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"I COULD NOT SLEEP WHILE THEY WERE HUNGRY":¹

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

JEEYON KIM, ALEX HUMPHREY, MAHA ELSAMAHI, AWS KADASI, DANIEL MAXWELL

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¹ Interview with female aid distribution center supervisor, November 2020.

After six years of civil war, Yemenis are in the grip of the [world's worst humanitarian crisis](#). [Over 16 million people are estimated to be food insecure, with nearly five million people at risk for famine](#).² While external aid is saving lives in Yemen, it is not necessarily the main source by which Yemenis cope during the ongoing crisis. Indeed, the Yemen response remains [severely underfunded](#) and humanitarian actors are unable to meet many households' basic needs. So how are Yemenis coping? [Experts on food security in Yemen](#), research from other contexts, and Yemenis themselves point to an obvious, but often under-recognized source of support: Households are relying on their social connections and support networks for survival.



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The humanitarian community must ensure that formal assistance strengthens, and at the very least does not undermine, these critical sources of local and mutual support. By understanding and monitoring these networks, aid actors can better anticipate and proactively respond to worsening humanitarian conditions. As research on the [Somalia famine of 2011-2012](#) showed, the collapse of support networks may be sudden and signify the onset of deteriorating humanitarian conditions.

Support networks are also a critical but overlooked topic in global efforts to [localize humanitarian assistance](#). In 2016, the Grand Bargain emphasized the need to center local actors in the international humanitarian system, and debates over localization have recently intensified amidst growing calls to [decolonize the aid sector](#). But to date, localization has largely been framed in terms of [engagement between formal actors](#), particularly between international and national NGOs, and discussions have largely omitted considerations of the *informal* systems on which crisis-affected communities depend for support. In Yemen, [where a range of barriers restrict donors' and international organizations' ability to partner with formal local organizations](#), it is especially critical for humanitarian interventions to account for and bolster informal support networks.



Social connections refer to the sum of people's social linkages, including the social networks on which they can draw; the extent and strength of those networks and their ability to mobilize resources; the nature of obligation that such networks carry; and the reciprocity presumed in terms of collective risk and mutual support.³

² As [Maxwell et al. 2021](#) discuss in a recent op-ed in the *New Humanitarian*, acute food insecurity crises such as the one occurring in Yemen must not be portrayed as a dichotomy between famine and no famine. Indeed, even in the absence of the highly technical and politically contentious declaration, an unacceptable number of people are known to be dying from hunger and malnutrition-related causes. Humanitarians, donors, and governments should not await the invocation of the word “famine” before acting to prevent such loss of life and to ensure the well-being of the population. For a detailed discussion of the constraints and complexities facing famine analysis in Yemen, including the Integrated Phase Classification system, refer to: [Maxwell, Hailey, Baker, and Kim 2019](#).

³ [Humphrey, Krishnan, Krystalli \(2019\)](#), p. 9. Originally cited in [Maxwell, Majid, Adan, Abdirahaman, Kim. \(2016\)](#).

Mercy Corps, in collaboration with [Dr. Daniel Maxwell](#) from the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University, are undertaking research to help aid actors better understand how social connections are supporting coping and survival in Yemen.⁴ We focus our qualitative study on Taiz, Yemen's most populous governorate which has witnessed some of the [highest rates of violence and civilian fatality during the conflict](#). Through in-depth qualitative interviews with a wide range of local respondents, we are examining Taizis' experience during the crisis, in order to understand the role that social connectedness plays in their ability to cope. While the study is ongoing, interviews conducted thus far are with individuals living in Taiz as well as with scholars, journalists, and humanitarian actors in Yemen and abroad that highlight four urgent insights.

For many households in Taiz, their support networks are critical for their survival and coping...

Socially connected households share both material and intangible resources with one another in the face of a variety of shocks and stresses. For example, several respondents described turning to their social connections for food to avoid going hungry and for financial support to recover from conflict-related injuries. Others recounted providing shelter to distant contacts who were forcibly displaced by insecurity. Generally, individuals prioritize sharing resources ranging from cash and food to emotional counsel and livelihood information with their immediate family members, after which they frequently extend support to relatives, neighbors, and friends. This support is often rooted in social and religious norms that emphasize generosity and altruism. Even when households are struggling to meet their own needs, they often willingly share resources with others in their networks who are experiencing particular hardship.

During the conflict, new types of supportive relationships have become increasingly important. For example, host communities and internally displaced populations may establish new connections, and extend important support to one another. When describing her relationship with a displaced family in her community, one host respondent explained that "we became like a family. I could not sleep while they were hungry. I used to cook food and share it with them even though there was little cooking gas."⁵ Support from members of the diaspora has also become especially important during the war. While remittances pre-date the current crisis, respondents spoke about members of the diaspora supporting families in need – some of whom they may not know personally – through new informal community initiatives organized over Whatsapp and Facebook groups. [Although COVID-19 has reduced remittance flows](#), support from the diaspora nevertheless remains an important resource for Taizi households in their times of need.

... but these networks have come under significant pressure and have been weakened during the prolonged conflict.

[The war and accompanying economic disruptions](#) including unpaid salaries, blockaded ports resulting in skyrocketing food prices, significant depreciation of the currency, and fuel shortages have strained households' social connections and undermined the reliability of their support networks. Six years into the conflict, informal support networks appear to be nearing exhaustion, with socially marginalized groups such as [the Muhamasheen](#) – a sizable minority population whose caste-based exclusion has been linked to their historical status as descendants of migrants from East Africa – likely to experience this collapse first.

Households are limited in their capacity to share resources with their social connections and have thus become increasingly dependent on formal assistance. In some cases, limited sharing capacities can also fuel social

⁴ The study team is composed of members from Mercy Corps' research and learning team, Dr. Daniel Maxwell from Tufts University, and Yemen-based local researchers. Given COVID-related travel restrictions and security considerations, all study activities are being conducted remotely. Data collection began in July 2020 and is expected to continue until early 2021. The study protocol has been approved by Tufts Social, Behavioral, and Education Research Institutional Research Board and relevant local authorities. Interviews have focused on residents of Saber Al-Mawadem and Jabal Habashy, two districts that have been subjected to some of the most intense fighting in Taiz.

⁵ Interview with female aid distribution center supervisor, November 2020.

tensions. Displaced communities, for example, may be particularly dependent on social connections in the host community for support, yet unable to reciprocate due to resource limitations. Over time, this may lead to tensions between hosts and the displaced, which in some cases, have driven families to return to their communities of origin at great risk. Further, [the trauma stemming from people's experiences of the protracted crisis](#) may be negatively affecting social connections. One respondent described being held at a checkpoint, on his way to inspect his home that had been shelled. The incident left him “in a state of depression” and caused him to isolate himself, “stay[ing] away from [his] family for three years.”⁶

Humanitarian assistance is helping households maintain and build their social connections and support networks...



“Even when a food basket isn’t enough for a family, they share as much as they can anyways.”

—Interview with male government employee.

With the [World Food Programme](#) estimating that nearly \$860 million is required to avert famine in the first six months of 2021 alone, humanitarian assistance continues to provide critical - albeit insufficient - life saving support to households in Taiz. In addition to meeting (some of) their immediate needs, assistance allows households to maintain and build informal social connections. As one respondent recalled, “even when a

food basket isn’t enough for a family, they share as much as they can anyways.”⁷ Aid sharing is widespread and an important source of informal support for households during the protracted crisis in Taiz. However, increasingly insufficient humanitarian assistance, as well as restrictions placed by some formal aid actors on informal aid redistribution are challenging households’ ability to build and maintain their social connections. As a result, households are finding it more difficult to maintain and establish safety nets for future reciprocal support through aid sharing.

... however, disputed and opaque selection processes for aid recipients can also give rise to significant social tensions and undermine informal support systems.

Frustration about a lack of transparency around recipient targeting is common among Taizis. In some cases this frustration is accompanied by a sense that the neediest community members are omitted from aid recipient lists. Disputed or opaque recipient selection processes can also cause significant tension between those who receive aid and those who do not. Such tensions may disrupt social connections, sometimes even between family members, and inadvertently undermine local support systems. As one respondent recalled, “Food assistance has a positive aspect, as it alleviates the suffering of some poor families that have been targeted. But it has a negative aspect as it creates conflict between people because not all families in the area are registered.”⁸ If aid actors are unaware of these tensions, or do not account for their potential consequences for informal support systems, interventions may inadvertently weaken a critical source of survival and coping in Taiz.

⁶ Interview with a female NGO employee, September 2020.

⁷ Interview with male government employee, July 2020.

⁸ Interview with female government employee, August 2020

What Can the Aid Community Do?



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Informal support networks are a key source of household coping and survival in Taiz. However, in a context characterized by widespread need, deep social fractures, depleting resources, and limited livelihood opportunities, these informal support networks are showing signs of exhaustion. In light of predicted humanitarian funding shortfalls and unprecedented scale of need, aid actors in Yemen are learning to do much more, with less. Crucial to the success of this endeavor will be a more nuanced understanding of these informal local support systems.

By accounting for social networks and the support that socially connected households share with one another, aid actors can bolster, and at the very least not undermine, these critical sources of local and mutual support. Aid actors should take concrete steps to understand who is included and excluded from informal support networks in order to obtain holistic understandings of vulnerability. Moreover, when considering program impact and intervention logic, aid actors must account for local support systems and the importance of aid redistribution to households' ability to maintain, diversify, and strengthen their social connections for future reciprocal support.⁹ Equally, in accounting for the *limitations* of informal support systems, by paying attention to signs that support networks are waning, aid actors may be better able to anticipate and proactively respond to eroding local coping strategies. Working with social networks and local support systems is also an opportunity to center crisis-affected communities in the broader humanitarian system, particularly in the context of the localization agenda.

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⁹ Agencies are aware that informal aid redistribution occurs and do not intervene unless the sharing appears to be coercive in nature. However, by and large, agencies design and implement their programs without accounting for local support systems and the obligations households may face to share limited resources, including humanitarian assistance.

CONTACT

Jeeyon Kim
Senior Researcher | Research & Learning
jeeyonkim@mercycorps.org

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45 SW Ankeny Street
Portland, Oregon 97204
888.842.0842
mercycorps.org