and increased competition over resources. A key informant discussed the conflict's reach and the reluctance to discuss trauma stemming from the war: "There is the hidden disease… that people can't see, the psychological trauma in Yemen. Not only children, [but also] women and elders. It's everybody. We can't see it, we can't provide data about it. Even before the war, people considered psychological problems in Yemen as taboo, and just say 'these are crazy people' and do not consider it as a treatable disease… [There is] suffering, you don't see what's inside of people. When I talk to you, my heart is really tearing because it's beyond expression."[121]

Estimates by the World Health Organization reveal that nearly one in five people living in a conflict zone have some form of mental health disorder.[122] A report by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies underscored the extent of war's impact on Yemenis, explaining that "ongoing conflict is continually increasing the breadth and depth of exposure to trauma."[123] Yet despite the urgent need for mental health and psychosocial services, such interventions are vastly underfunded. Assessments have found that there has been a shortage of donor support for comprehensive mental health and psychosocial services.[124] High rates of stigma, a limited mental health workforce, and a shortage of donor funding for comprehensive services have contributed to the failure to fully address the psychological toll of war.[125] With only 40 psychiatrists left to serve a population of 27 million,[126] investments in psychosocial support are seen as crucial to the long-term development and security of Yemen.[127]

These psychological impacts are also negatively affecting people's social connections. One key informant described the toll: "The loss of loved ones due to the war also had a similar impact. People paid a high price for the war such as the loss of loved ones. This has also caused them psychological problems that affected their relationships with others."[128] For some participants, the trauma stemming from their experiences in the conflict left them "in a state of depression"[129] which led to their self-isolation.[130] In turn, individuals in Taiz who are experiencing a wide array of economic and conflict-related shocks are also contending with the trauma related to such experiences. Isolated from their social networks, they are losing an important source of emotional support and coping during the protracted conflict.

121 Key informant interview with male member of diaspora, November 20, 2020.
122 Boseley (2019).
123 Al-Ammar et al. (2017).
124 International Medical Corps (2019).
125 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
127 Given the social stigma surrounding mental health challenges in Yemen, psychosocial support often takes the form of collective social engagements, such as women and children-friendly safe spaces. In addition to these forms of support, livelihood support that focuses on increasing self-reliance has also been suggested as being crucial to improving psychosocial well-being. See al-Hamdani (2020); Ridley, Rao, Schilbach, & Patel (2020); Hussam, Kelley, Lane, & Zahra (2021).
128 Key informant interview with male activist, January 30, 2021.
129 Interview with a male researcher, August 20, 2020.
130 In-depth interviews with female social worker, July 28, 2020, female college student, October 21, 2020; Key informant interviews with male community committee member, January 31, 2021.

TYPES OF SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Households in Taiz rely on various types of social connections for support.[131] Broadly, participants described five distinct, yet occasionally overlapping, categories of social connections in Taiz: kinship, place of origin, place of residence, political affiliation, and casual acquaintances.[132] This section describes these bases of social connectedness, with reference to the particular opportunities and support that they may facilitate, as well as the ways in which they have changed over the course of the humanitarian crisis.

Kinship

Kinship[133] is the most important source of social connectedness for households in Yemen. In Taiz, the two most significant features of kinship include ancestry or familial bonds, and to a lesser but still important degree, tribal affiliation. Relationships based on kinship are characterized by a high degree of reciprocity, or the expectation or normative obligation to provide various forms of informal support.

Family Ties

Kinship ties include connections between immediate relatives as well as extended kin with traceable shared lineage. Families have mobilized to provide social support in the face of weakened local institutions, particularly in the context of the ongoing conflict.[134] Traditionally, Yemenis have relied on familial social connections to pool resources during periods of scarcity,[135] with 72% of respondents surveyed in one study in Taiz reporting that family was their biggest source of support.[136] Participants interviewed for this study similarly described their immediate and extended relatives as the strongest of their social connections, and explained that they were the most reliable sources of material support during the war.

Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

131 No consistent pattern emerged from the interviews about if and how households rely on different types of connections to mobilize various types of resources. Whom households turn to in times of need appear to be dictated by one's capacity rather than one's relationship.

132 While these categories emerged most prominently over the course of the study it is important to note that this section is not intended to exhaustively discuss all of the bases of social connectedness in Taiz. For discussions on the complexity and history of additional categories of social connectedness in Yemen, please refer to: Hashem (1996); Carter (2017); Myntti (1993); Carapico (1996); Adra (2006); Schmitz (2011); Al-Dawsari (2012).

133 In interviews, "kinship" was broadly interpreted. It may not necessarily refer to descendants of a common ancestor in all cases . Participants referred to terms ranging from "family," "relative," to "clan" or "house." Kinship is the clearest at the smallest level—the immediate family or household, but at higher levels of aggregation, it becomes blurred with other commonalities—such as place of origin, sharing a common house name/surname even if there are no known relatives.

134 Carter (2017).

135 Ghanem (2019).

136 Semmache, Mason, & Skallman (2020).

The reliability of kinship-based support stems in part from cultural and religious traditions that emphasize providing support to one's family before all others. Kinship-based support is grounded in reciprocity as one participant explained, "People cannot just abandon their family, because they might need them in times of crisis or sickness."[137] Others noted that family members helped to ensure food security, with resources shared amongst relatives, both in times of plenty and need. Moreover, many participants explained that they relied on remittances from family members living abroad, particularly those working in GCC countries. In some instances, these expatriate relatives may be responsible for supporting multiple households or they may even be a source of support for wider, community-initiated development projects or funds.

The nature of kinship connections vary in some instances between men and women, particularly as gender roles have shifted, with more women working or taking on the role of primary breadwinner (*Effects of Crisis on Women and Social Networks* callout box).[138] For women, family may not always be a reliable source of help—particularly when advice or psychosocial support is required. Numerous participants noted that women were more likely to seek and find emotional support in their *friendships* rather than from kin. As one participant noted, "When women turn to their friends, they receive the help they need—even if their friends are similarly not in a good situation."[139]

Notably, family ties become especially critical in the event of displacement from urban contexts. While some participants noted that internally displaced persons (IDPs) have been welcomed and assisted in places where they had no pre-existing connections, more often they explained that IDPs from urban areas tend to relocate to their villages of origin where they are likely to have support from pre-existing familial ties. This highlights an important area of overlap between connections based on kinship and those based on place of origin, a second category of social connections discussed in more detail below.

Tribe

Participants described tribe as another salient aspect of kinship in Taiz, even though the region is often described in the literature as less "tribal" than other parts of the country, particularly the North.[140] The concept of tribal affiliation in Yemen is highly complex and nebulous in that it often overlaps with connections based on family, geography, and increasingly political affiliation.[141] Tribal affiliation may imply common ancestry, but in most cases, it simply implies commonality of territory, defense, custom, and tradition. According to ACAPS, in Yemen, a tribe consists of "a group of adult men sharing a common territory," with tribal identity "defined territorially and contractually…[wherein] mutually supportive tribesmen usually inhabit a shared territory and do not necessarily recognise a common ancestor."[142] Traditionally, tribes have played a role in conflict and dispute resolution, preservation of social order, and the provision of social safety nets, and are grounded in "consensus building and maintaining relationships."[143] Tribe can also

> *To our mind, reciprocity is based on our tribal origins. Everyone treats everyone in their tribe with kindness. This extends to providing services to people, regardless of whether they provided me with a service or not.*
>
> — Unemployed female, Taiz

137 Key informant interview with female college student, February 18, 2021.
138 Gressmann (2016).
139 Quote In-depth interview with female social worker, July 28, 2020; In-depth interviews with female NGO worker, July 27, 2020, male IDP, September 1, 2020.
140 Carter (2017).
141 See Schmitz (2011); Al-Dawsari (2012).
142 Yemen Analysis Hub. (2020), p. 6; It should be noted that the ACAPS report is particularly speaking to the northern highlands of Yemen—the structure of tribal linkages varies by location.
143 Al-Dawsari (2012), p. 9.

be an important determinant of one's access to reciprocal informal support in the context of hardship. As one participant explained, "If someone provides me with a service, I provide them with a service back. To our mind, reciprocity is based on our tribal origins. Everyone treats everyone in their tribe with kindness. This extends to providing services to people, regardless of whether they provided me with a service or not."[144] Social connections within tribes can at times prevent a household's further financial deterioration and act as an informal social safety net.

Moreover, during the conflict, tribal connections have offered a form of credibility and assurance in a context where "people are afraid of the consequences of helping someone...people are very careful about who they help."[145] Participants noted that political alliances and affiliations within tribes remain consistent among members, with an understanding of which conflict actors they are aligned with. Indeed, in some instances "if you don't have [tribal] support and you get in trouble, people will not come to help you."[146] This understanding of fellow tribesmen's political affiliations prevents individuals from lending support to those who may be aligned with an opposing political actor and from having it perceived as broader support for a particular political affiliation. Further, for populations like the Muhamasheen, whose lineage is unclear, the lack of tribal support or affiliation may leave them unmoored from critical networks of support.

Place of Origin

Place of origin is a salient factor informing social connectedness in Yemen. In this study, place of origin refers to the village, city, or governorate that an individual is tied to through residence or extensive familial connections. Yemeni scholars and experts highlighted that nearly everyone in Yemen knows where they are from—both genealogically and geographically. Connections based on place of origin remain strong even if people move away from those areas. People from a particular village may resettle in proximity to one another in urban areas. In times of uncertainty or hardship—and particularly in the context of the war—many report having left urban centers to return to their rural areas of origin, seeking safety and assistance that is harder to access in cities. Participants described returning to their families' historical or ancestral villages, despite at times being several generations removed from these rural communities. Some emphasized being "welcomed with open arms" and, for those who had not visited family for years, their return strengthened kinship ties and offered the opportunity to rebuild social connections with extended family.[147]

Nonetheless, place of origin may also be a source of division. This is especially true in instances of displacement. Some displaced participants, for example, noted that they carefully avoided fleeing to areas that were controlled by a different faction than the one controlling their place of origin. In other instances, displaced participants reported being subjects of mistrust in their host community based on their place of origin, even being viewed as spies or informants for the other side. One young activist in Taiz described the dire conditions of a group of 26 families displaced from Ibb to Taiz: "People thought of them as spies. They had to live near the frontlines, not far from where the shells fell."[148] The protracted nature of the conflict and the accompanying political divisions have strengthened suspicions of geographic outsiders based on their perceived political affiliations and loyalties.

Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

144 In-depth interview with unemployed female, August 19, 2020.
145 Key informant interview with female NGO worker, November 18, 2020.
146 Ibid.
147 Key informant interview with male activist, January 27, 2021.
148 Key informant interview with female youth activist, January 20, 2021.

Place of Residence

While in rural areas social connectedness is largely based on kinship and place of origin, there are similarly strong relationships based on one's neighborhood or place of residence in urban areas. These bonds appear to be based more on day-to-day interactions and exchanges than those characterized by kinship. Given the hardships of war, relationships with one's neighbors have become increasingly important to people who have decided to remain in urban areas. Participants frequently described willingly sharing assistance with neighbors in need. This stems in part from Islamic religious obligations that require adherents to ensure that their nearby neighbors are fed, but may also be due to the diffused nature of social connections in urban areas where extended family ties and tribal connections are significantly weaker. Neighborhood level initiatives also serve as a lifeline for vulnerable households during the conflict. For example, one key informant in Taiz described the phenomenon of "charity kitchens" that began in 2018, which provided lunchtime meals to poor and vulnerable households.[149]

In both urban and rural settings, local leaders such as *sheikhs* and *aqils*[150] are important facilitators and sources of social connections. They can act as arbitrators for small disputes between households and be a source of advice and guidance. One key informant described the saliency of neighborhoods for social connections in urban areas, noting that "the neighborhood is the clear form of organization…organized around the neighborhood elder or leader."[151] Indeed, despite the socio-demographic and political diversity found within these places of residence, the neighborhood ultimately serves as a critical basis of connection between households whose historical or ancestral areas of origin may be vastly different.

Political Affiliation

Since the onset of the current war in 2014, political divisions have significantly reshaped social relations, introducing new divisions, sometimes even at the level of the nuclear family, with participants describing rifts with their own siblings or between parents and children over political allegiances. As one participant explained, "After the war [began], everyone started siding with their own political party…creating regional and political agitations."[152] This is particularly the case in urban areas where other bonds of kinship and tribal connections may be weaker, and especially in Taiz, because it has been so badly affected by the conflict. There are other divides that may reflect political parties, but have become highly polarized in the context of the war including sectarian divisions and alliances by regions of origin.

On the other hand, while political affiliation has become a source of significant division in Taiz, social solidarity and the exchange of support *within* parties have increased over the

> *If you are affiliated with one of the dominant political parties in Taiz, you are more likely to get a job, a food basket, and other support. But if you are not affiliated with one of them, you will not get anything.*
>
> — Male civil society worker, Taiz

149 Key informant interview with male scholar, November 30, 2020.
150 Both sheikhs and aqils came up frequently in interviews as men who serve as key local leaders. While sheikhs can be religious figures, "sheikh" is also an honorific bestowed on men who have completed the Hajj pilgrimage and are often an unofficial authority figure in their village, town, or neighborhood. Aqil al-haras (or simply "aqils") are unofficial neighborhood leaders to whom people can look to for information, financial and emotional support, and guidance. Over the course of the crisis, in some areas, aqils have begun to play a more formal role in service delivery, particularly in the sale and distribution of cooking gas. This has largely occurred as a result of the breakdown of formal delivery service by the state and, in some areas, has helped to solidify the control of armed actors over local neighborhoods.
151 Key informant interview with male researcher, September 10, 2020.
152 Key informant interview with male university professor, February 2, 2021.

course of the crisis in Yemen. Indeed, political affiliation is often an important determinant of access to resources, sometimes including humanitarian assistance. Political affiliation has also become increasingly important in determining access to livelihood opportunities, as individuals who share social connections based on shared political beliefs often prioritize one another for job opportunities. As one participant explained, "If you are affiliated with one of the dominant political parties in Taiz, you are more likely to get a job, a food basket, and other support. But if you are not affiliated with one of them, you will not get anything."[153]

During the war, participants explained that it has become increasingly common to join political parties with the explicit intention of benefiting from the support that socially connected party members share with one another. In many cases, joining a political party may result in the loss of other social connections, sometimes even with immediate family members and kin, who may be affiliated with other opposition parties. That some Taizis are willing to sacrifice existing connections in order to join particular parties demonstrates the extent to which political affiliation has become an important basis of social connectedness during the crisis in Yemen.

Casual Acquaintances

Another category of social connectedness, which is less well-defined than previous categories, but often referenced by participants is that of casual acquaintances or "ties of fortune." These ties are defined as "fortuitous relationships dictated by circumstance and mostly made with total strangers…Sometimes these relationships morph into intimate friendships but mostly they are relationships that last for a period while both people live in proximity to each other."[154] In Taiz, these acquaintances may be a co-worker or schoolmate, or a trader that the individual usually relies on for purchases. These ties may be fleeting in nature, but are nevertheless important—particularly at times of displacement or when cut off from other, more long-lasting relationships.[155] During the protracted conflict, however, these casual relationships and people's ability to rely on them for support are deteriorating as people contend with loss of livelihoods and resource depletion. These casual acquaintances also appear to be a more significant category of social connectedness in urban areas and in displacement, relative to long-settled rural areas where other kinds of connections are more important.

Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

153 In-depth interview with male civil society worker, September 9, 2020.
154 Fontana (2020), p. 26.
155 In sociology literature, such relationships may be described as "weak ties" (Granovetter 1973). Whereas ties of family, kinship or lineage are considered "strong ties," "weak ties are more likely to simply be acquaintances, people with whom one interacts in the marketplace, but who do not share a common lineage, place or origin or other "strong tie." In some cases, these can become as important as "strong ties"—the "strong" or "weak" descriptor here having to do more with the longevity or historical depth of the tie, rather than with its "strength" in the current context.

CROSS-CUTTING FACTORS

Various cross-cutting factors influence households' abilities to access particular social networks. These factors include age, gender, social class, and livelihood. For example, one study found that older women play an especially important role in reciprocity practices, fulfilling obligations around reciprocal visitations that in some parts of Yemen are an important form of social capital that provides tangible and intangible benefits.[156] Indeed, in Taiz, women play a key role in building and sustaining their households' social networks, and accessing informal support from their connections. Women had greater access to or knowledge of other households' conditions, allowing them to mobilize resources through their networks to those in need.[157] However, over the course of the conflict, participants noted that practices surrounding weddings and births in particular—especially the giving and receiving of cash gifts—had declined, disrupting key opportunities for women to maintain and expand their social networks. For Yemeni youth, while their age often leaves them excluded from social networks facilitated by older Yemeni men that provide job opportunities, they also rely on social connections with other youth when migrating to urban areas in search of employment opportunities.[158] Finally, social class divisions are in some instances amplified. One participant described class divisions becoming particularly heightened in IDP camps, with those of wealthier socioeconomic backgrounds refusing to socialize or interact with social groups on lower rungs such as the Muhamasheen.[159]

MARGINALIZED GROUPS AND THE BASES OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Studies from diverse contexts demonstrate that social connectedness is inherently linked to social hierarchy and power dynamics.[160] An analysis of social connectedness must account for bases of inclusion within social networks, as discussed, as well as the bases of marginalization and social exclusion. In Yemen, the most well-known marginalized group are the Muhamasheen (which translates to "marginalized" in Arabic). There are different accounts for why the Muhamasheen are socially marginalized: some contend that it is a matter of race, and that the Muhamasheen are descendants of slaves from East Africa.[161] Others maintain that their marginalization is the result of being outside the tribal system and "having no clear origins."[162] Indeed, as Colburn et al. describe, "Membership in this ethnic minority is hereditary, associated with certain types of occupations, and in traditional Yemeni social structures its members are considered 'weak' and lacking origins," with their stigmatization akin to a caste-like social structure.[163] Recently armed groups have begun recruiting Muhamasheen fighters into militias—something that would have been forbidden in the past because the Muhamasheen were not permitted to own or carry firearms—and rationalizing doing so on the basis of being inclusive.[164] However, in the case of the Muhamasheen,

156 Colburn (2021).
157 Some evidence suggests gender differences when it comes to the allocation of resources, particularly cash, within Yemeni households. A study examining community perceptions of cash programming found that male heads of households were more likely to spend it on repayment of debts, special meals, and/or qat, a mildly narcotic leaf that is popular in Yemen. Spending by female-headed households, on the other hand, was better informed by household needs, with cash transfers put towards food, medication, school fees, etc. However, a randomized comparison of in-kind food aid versus cash transfers found no differences in non-food consumption between modality types and did not find higher expenditure on qat (Bagash, Pereznieto, & Dubai, 2012; Schwab, 2020).
158 Assaad, Barsoum, Cupito, & Egel (2009); Marc, Willman, Aslam, Rebosio, & Balasuriya (2013).
159 Key informant interview with male journalist, February 26, 2021.
160 Kim et al. (2020); Maxwell et al. (2016).
161 For more discussion on the sources and origins of the Muhamasheen's marginalization see **Adra (2006); Al-Warrraq (2019)**; **Hashem (1996)**; **Colburn, Saleh, Al-Harbi, & Saleem (2021)**.
162 Key informant interviews with male scholar, July 24, 2020, female scholar, December 1, 2020, male youth activist, January 27, 2021, female NGO worker, February 7, 2021.
163 Colburn, Saleh, Al-Harbi, & Saleem (2021), p. 9.
164 Key informant interview with male scholar, September 28, 2020.

their integration in armed groups may well be less about "inclusion" and more "a means of coercion."[165] Indeed, Muhamasheen reported that these attempts to integrate them via recruitment have occurred while they continued to be denied access to education, employment, and healthcare.[166]

Muhamasheen participants explained that pervasive social exclusion prevents them from strengthening or expanding their social networks. One Taizi key informant similarly explained the limits to the Muhamasheen's networks, stating, "Their social connections are limited within themselves. For example, people do not marry those who are Muhamasheen…The same thing applies to social connections. People do not live near them or befriend them…Society takes the Muhamasheen as a group that should live on their own."[167] Participants explained that this exclusion even extends to the targeting of humanitarian assistance by local actors and that "minorities such as the Muhammasheen are not treated fairly when it comes to receiving aid."[168] Their exclusion from mainstream society has also limited their access to key public services, including national identifications and other forms of documentation, in part because access to public services often requires access to patronage networks.[169] This de facto prejudice has created additional obstacles to their access to formal social protection systems, often leaving them as one of the last populations to receive external assistance.[170]

Other dominant forms of exclusion have arisen over the course of the conflict, particularly on the bases of political affiliation, regionalism, and divisions between North and South Yemen. To some degree, other group-based forms of exclusion have strengthened as well, including the exclusion of IDPs (depending on the locations to which they are displaced), as well as returnees—especially Yemenis who had migrated to the Gulf states to work but who had to return home unexpectedly and were unable to repatriate much wealth. Other research has described the source of these returnees' exclusion as stemming from the lack of social networks and representation that would have otherwise allowed for them to be more fully integrated into society.[171]

Ultimately, the degree to which households and individuals are socially connected varies, and is mediated by a number of factors including age, gender, social class, and livelihood.[172] In Taiz, households' social connections, the extent of their social networks, and the degree to which they can mobilize key resources through their networks are crucial to their ability to cope and survive in the face of multiple shocks and stresses. However, factors concerning inclusion, exclusion, and marginalization are dynamic and highly fluid—particularly in protracted crises contexts. Studies from a variety of contexts,[173] including analyses presented in this report, showcase that conflict only compounds these factors further.

> *[The Muhamasheen's] social connections are limited within themselves. For example, people do not marry those who are Muhamasheen… The same thing applies to social connections. People do not live near them or befriend them…*
>
> — Female NGO worker, Taiz

165 Key informant interview with male scholar, November 11, 2020.
166 Colburn, Saleh, Al-Harbi, & Saleem (2021).
167 In-depth interview with female NGO worker, July 27, 2020.
168 Key informant interview with male activist, January 28, 2021.
169 Nimkar (2021).
170 Nimkar (2021); Al-Sabahi & De Santis (2016).
171 Hashem (1996).
172 In South Sudan, socio-economic characteristics including age, gender of household head, livelihood, and wealth determine the relationships that households are able to form, and the types of support they can share with and receive from one another See: Kim et al. (2020).
173 For example, Maxwell et al. (2016) found that people relied on their social connections and identity as well as links with local authorities (e.g. clan militia) to gain access to and control over aid. At times, these well-connected groups captured aid through the use of human famine victims to attract external assistance for their own or their social networks' benefit.

Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

How are conflict and COVID-19 affecting social connections in Taiz?

KEY FINDINGS

- 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.[174]
- 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,[175] which, in combination with job losses and limited daily wage opportunities, put households and their resources under further strain.

174 See footnote 9.
175 Notably, remittances have since rebounded in parts of Yemen and the Middle East more generally. See: Cash Consortium of Yemen (2021); World Bank. (2021).

Seven years into the conflict, informal social protection networks are showing signs of exhaustion in Taiz. The war, accompanying economic disruptions, a cascade of shocks and stresses, and an unprecedented scale of humanitarian need have all strained the extent to which Taizi households are able to leverage material support through their social connections. This section describes the effects of conflict, resource depletion, and the COVID-19 pandemic on social connectedness and households' ability to mobilize resources through their networks.

EFFECTS OF PROTRACTED CRISIS ON INFORMAL SOCIAL PROTECTION NETWORKS

At the outset of the war, participants noted that material support was shared liberally within social networks, particularly in the absence of formal assistance that had yet to arrive in Yemen on a large scale. Increased resource sharing during the early period of the war was accompanied by a perceived *increase* in social solidarity among participants. Those who were better off, including wealthy merchants and Taizi expatriates, emerged as especially important sources of informal material support during this early period of the conflict. New informal community initiatives were organized via social media by Taizi youth to channel funds to households in need. As one participant recalled, "The starting period of the war brought great social solidarity. People's true colors were revealed. Many people [during that period] lost their jobs and had their salaries cut off, and yet some other people who were doing well financially helped them. That was the case at the beginning of the war."[176]

However, the sharing of material resources between social connections has waned as the war has dragged on with no signs of abating, and people have grown increasingly uncertain about the future. As a result, many Taizi households have sought to reserve what limited resources they can obtain for their own household's consumption. As one participant explained, "The prolonging of the war forced people to save what they had because the future became more uncertain and the end of the war is still unknown."[177] This period also seems to have corresponded with the erasure of wealth for many of the households who were considered upper class, and among the most prominent providers of informal support at the outset of the war.[178]

Notably, while the shrinking of Taiz's upper and middle classes has meant that fewer resources are available for sharing within social networks, participants sometimes noted that this process also ushered in a greater sense of equality and social solidarity. As one participant explained, "War has made people equal, and there is no longer a difference between the rich and the poor. Now the capitalist class has shrunk in Yemen. Many wealthy people have lost their money, companies, and assets, and now they marry their daughters to people from lower classes. The war reminded people of the afterlife and made them see that there's no difference between people, that they are all equal in the eyes of God."[179] These equalizing effects of war also made it difficult for participants to seek material support through their connections. As another participant described, "I do not ask anything even

> *I do not ask anything even from my own brothers…Everyone is barely able to take care of their own needs. Even if you ask for help from relatives, they can only give you a small amount of money that does not cover your needs. Therefore, it is better if you rely on yourself and God will assist you.*
>
> — Female government employee, Taiz

176 Key informant interview with male journalist, February 26, 2021.
177 In-depth interview with unemployed male, October 20, 2020.
178 Evidence suggests that while the majority of Yemen's population has lost significant wealth over the course of the war, a small faction of elites affiliated with all sides of the conflict have nonetheless benefitted from what the UN Panel of Expert on Yemen describe as "widespread economic profiteering perpetrated by networks of commanders, businessmen, politicians and local leaders" (United Nations, 2021b, p. 6).
179 In-depth interview with female social worker, July 28, 2020.

from my own brothers…Everyone is barely able to take care of their own needs. Even if you ask for help from relatives, they can only give you a small amount of money that does not cover your needs. Therefore, it is better if you rely on yourself and God will assist you."[180]

The protracted war and accompanying economic disruptions[181] have strained households' social connections and undermined the reliability of their support networks. Taizi households have become severely limited in their capacity to share *material* resources with their social connections and have thus become increasingly dependent on formal assistance. In some cases, such limited capacity to share is fueling social tensions and placing an unsustainable burden on households' support networks.

Displaced households, for example, may be particularly dependent on social connections in their host community for support, yet unable to reciprocate due to their circumstances. Over time, this may lead to tensions between hosts and the displaced, which in some cases has driven families to return to their communities of origin at great risk.[182] A participant who hosted his displaced family members discussed the burden of being unable to provide material support: "[My aunt and her family] stayed for a little longer than a year. I didn't want them to let them know that I lacked anything, so I would avoid them. I would go out and try to fight for my living. I wouldn't spend much time at home, so they wouldn't have to ask me for anything, and I wouldn't have to say no."[183] A member of the diaspora also discussed the enduring demand for their support, and perceived obligation to support multiple social connections in Taiz: "I, even as a student, have to look after my whole family—my uncles, cousins. It's my responsibility to support them. This is what Yemenis in the US are doing. Imagine, a Yemeni who works in a store in Brooklyn is supporting seven families…If his brothers have a big family—nieces, nephews, and their families—he'll support up to 50-60 people. He sees it as his responsibility to support them."[184]

As access to material resources is increasingly constrained in Taiz and abroad, participants described a corresponding increase in the importance of intangible support shared within social networks. This includes information and advice about livelihood opportunities, as well as sharing labor with families facing particular hardships, including displacement. As one participant explained, "There are new forms of solidarity in the community that resulted from the war. For example, people tried to help each other with construction. Because the people displaced to the village did not have jobs, whenever someone needed to construct anything, we would go as youth and help them. It was not for any payment. It was voluntary. This kind of support was mostly in the form of physical help, rather than financial support."[185] The exchange of such intangible forms of support also helped participants to strengthen and maintain their social networks as their ability to mobilize material support through their networks waned.

EFFECTS OF THE PROTRACTED CONFLICT ON WOMEN AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

Data—both collected as part of this study and reported elsewhere—underscore that gender dynamics are very much in flux in Yemen. However, it is without question that Yemeni women continue to "play a significant role in promoting resilience through connecting to neighbors and social networks that contribute to social capital."[186] Yemeni women and their social networks have been critical in strengthening the capacity of their households to withstand numerous and concurrent shocks.

180 In-depth interview with female government employee, September 2, 2020.
181 Robinson (2021).
182 Al-Sakkaf (2019).
183 In-depth interview with male shopkeeper, August 22, 2020.
184 In-depth interview with a male member of Yemeni diaspora, October 8, 2020.
185 In-depth interview with male researcher, August 20, 2020.
186 Colburn (2021), p. 73.

The loss of male breadwinners and the resulting increase in female-headed households, combined with the devastating economic crisis, have pushed many Yemeni women into the workforce.[187] In particular, women have played an outsized role in the humanitarian response and in Yemeni civil society.[188] Greater acceptance of their role in the workforce has helped women expand their social networks, both in the breadth as well as composition of their connections. As women have taken up more jobs, participants report that social connections across genders have increased as well. Indeed, one young Taizi woman described this shift in norms, explaining that, "after the war, many youth initiatives started showing up and gendered mixing has become normal. Men and women being workers has become more normal, so society has become more accepting of these things."[189] Even in instances where they are not able to find employment outside of the home, women have taken up handicrafts and run small businesses from their homes, utilizing social media to connect with and sell to other women.[190] While these changes have occurred largely out of necessity, participants highlighted the positive impact they have had on women's status within their own families and broader communities, with working women reporting an increase in decision-making power within their homes.[191]

Yet, despite these developments, the rapid changes in gender roles and the shrinking number of job opportunities available to men—especially within the aid sector—have aggravated tensions within the home.[192] Some participants perceived and expressed resentment that women were now prioritized in the job market: "All work opportunities are now directed towards women; organizations and companies are looking for women to hire... Women have become more influential than before."[193] And while women's increased access to the workforce has expanded their social networks outside of the household, it has not reduced their workload within it.[194] For most women, their increased contributions have not come with a more equitable distribution of household labor.[195]

EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON INFORMAL SOCIAL PROTECTION NETWORKS

In Yemen, the COVID-19 pandemic was yet another shock in a context already mired by a multitude of economic and conflict-related shocks and stresses (*Impact of the Pandemic* callout box). The pandemic further strained households' social connections and their ability to rely on their networks to mobilize support. The early days of Yemen's COVID-19 response were marked by lockdowns, movement limitations, and restrictions on social gatherings. Yemen's pandemic response was inhibited by a lack of communication, a health system decimated by seven years of conflict, and pre-existing public health crises such as continued cholera outbreaks.[196]

187 Al-Ammar & Patchett (2019).
188 Colburn (2021).
189 In-depth interview with female NGO worker, July 27, 2020.
190 Al-Ammar, Patchett, & Shamsan (2019); Wiggins et al. (2021).
191 Gressmann (2016).
192 Colburn (2021).
193 In-depth interview with male researcher, September 9, 2020.
194 Gressman (2016).
195 Comparatively, for women from vulnerable populations such as the Muhamasheen, working outside of the home was commonplace and a necessity even prior to the conflict. Their precarious socioeconomic conditions and marginalization, as described throughout the report, were exacerbated by the dynamics of the conflict and the accompanying economic disruptions in Taiz.
196 Looi (2020).

IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON HOUSEHOLD LIVELIHOOD AND FOOD SECURITY IN TAIZ

For many Taizis, the COVID-19 pandemic poses a catastrophic threat to their livelihoods and food security. Early numbers and reporting from Yemen suggested that many more feared rising food insecurity and hunger than the health impacts of the virus itself.[197] Participants in Taiz, particularly those who engage in daily wage labor,[198] described conditions in which movement restrictions, decreased job opportunities, and the skyrocketing prices of basic goods all disrupted livelihood activities.[199] Ultimately many were forced to disregard precautionary measures in order to secure their immediate needs. As one participant explained, "People don't have [large] incomes and they are in a bad financial situation. They depend on daily wages. So they had the option to die of hunger if they stayed at home, or go out and risk their lives to COVID. Not many people could afford to stay at home."[200] A worsening economic crisis, rising food insecurity, and the decline in the availability of goods forced many to take the risky gamble of their health and safety in order to secure their household's most basic needs.

Participants described the ensuing communication challenges and disruptions to social practices. Many had to stop traditional visitation practices around Eid, weddings, and even funerals—a crucial form of support and solidarity during a moment of crisis. One social worker described how COVID-19 had strained social connections in her area: "When a person dies, the whole village gathers at the home to offer condolences. Those visitations help people know which people are closest to them, but COVID-19 has changed it. People have stopped being able to know who is close to them and who isn't."[201] Some noted that not engaging in such social practices was at times perceived as being disrespectful, even if they were abiding by public health measures.

In addition to restrictions on households' ability to engage in social functions that help build and strengthen social connections, the pandemic has also had a devastating effect on remittances.[202] In 2020, the flow of remittances into Yemen drastically shrank as a result of pandemic interventions by states that led to global economic disruptions, decreased oil prices, and a contracting labor market in the Gulf. One major remittance service provider, Alkuraimi Islamic Bank, reported a 70% drop in remittance

When a person dies, the whole village gathers at the home to offer condolences. Those visitations help people know which people are closest to them, but COVID-19 has changed it. People have stopped being able to know who is close to them and who isn't.

— Female social worker, Taiz

197 McCarthy (2020); NRC (2020).
198 In Taiz, a large segment of the population depend on daily wage opportunities to make ends meet.
199 In-depth interviews with male NGO worker, September 6, 2020, female college student, October 19, 2020.
200 In-depth interview with male researcher, August 20, 2020.
201 In-depth interview with female social worker, July 28, 2020.
202 Oxfam (2020).

transfers into Yemen in March 2020.[203] As described, cash remittances emerged in the study interviews as a key resource that Taizi households rely on to meet immediate needs. The drastic reduction in remittances was compounded by disruptions to local markets as well as pandemic-related job losses and the depletion of daily wage opportunities. As a result, some households were forced to take out loans to support family members working in the Gulf who could not work during the pandemic or to cover shortfalls stemming from the loss of remittances.[204] While remittances did eventually recover, the need to recoup and repay loans meant that household consumption remained depressed for several months, even after work resumed.[205] These secondary impacts of COVID-19 put households' resources, and in turn their ability to support their networks under further strain, particularly in the face of already reduced resources.[206]

Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

203 Elsabbagh, Kurdi & Wiebelt (2021).
204 ACAPS (2021).
205 Ibid.
206 These findings are echoed by a recent study which examined the linkages between COVID and conflict in Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Colombia: the pandemic and its economic consequences strained relations within tribal, ethnic, and religious groups. The uncertain economic outlook also undermined the norms of reciprocity and sowed opportunities for disagreement over social and economic challenges posed by the pandemic Mercy Corps (2021).

Ezra Millstein, Mercy Corps

How is external assistance affecting informal social protection networks?

KEY FINDINGS

- 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.

External assistance is providing life-saving support in Yemen, helping to alleviate suffering and prevent widespread famine conditions. However, with only 77% of the Yemen Appeal funded, and 20.7 million people in need of assistance, aid actors operating in Yemen are overstretched and under-resourced.[207] They are also grappling with the realities of delivering aid in an active conflict zone, where much of the area remains inaccessible, fraught with insecurity, and highly politicized. As aid actors contend with having to do more with less, it is increasingly important for the aid community to work with and through informal social protection networks—a key source of resilience for Taizis—and to identify opportunities to meaningfully partner with, or complement these networks.

In Yemen, external assistance not only helps households meet their immediate needs, but also plays an important role in buttressing their informal support networks. Aid, often in the form of food assistance, enables households to share resources with their social connections and fulfill the obligations that their membership in informal support networks may entail. In Taiz, aid sharing has also helped increase cooperation, empathy, and interconnectedness between households. Participants further emphasized the potential for aid to help reduce the strain on households and mitigate household- and community-level tensions. As one key informant described, external assistance helped people in his community become "psychologically stable," reassured by the knowledge that "they are receiving a food basket every month and do not need to resort to begging or other illegal means to earn a living."[208]

However, external assistance has also strained social networks and at times, inadvertently facilitated elite capture and households' exclusion from informal support networks. Participants discussed four reasons why aid actors are missing the opportunity to better integrate considerations of informal social protection 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.

This section describes these reasons in detail, and highlights participants' perceptions of external assistance and the ways in which they believe aid is both shaped and being shaped by social networks in Taiz. Where appropriate, implications for the aid community are highlighted below, and then discussed in further detail in the final section of the report.

LIMITED CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Participants, including key informants working in the aid sector, highlighted that there is a limited consideration of social networks in their operations. To date, discussions of social networks have been largely "rhetorical"[209] with little bearing on models of delivery and/or community engagement. In turn, there is a missed opportunity to "maximise the potential synergy between externally driven aid and community-led responses to humanitarian crises."[210] When aid actors do acknowledge informal support networks, participants noted that discussions are largely rooted in assumptions rather than analysis. This may lead to an unrealistically optimistic view of

> *The international community does not know about the social puzzle that we live in. Therefore, they have a picture that Yemenis are simple and care about each other. They think that people will voluntarily help each other and that they will not discriminate against each other.*
>
> — Female Humanitarian Worker, Taiz

207 As of October 2021; OCHA (2021).
208 In-depth interview with male lawyer, August 8, 2020.
209 Key informant interview with male NGO Country Director, December 8, 2020.
210 Corbett, Carstensen, & Di Vicenz (2021), p. 9.

social solidarity in the context. As one Yemeni aid worker described, "The international community does not know about the social puzzle that we live in. Therefore, they have a picture that Yemenis are simple and care about each other. They think that people will voluntarily help each other and that they will not discriminate against each other by doing things such as dropping the names of a household from a distribution list. International actors have this blind faith…"[211] Collectively, interviews point to a limited investment in thorough contextual analysis in Taiz that seeks to comprehend, account for, and integrate an understanding of social networks in interventions. For one scholar of humanitarian action, this was emblematic of the broader lack of "a concerted effort to engage the Yemeni community as equal partners in structuring the response."[212]

While understanding social connectedness is critical to aid actors' engagement in the ongoing conflict, it is important to acknowledge the challenges inherent to analyzing such networks and their dynamics in a context like Taiz. International and local aid actors are often forced to contend with significant resource constraints, operational challenges, and a highly politicized information system. There may also be risks inherent to aid actors directly inquiring about complex social identities and networks. Worse yet, if conducted hastily, a superficial accounting of informal support networks may overlook those who are excluded from them, further perpetuating local power dynamics. However, there are significant risks too in maintaining the status quo. There are concrete examples, highlighted in this study and others, in which the aid community's failure to account for and proactively consider informal support systems has undermined the very coping and survival strategies on which Taizi households rely. With informal support systems showing signs of exhaustion, overlooking these networks may result in the aid community missing out on opportunities to anticipate and proactively respond to the erosion of a critical local coping strategy.

NARROW AND OPAQUE SELECTION CRITERIA

Narrow and opaque approaches to targeting assistance that are based on externally defined individual and household-level characteristics do not account for and, at worst, risk undermining Taizi households' social support networks. The targeting of aid is often determined at the donor level and informed by guiding principles such as impartiality, neutrality, and independence. In turn, aid organizations rely on stringent "categorical" approaches to targeting assistance that entail the use of selection criteria based on certain observable characteristics perceived to be associated with vulnerability.[213] Yet these criteria fail to account for harder-to-measure, informal dimensions of vulnerability, including the strength of social connections and access to informal networks of support. They are also often at odds with community-level support norms and local understandings of need and fairness.[214]

Numerous participants in this study described increased tensions and reduced mutual support between host and IDP populations as a result of aid actors' use of categorical targeting on the basis of displacement status. Host participants often perceived IDPs as being unfairly favored for assistance and described their resulting exclusion from social support networks. One participant living in a rural village recalled an incident in which members of the host community blockaded a nearby road in order to halt the distribution of aid to IDPs "because it was unfair to select a specific category while all people suffer."[215] Similarly, a key informant explained that targeting only displaced families for external assistance had led to a decrease in informal support for IDPs, noting that "People's empathy towards displaced people has decreased because they think that organizations are more focused on displaced people...they think displaced people's situation is good and have started to exclude them."[216] For displaced families, potential exclusion from informal support networks leaves them more vulnerable, complicating their access to resources, critical sources of information, and even emotional support.

211 Key informant interview with female humanitarian worker, January 26, 2021.
212 Key informant interview with female scholar, August 20, 2020.
213 Cirillo, Györi, & Veras Soares (2017); Ghorpade & Ammar (2021).
214 Santschi, Gwora, & White (2018).
215 In-depth interview with male daily wage worker, August 19, 2020.
216 Key informant interview with female NGO worker, January 21, 2021.

Participants also noted that in a context of widespread need, opaque criteria for the selection of aid recipients contributed to tensions between households. As one student in Taiz explained, "I honestly do not know why some households were excluded, particularly because their financial situation is very similar to others. If one were to ask the person in charge of humanitarian assistance distribution, they would not get a clear answer. This has created tension between the [recipient] households and their community. In fact, the [excluded households] say things like, 'why is it only us who are excluded? How are we different from others?'"[217] Externally-defined selection criteria also magnified differences between recipient and non-recipient households that had otherwise been immaterial to community members. As a result, aid actors have inadvertently sowed divisions between households, encumbering recipient households' ability to access resources through informal support networks.

People's empathy towards displaced people has decreased because they think that organizations are more focused on displaced people...they think displaced people's situation is good and have started to exclude them.

— Female NGO Worker, Taiz

SOCIAL EXCLUSION THROUGH COMMUNITY COMMITTEES

In Yemen, aid agencies routinely rely on community committees to lead the selection of program participants and to coordinate the distribution of assistance (Figure 3). While these committees play an important role in ensuring community accountability and representing community perspectives during the implementation of aid programs, they may also inadvertently facilitate elite capture and exclusion of some groups. In this context, elite capture concerns "situations where elites shape [aid] processes according to their own priorities and/or appropriate [aid] resources for private gain."[218] As described earlier, social connectedness is as much about exclusion and marginalization as it is about inclusion and mutual support.

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217 In-depth interview with female college student, October 19, 2020.
218 World Bank Group (2008).

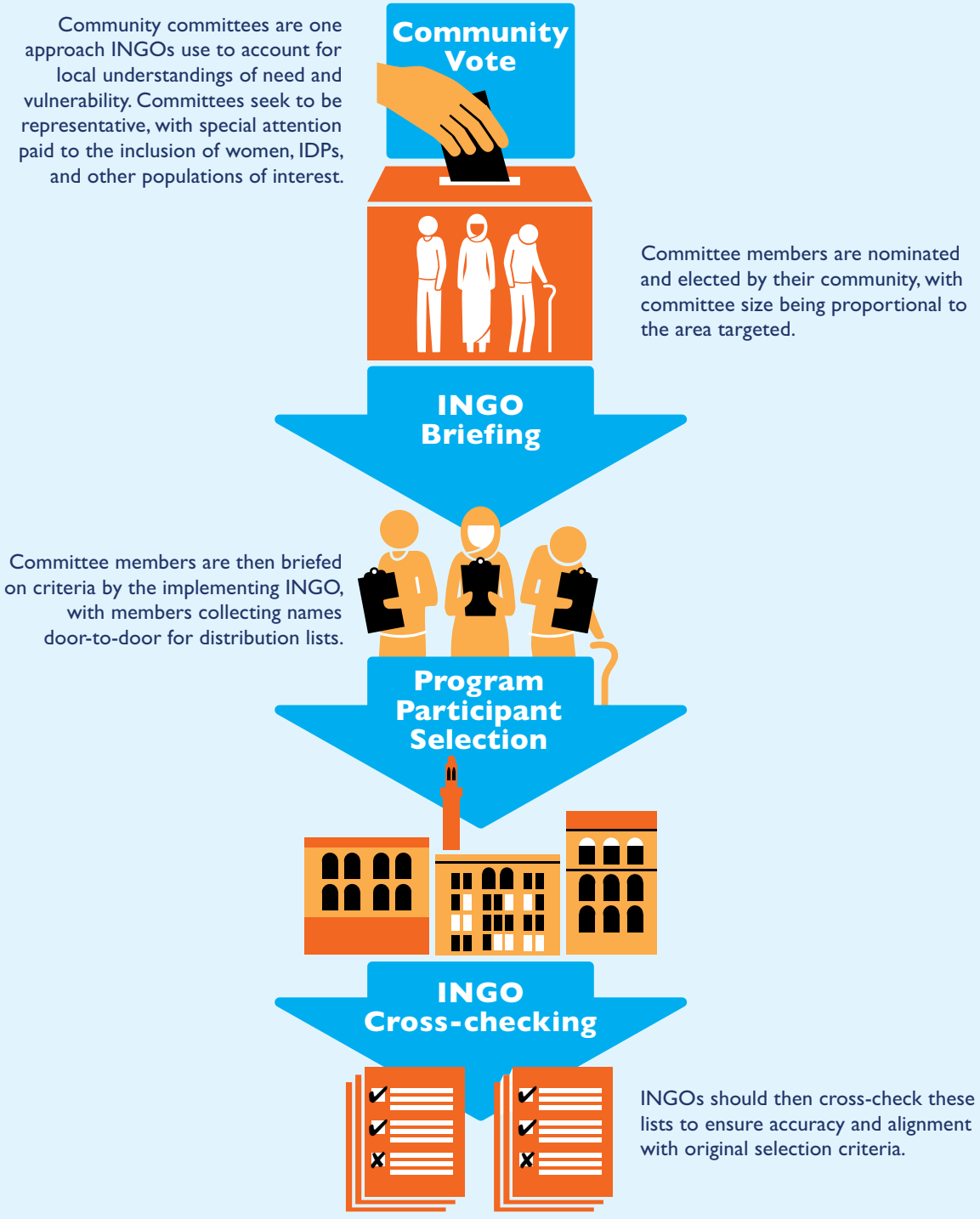

Figure 3: Community committee selection process

In Taiz, participants explained that committee members often find themselves wearing "two hats,"[219] navigating commitments to both international aid agencies and their local communities. On one hand, committees are held to their obligations to implementing agencies and their standards of accountability. On the other hand, committee members report facing pressures from local elites. Participants also frequently discussed the impact of partisan politics on the distribution of assistance,[220] noting that local authorities and community leaders such as *sheikhs* and *aqils* sometimes used assistance to consolidate support from their constituents and even distributed it among their political and kinship networks. One committee member in Taiz described circumstances "in which people would force community committee members to register their names under the threat of the gun."[221] These pressures sometimes led to the distribution of assistance on the basis of committee members' or local authorities' social networks, exacerbating exclusion during the targeting and selection process. Various committee members shared that they were regularly left on their own to address local conflicts and escalating tensions over assistance, with limited support from aid agencies.

> *If people know someone in the local government, things will be alright for them, but no one cares about those who have no one in the local government.*
>
> — Male Teacher, Taiz

Such elite capture and allocation of assistance on the basis of political and/or kinship networks further exacerbated existing patterns of social exclusion. One teacher in Taiz described the exclusionary nature of the aid response, remarking that "If people know someone in the local government, things will be alright for them, but no one cares about those who have no one in the local government."[222] This is especially true for vulnerable and marginalized populations like the Muhamasheen, who are often excluded from social networks that can be crucial to accessing support and assistance.[223] In turn, community committees—the very mechanism set in place by aid actors to ensure community accountability and to promote inclusion of local perspectives—were being instrumentalized by local authorities and elites to capture assistance and to reinforce existing social exclusion.

UNCLEAR PARAMETERS ON AID SHARING

Sharing assistance helped households to strengthen relationships with other households in their communities and form new connections, particularly with displaced families.[224] Nonetheless, interviews with Taizis revealed that communities are struggling to reconcile the inconsistent and, at times, conflicting messaging by aid actors and community committees regarding the sharing of assistance. While participants overwhelmingly described aid sharing as voluntary, some participants explained that community committees often encouraged—and occasionally strictly enforced—aid sharing. Under pressure to respond to resource scarcity in their communities, local leaders required households to share their allotment when insufficient amounts of assistance were available and only a limited number of recipients could be added to the formal distribution lists. On one hand, community committee members or local officials may be perceived as speaking directly on behalf of aid actors, creating the impression among households that failure to abide by aid sharing instructions threatens

219 Key informant interview with male NGO Country Director, December 8, 2020.
220 Nimkar (2021).
221 Key informant interview with female community committee member, January 31, 2021.
222 In-depth interview with male teacher, October 15, 2020.
223 Echoed by findings in El Rajji (2016), "The lack of documentation among Muhamasheen communities could also have an impact on their ability to benefit from aid distributions. In addition to the scarcities created by the countrywide and inland blockades, Muhamasheen have reported being sidelined on distribution lists because of discrimination, further reducing their access to the limited humanitarian assistance available" (p. 13).
224 In-depth interview with female college student, October 21, 2020.

the continuity of assistance.[225] On the other hand, participants noted that aid agencies sometimes discouraged aid sharing even in instances where it was voluntary or in contradiction to committee members' instructions. Households' lack of knowledge of and trust in feedback mechanisms limited their ability to clarify their understanding of aid sharing guidelines.[226]

The inconsistent messaging and restrictions on aid sharing are disrupting informal sharing practices and contributing to increased social tensions. The current emphasis on the prohibition of assistance sharing and contradictory guidance imposed by some aid actors is undermining households' social networks, a key source of coping in Taiz. Collectively, interviews with participants highlight opportunities for donors and agencies to permit voluntary post-distribution reallocation of assistance, and at a minimum, ensure that communication and feedback channels between INGOs, community committees and community members are consistent and trusted.[227]

Cassandra Nelson, Mercy Corps

225 While these perceptions cannot be independently verified, they highlight the ways in which contradictory and inconsistent instructions—perceived or actual—by aid actors and their partners can inadvertently work to erode social connections.

226 El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, Al Jeddawy, & Holloway (2020); United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs Yemen (2021).

227 In their examination of communication and community engagement approaches in Yemen, El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, Al Jeddawy, & Holloway (2020) found that the lack of local ownership (e.g. the engagement of local organizations and communities in shaping and informing assistance) and insufficient monitoring stymied efforts to improve effectiveness of communication between INGOs and local organizations and communities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Interviews with 149 participants and key informants showcase that households in Taiz are relying heavily on their social networks to cope and survive. The support systems described in the report existed well before aid actors' arrival in Yemen and long predated the current crisis. There is significant evidence that the extraordinary social solidarity of the Yemeni people is a key reason for why there has not been a further deterioration of humanitarian conditions during the protracted crisis. But there remains a limited understanding of the bases and dynamics of social connectedness in Yemen that is material to coping and survival in the ongoing conflict.

The following recommendations offer practical steps that donors, policymakers, and practitioners can take to better account for and bolster informal support networks. While these recommendations are based on research conducted in the Taiz governorate of Yemen, they are likely relevant to other contexts in the country and beyond.

1. **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.[228] They may also assist 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.[229] 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.

228 See footnote 11.
229 See footnote 12.

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. **Invest in psychosocial services in order to support household resilience and access to informal support.** Psychological trauma stemming from the humanitarian crisis has driven some Taizis to isolate themselves from their broader communities. This leaves them cut off from important sources of emotional support and coping during the protracted conflict. Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) interventions are therefore critical not only for addressing untreated trauma, but also as a means of bolstering social networks and households' ability to access informal support within their own communities. In Yemen, where mental illness is highly stigmatized, MHPSS interventions can take the form of collective community engagement projects such as support for neighborhood interest groups or traditional group gatherings that facilitate social connections between community members.[230]

    b. **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.[231] 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.

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. **Increase support for community committees.** Participants in Taiz underscored the lack of support for local actors, in particular community committees, who are tasked with leading recipient selection. Tight timelines, opaque and externally defined targeting criteria, and the inclusion of local actors only at the distribution phase of project cycles are inadvertently exacerbating existing patterns of social exclusion and undermining households' access to informal support networks. When engaging with community committees, aid actors must not place undue burden on local actors and must avoid inadvertently harming local support networks through such engagements. Support in the form of conflict resolution and community-focused mediation training, as well as more effective and entrusted communication practices between international NGOs, local NGOs, and community committees may increase members' capacities to address conflicts as they arise.

    b. **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.[232] Practices such as survivor- and community-

230 Livelihood based support is another entry point for MHPSS interventions. Given that economic insecurity and resource scarcity aggravates the psychological impacts of conflicts, livelihoods programming that seeks to support self-reliance can help to bolster psychosocial well-being.
231 See footnote 13.
232 Colburn (2021).

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.[233] 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.

c. **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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233 Corbett, Carstensen, & Di Vicenz (2021).

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The Resilience Evaluation, Analysis and Learning (REAL) Associate Award 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.

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