The Impact of War on Civil Society Organizations in Marib
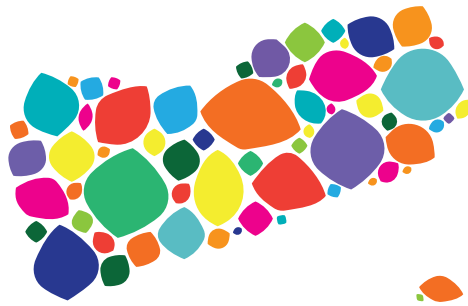
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YEMEN PEACE FORUM

SANA'A
CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES
مركز صنعاء للدراسات الاستراتيجية

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INTRODUCTION

Nestled in central Yemen and bordering several other major governorates, including the capital Sana'a, Marib has stood out as the main engine of the country's economy in recent decades.[1] However, despite its oil and gas wealth, the governorate remained impoverished due to a policy of marginalization adopted by the government of late president Ali Abdullah Saleh, depriving it of basic infrastructure, development and economic projects.[2] Among the repercussions of this policy was a lack of civil society organizations[3] (CSOs) to support residents in the absence of government services. Prior to 2011, local CSOs were few in number. Some were only semi-active, leaving just a few organizations operating, unsustainably, in the fields of development, charity and cooperation.

Following the outbreak of the February 2011 revolution that toppled Saleh, young Yemenis established a number of new local associations and organizations and set up branches of labor unions in Marib.[4] These efforts managed to revive civil society in the governorate through the implementation of basic activities and projects, some funded by international donor organizations, others self-financed by their founding members.[5]

The ongoing conflict in Yemen has led to the internal displacement of millions of people over the past six years, as Yemenis from across the country sought refuge in its relative stability. Marib governorate – the last stronghold of the internationally recognized government in the north – has absorbed most of them,[6] and faced significant challenges

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[1] Mohamed Rajeh, "Yemen: Saudi ambitions turn the lives of Al-Jawf residents into hell [AR]," The New Arab, March 5, 2021, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/اليمن-أطماع-سعودية-تحوّل-معيشة-سكان-الجوف-إلى-جحيم

[2] Walid Abdel-Waseh, "Marib..The new federal face of Yemen [AR]," The Daily News, August 17, 2017, https://akhbaralyom-ye.net/news_details.php?sid=98390

[3] The World Bank defines civil society organizations as "the wide array of non-governmental and not for profit organizations that have a presence in public life, express the interests and values of their members and others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations." World Bank, October 18, 2019, https://www.worldbank.org/en/events/2019/10/18/civil-society-policy-forum#1

[4] Interview with Abdel Hakim al-Qaysi, director general of the Office of Social Affairs and Labor, December 23, 2020.

[5] Maher al-Waeli, "Anti-Violence and Protection of Civilians from Conflict Project [AR]," Ma'rib Dam Foundation, September 15, 2015, https://mdf-ye.org/?p=778; "Ajeal Marib Development Association," Peace Insight, n.d., https://www.peaceinsight.org/es/organisations/ajeal-marib/?location=yemen&theme

[6] "Press briefing notes on Yemen," Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, February 19, 2021, https://www.ohchr.org/FR/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26764&LangID=F

as its population has grown exponentially. In 2020, the population of Marib governorate reached three million, according to official government estimates[7] - a significant jump from 360,000 in 2014.[8]

As of the end of February 2021, some 2,231,000 internally displaced people (IDPs)[9] have fled to the governorate and are currently spread out across 139 camps and scattered agglomerations across more than five districts. Marib city alone hosts nearly 82 percent of the IDPs in the governorate.[10]

The conflict, and the accompanying humanitarian situation, have had a considerable impact on the number, nature, function and type of local CSOs. New rights organizations have been established, Yemeni organizations have set up branches in Marib, and others have changed the focus of their work from development to relief. Some organizations have been forced to cease operations altogether.

The security and economic stability that the governorate has witnessed over the past few years have helped it embrace civil society workers and organizations. CSOs have found in Marib a fertile environment for activity – in contrast with areas under the control of the armed Houthi movement, whose authorities have imposed restrictions on funding and projects related to and carried out by civil society organizations.[11] Such restrictions have forced some Yemeni organizations to close down or relocate to areas under the control of the internationally recognized Yemeni government, including Marib. The Office of Social Affairs and Labor (OSAL) registered 138 local organizations, associations and institutions between 2011 and the end of 2019, according to statistics it issued in 2019.[12] In early 2020, former OSAL director general Hassan al-Shabwani said that the number of local CSOs active in Marib governorate has significantly increased in recent years, rising from 90 at the end of February 2020, to nearly 160 within a few months.[13]

[7] "Marib Urban Profile: a precarious model of peaceful co-existence under threat," UN Habitat, March 2021. https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2021/04/210408_marib_small.pdf

[8] Ba-Haj (Ishar Muhammad), "The Demographic Developments in Yemen between 1900 and 2000, and the Forecasts for 2024," University of Koufa; see also "Marib Urban Profile: a precarious model of peaceful co-existence under threat," UN Habitat, March 2021, https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2021/04/210408_marib_small.pdf

[9] Statement issued by the Executive Unit responsible for managing IDPs camps in Marib governorate on February 26, 2021.

[10] "Marib Urban Profile: a precarious model of peaceful co-existence under threat," UN Habitat, March 2021, https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2021/04/210408_marib_small.pdf

[11] Aziz el Yaakoubi and Lisa Barrington, "Yemen's Houthis and WFP dispute aid control as millions starve," Reuters, June 4, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/yemen-security-wfp-idINKCN1T51XR

[12] List of community-based organizations in Marib governorate as of 2019, issued by the Office of Social Affairs and Labor (Excel sheet).

[13] "Four new UN and international organizations are preparing to open offices in Marib [AR]," Al-Thawra.net,, February 28, 2020, https://althawra-news.net/news111701.html

Current OSAL director Abdel Hakim al-Qaysi said that before 2015, there were 35 organizations and associations operating in Marib, and their activities were limited.[14] Their work was largely charity-based in nature, and their projects were seasonal. They lacked infrastructure and qualified staff. However, between 2015 and 2020, there was an increase in the number of registered organizations and associations. A total of 120 new organizations were registered during that time, with 43 work permits issued to institutions that had either moved their headquarters to the governorate or opened another branch. The scope of CSO activities and projects has also widened and diversified, encompassing charity, relief, human rights and development.[15]

This policy brief addresses the rise of local CSOs in Marib governorate between 2015 and 2020, focusing on the impact of the war on their internal and external working environment and on their activities and performance, including the most important changes civil society has undergone. It presents the views of various key stakeholders in Marib's civil society and the challenges they faced during that period. It also makes recommendations to improve the work of CSOs and their access to cooperation and partnership opportunities with international organizations both in wartime and after.

[14]Interview with Abdel Hakim al-Qaysi, director general of the Office of Social Affairs and Labor, December 23, 2020.

[15]Interview with Abdel Hakim al-Qaysi, director general of the Office of Social Affairs and Labor, December 23, 2020.

METHODOLOGY

As part of a qualitative research methodology, this policy brief is based on interviews mainly conducted between October and January 2021 with an international non-governmental organization (NGO), the OSAL in Marib, seven local CSOs, including rights, development and relief organizations, and nine activists and volunteers working with CSOs. 49 residents of Marib city, from both the local and IDP communities, took part in an online survey set up for this paper.

The interviews with the CSOs focused on exploring their current role, while taking into account the changes they experienced in terms of internal policies after 2015. They also examined the positive and negative impact the conflict has had on the work, performance and objectives of these organizations, in addition to partnership and financing opportunities. The questions set for the international organization that partners with local organizations centered on its vision and its assessment of the work of local CSOs during the conflict. The interviews were intended to ascertain whether and how the war had affected the work of local organizations, the nature of partnerships and the support provided by international organizations.

CSO workers and volunteers in Marib were asked about the repercussions of the war on the level of their performance and their psychological state, and how this impacted their belief in and desire to continue community and voluntary work. The interviews also sought their assessment of the activities and projects carried out by these organizations based on their experiences during the war.

The online survey sought to obtain the views and assessments of a sample of beneficiaries from the local community on the war's effects on the quality and sustainability of projects and services provided by civil society organizations in Marib city.

THE FOCUS OF LOCAL CSOS BEFORE AND AFTER 2015

Prior to 2015, the objectives of local organizations were to develop the capabilities of Yemeni youth, promote the role of women and youth in community development, help local authorities in providing services and contribute to resolving some of the problems that afflict the local community.[16]

At the time, human rights work was minimal in Marib, but as the challenges and needs of residents increased with the progression of the war, so did the need for local organizations to step in and fill the gap. Consequently, the objectives of local CSOs evolved, and the services, projects and activities provided to beneficiaries broadened to reach various segments of Marib's society, especially IDPs.

After 2015, the main objectives of local organizations changed. Organizations established during this period have focused on supporting peace initiatives, defending human rights, protecting children's rights and supporting and assisting women in accessing decision-making circles. As the quality of life and economic situation in Marib has deteriorated, CSOs have led efforts to respond to the humanitarian needs of locals and IDPs by providing healthcare services, clean water and sanitation services and food aid and other necessities. A number of local organizations were founded to defend the rights of detainees and the forcibly disappeared after the Houthis captured the capital Sana'a in late 2014 and carried out arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances and abductions.

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[16] Interviews were conducted with decision makers from eight organizations, seven local and one international. Of the seven local organizations interviewed, two were established in Marib before 2015.

THE INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT OF LOCAL CSOS

Reports and regulations

Despite the war and upheaval Yemeni CSOs have faced over the past decade, the majority of the Marib CSOs consulted for this paper have strong internal structures and follow proper procedures with regards to producing and adhering to organizational and financial regulations, as well as submitting technical and financial reports to the Yemeni government.[17] Decision makers at these CSOs revealed that this stems from a desire to form partnerships, access financing opportunities, have their licenses renewed and continue their operations. Adherence to proper internal regulations allows CSOs to organize their work and promote good governance, oversight and inspection.

These regulations govern how CSOs conduct their activities and prepare the ground for the organized and meticulous running of their organizations. Firstly, a structured management system facilitates workflow across departments and areas in which they operate. CSOs have considerable contact networks and expertise that help them select, organize, use, disseminate, transfer and employ their knowledge and information into various administrative activities, such as decision making, work procedures and strategic planning. Additionally, they rely on a system of continuous follow-ups and evaluations to review progress according to a timetable and set programs, and identify and redress deviations.

However, some of the CSOs in Marib that were contacted have not met these high operational standards. Some did not submit the legally required technical and financial reports, due to poor efficiency on the part of their staff, weak operational and financial resources or because they had ceased active operations altogether. A minority of the CSOs interviewed indicated that internal regulations needed to be developed and updated, in order for them to meet work requirements and access funding. Some CSOs confirmed that they had not updated their internal and financial regulations since their establishment, while others had updated these statutes to meet the requirements of their international donors, but had not actually implemented the changes.

[17] Interview with Abdel Hakim al-Qaysi, director general of the Office of Social Affairs and Labor, December 23, 2020.

The disregard for regulations on the part of some CSOs is reflected in the way they cut corners. One decision maker working in development said that in many instances, administrators of newly-established local organizations ask another organization for a copy of its regulations and duplicate it, without changing anything except for the name and logo. According to the decision maker, these administrators do not read the regulations or amend them to fit their own vision and objectives; rather, they focus on meeting funding criteria, which requires that funders and donors review organizational and financial bylaws.[18]

While much of the blame for the shortcomings of some of the Marib CSOs can be placed on the organizations themselves, funding organizations and donors also carry some of the responsibility. They often make little effort to verify the regulations submitted to them, nor do they help local organizations to develop their regulations to correspond with funding criteria. In fact, most donors and international organizations require CSOs to abide by their own regulations and policies when implementing activities and projects that they fund, without benefiting from or adopting the internal regulations of their local partners.

Planning and setting strategic objectives

While it is important for civil society organizations to focus on current projects, they must also plan and prepare for the future. Based on the interviews conducted, many CSOs in Marib largely have specific objectives and a strategic plan for the next five years. Others said that planning and setting goals are among their best features, allowing them to provide consultancy to other local organizations and the OSAL. Objectives and plans are reviewed periodically, in an effort to analyze how projects have been carried out.

This is not the case for all Marib CSOs. Organizations may fail in implementing even basic plans for an activity or project, or may be required to introduce partial or fundamental changes to their strategies – as was the case during the coronavirus pandemic, when local and global organizations had to abort or suspend many of their projects.

The observed differences between local CSOs were to be expected, and stem from the following factors: the absence of training programs in strategic planning or institutional

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[18] Interview with the head of a local CSO operating in the development field, November 30, 2020.

building; and the lack of sustainable funding sources that enable organizations to work on short- or long-term strategic goals or plans. Most organizations are therefore forced to forgo developing short- or long-term strategies. Intervention by the OSAL could help mitigate this issue by coordinating the sharing of expertise between local organizations.

The management style of local organizations

CSOs in Marib are largely run in a consensual manner between members of the administrative body or board of directors, in the sense that a vote is not required to decide on matters. Legally, the nature and style of management of CSOs depends on the decisions of the founders or board of trustees, who determine whether management should be conducted in a consensual or electoral manner.[19]

One organization reported its decisions are made collectively, and management is participatory at every level. They added that unilateral decisions could lead to serious consequences, and one individual may be held accountable for making this decision. But when a decision is collectively made, everyone bears the responsibility for its outcomes, whether it succeeds or fails.[20]

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[19] According to the Law of Civil Society Organizations and Institutions No. 1 of 2001.

[20] Interview with the head of a local relief and development organization working in Marib city, November 30, 2020.

THE WAR'S IMPACT ON PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

The growing need for the services provided by CSOs has enhanced their capacity to implement projects on a wider scale. International funding, designated for humanitarian response and relief action, enabled CSOs to carry out projects, activities and interventions. However, the security situation impacted the organizations' ability to reach areas directly affected by the war to conduct relief operations, such as the distribution of aid in Houthi-controlled regions; monitoring and documenting incidents and violations; and meeting victims in high-risk areas. Meanwhile, some development activities that had already received funding and were underway in more stable districts were disrupted as the war spread to those areas, leading organizations to halt the projects or relocate them. A project to renovate a school in Marib's Medghal district eventually had to be relocated to another Marib district, Raghwan, as a result of the fighting.[21]

The growth in the presence of international development organizations in Marib, and the impact of the security situation on project implementation, can be illustrated by the case of one such organization that opened an office in Marib a year after the war started. Prior to 2015, the organization did not have a direct presence in Marib governorate.[22] The change occurred in response to the deteriorating living and economic conditions of residents in Marib, and the influx of IDPs to the governorate. The organization allocated a large part of its funding to various projects in the field of early recovery and services in key sectors, such as agriculture and water. Nevertheless, the conflict affected the nature of its activities and its ability to implement projects in the governorate, as fighting spread to a number of districts where programs were being carried out. The situation forced the organization to reconsider volatile regions or to re-coordinate with the sides controlling these areas – a time-consuming process that requires significant effort. Under such circumstances, it might take three to six months to re-coordinate and implement the planned activities. This in turn affects the project's schedule, budget and commitments toward donors in the event of delays in execution or when requesting an extension of the project period.

[21] Interview with the coordinator of a national organization working in the field of development, November 8, 2020.

[22] Interview with an employee at an international development organization that has a branch in Marib governorate, January 25, 2021.

THE WAR'S IMPACT ON CSO STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

The repercussions of the war have not been limited to organizations' action plans. Most of the local CSOs interviewed reported that their staff and volunteers have also suffered on a personal level as they face worsening living conditions, rising food prices, high rent and high fees on cash transfers from government-held areas to Houthi-controlled areas. In some cases, the impact of the war on the psychological state of workers has lowered their drive and faith in the importance of community and volunteer work.

One organization reported that at the height of the war, most of its employees and staff were forced to relocate with their families outside the governorate, and the organization suspended its operations and closed its headquarters from 2015 until 2017. But when the imminent threat was over, the workers' mood had shifted. After their return, they lived in constant fear that the war would drag on and that they would not experience security and stability again. This was not the case everywhere; another local organization said that the war did not negatively impact its team, on the contrary, it made them more driven and motivated to work. Seeing that the community needed them more than ever to provide assistance had given them strength and enthusiasm.[23]

That positivity was widespread; local staff and volunteers of different local CSOs in Marib city noted that they felt a high level of satisfaction with the activities, projects and services provided by their organizations over the past five years. They emphasized the vital work carried out by these organizations and the substantial societal impact it had through projects that supported and empowered women, youths and displaced people. They also highlighted the role CSOs have played in encouraging and backing community initiatives in the field of peace-building, community reconciliation and raising awareness about the risks of epidemics and diseases and the importance of preventive and precautionary measures against COVID-19.

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[23] Interview with an employee of a local development organization working in Marib city, November 9, 2020; Interview with a local relief and development organization working in Marib, November 30, 2020.

The work of CSOs and the implementation of dozens of projects in the governorate during the war has created new job opportunities for many unemployed youths. It has also reinforced young people's growing interest in community work and their desire to engage with such organizations to improve their professional and financial statuses.

There have also been challenges. Volunteers perform assignments in conflict zones while fearing for their lives and safety. Those involved in journalism, research and the monitoring and documentation of violations are at risk of being arrested due to the nature of their work. Others face danger by working with a specific organization or in a region controlled by a party to the conflict. The impact of the security and economic situation on their mental health and livelihood also weighs on workers and volunteers.

THE WAR'S IMPACT ON THE NUMBER AND TYPES OF CSO PROJECTS

Since 2015, the war has significantly influenced the actions and funding of local CSOs in Marib. A number of organizations have shifted the nature and type of interventions planned for the community from development to relief and emergency response. The projects that were implemented before the war, such as training programs, advocacy campaigns, capacity-building for youth and sports activities, have largely been abandoned. Instead, organizations focus on providing humanitarian needs to IDPs and locals. However, as the number of organizations working on meeting the needs of IDPs has increased, some organizations have been able to return to their previous development work.

During the conflict, donors have provided limited funding for projects outside the scope of relief work, particularly before 2018. This led to some organizations temporarily suspending their work, or launching projects that were incompatible with their initial objectives and scope of work. Such decisions were necessary for organizations to remain operational and meet financial obligations, such as office rent, salaries and transport allowances for their staff.[24] Locals in Marib city have noticed the change, with just over three-quarters of those surveyed for this paper reporting an increase and change in the type of projects and interventions carried out by local CSOs in the governorate.

Two local organizations founded before 2015 indicated that prior to the war more than 20 different projects were implemented across several areas, the most important of which were in youth capacity building and development, dialogue, employment, research and education. Five local organizations, established between 2015 and 2020, confirmed that they had carried out more than 100 projects. While most of their work was concentrated on relief and humanitarian response, other projects included training and rehabilitation, community accountability, conflict resolution, peace-building, monitoring and documentation of human rights and media violations.[25]

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[24] Interview with the head of a local developmental organization that has been working in Marib since before 2015, November 9, 2020.

[25] Interview with an employee of a local organization working in the field of relief and development in Marib, November 30, 2020.

THE WAR'S IMPACT ON THE SUSTAINABILITY OF PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The conflict in Marib has affected the sustainability of projects carried out by local organizations and forced them to narrow their objectives. The changing nature of the frontlines has meant that some projects, such as the construction of housing for IDPs, were forced to stop in certain areas when fighting began and limited, access for humanitarian aid workers.[26] Some local organizations have been forced to limit their aspirations, with one Yemeni organization forced to abandon a planned international expansion due to the protracted conflict.[27]

The war has also had varying repercussions on the name, domain and objectives of local organizations in Marib city. In some instances, parties to the conflict may have problems with the nature of the work undertaken by an organization, or with their sources of funding. To avoid complications, CSOs may be forced to change their name and the name of their projects. A member of a human rights organization working in both government- and Houthi-held territory said that the organization had to use a different name in each area in order to carry out its work.[28]

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[26] Interview with a member of a local civil society organization, November 8, 2020.

[27] Interview with an employee of a national relief and development organization, November 8, 2020.

[28] Interview with the coordinator of a national human rights organization operating in Houthi and government areas, December 2, 2020.

THE WAR'S IMPACT ON FUNDING AND PARTNERSHIPS

Knowledge of and access to funding channels

Most local organizations operating in Marib governorate since before 2015 have limited knowledge of potential new sources of funding. These organizations only learned about such channels through long experience in community work and extensive relationships with a number of agencies and organizations. They also relied on direct communications with donors and funders to discuss cooperation and partnership and funding opportunities, in addition to searching online and monitoring open calls for funding proposals on social media.

Since 2015, a number of local organizations have also gained a greater knowledge of opportunities to apply for grants. However, despite the submission of a number of project proposals, they face many challenges in getting approval from funders, such as difficulty in meeting criteria and conditions, requirements to have offices in Sana'a, political or partisan affiliations, or limited English language capabilities, which hinder the staff's ability to submit proposals and reports to donor agencies.

Creating effective partnerships

The vast majority of local organizations operating in Marib governorate believe in the importance of establishing effective cooperation and partnerships with local authorities and relevant executive offices. Such relationships play a key role in facilitating the implementation of projects and overcoming challenges they or their staff may face. All the organizations contacted said that they had excellent partnerships with official bodies, governmental authorities and a number of executive offices in the governorate, such as the OSAL, the Office of Human Rights and the Office of Youth and Sports. They also coordinate and cooperate with the Executive Unit responsible for managing IDP camps in Marib.

Relationships with international organizations and donors allow local organizations to partner and finance projects directly. Some organizations are limited to using other local CSOs as intermediaries when attempting to network or partner with international organizations, while the fact that a number of international funders do not have offices in Marib can make it difficult for some CSOs to form effective relationships.

However, this coordination and cooperation is less frequent between the local organizations themselves. It appears as though CSOs in Marib lack awareness of the significance of establishing a real partnership with one another when planning and executing projects in the governorate. Seventy percent of the local organizations interviewed are not members of any coalition or network. The 30 percent of CSOs who do hold such memberships indicated that being a member of, or existing under the umbrella of a network, coalition or civil alliance enhances opportunities for effective partnerships and joint cooperation. Coordination between local organizations can create opportunities to network and exchange expertise, as well as offer CSOs greater access to financing opportunities from international organizations and donors, who prioritize funding to those operating within a network. Working within a group also facilitates the reach of the organization's activities to larger numbers of people.

Minimum criteria for funding and partnership opportunities

Local organizations in Marib stressed the importance of possessing a bare minimum of capabilities and standards in management, regulations, policies and structure to be eligible for funding opportunities and to build effective partnerships with various governmental, local and international agencies. At the forefront of these requirements is the establishment of an institutional structure, internal organization and financial regulations and systems. Having basic operational capabilities, such as a qualified team with extensive experience and connections, and a headquarters equipped with basic equipment, are also included in the minimum criteria that facilitate organizations' access to funding and partnerships.

Ability to recruit qualified and committed staff

All the organizations interviewed for this paper indicated that while they have the ability to recruit employees and volunteers, the majority are not qualified, or do not have

sufficient experience in community work or project management and implementation. This adds an extra burden on organizations to cover the cost of training and developing the skills of staff and volunteers.

Most local organizations in Marib governorate rely primarily on grants and capital provided by international organizations and donors, self-funding and support from founders or board members and donations and contributions from businessmen or philanthropists. As a result, they lack the financial stability to cover operational expenses and salaries. It can prove challenging for them to retain competent and qualified workers due to their inability to pay wages in a sustainable manner, particularly when cash flows dry up at the end of projects. Many workers leave their jobs as soon as they receive offers with greater financial payoff.

Additionally, there was a rise in employment opportunities with international organizations and jobs in large donor-funded projects between 2015 and 2020, which cost some local CSOs dozens of employees, workers and volunteers whom they had trained over the years. The presence of international organizations in Marib also drove up car rental prices, the rental costs of training halls and the cost of meals provided during activities. The cost and wages of consultants, advisors, media professionals, trainers and technical and logistical services providers also increased.

Positives and negatives of international partnerships

The conflict in Yemen has also influenced the active partnerships between local CSOs and international organizations.

A decision maker at a local development organization pointed out that although relief and humanitarian activities have been added to its operations, the opportunities for work in this field were not opportunities for partnership or direct international funding. The function of their organization was limited to the execution of activities on the ground, without being involved in the design and drafting of projects, nor was it included in the selection and procurement process for items planned for distribution among target groups. The CSO was not given the opportunity to develop and train its staff on how to manage and implement these projects and activities.[29]

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[29] Interview with the head of a local relief and development organization, November 30, 2020.

The conflict has affected local CSOs' chances of accessing international funding opportunities, with some of those interviewed saying this was because they were unable to reach funders. A lack of communication with funders can cause other problems. One local CSO said that due to the conflict, it has been labeled as a political organization, even though its work is primarily humanitarian, which has led to lost funding and partnership opportunities with international organizations and donors.[30]

Conversely, the conflict has led to an increase in cooperation and partnerships between some local CSOs and various local and international actors. A decision maker at a local organization in Marib indicated that their existing partnerships with organizations they worked with prior to the war have expanded, while they were able to establish additional relationships with new international organizations and donors. The director general of the Office of Social Affairs and Labor attested that overall, partnership and funding opportunities afforded to local CSOs by international organizations have increased.[31]

For their part, international development organizations have benefited from cooperating with local organizations. One worker at an international development organization, which has an office in Marib governorate, said that they were implementing their projects through a team on the ground, with limited partnerships with local authorities and their relevant executive offices.[32] Instead of directly addressing the needs of the community, the organization provides training programs to local CSOs and members of the local community related to the objectives of a specific project. For instance, if the project was related to water, it might train a number of local volunteers as community committees to ensure proper management of the project in their area. The organization has established an advisory partnership with a number of local CSOs in the governorate to benefit from their experience and access. The worker also noted the community's positive response to projects and activities implemented by international organizations, adding that such reactions come from an awareness and understanding of their work and the importance of their projects. However, he said that challenges may arise while engaging with the local population due to the organizations' poor understanding of the nature, geography, groups and segments of the local community.

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[30] Interview with an employee of a national human rights organization, December 2, 2020.

[31] Interview with Abdel Hakim al-Qaysi, director general of the Office of Social Affairs and Labor, December 23, 2020.

[32] Interview with an employee at an international development organization that has a branch in Marib governorate, January 25, 2021.

THE WAR'S IMPACT ON FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

The conflict has significantly impacted freedom of movement for Marib CSO workers. Staff at these organizations fear arrest if they travel to the Houthi-controlled capital, Sana'a, even if they are from there.[33]

The conflict also means that the most direct route between different areas is not safe for travel. The normal route between Marib and Sana'a, is 160 kilometers but has been closed because of the conflict, forcing CSO staff and other Yemenis to take an alternative route that is more than twice as long..

Travel difficulties and road closures are not limited to areas on the frontlines between Houthi forces and the Yemeni government, but also exist in the south, where the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) holds sway in many areas. The power struggle between government forces and the STC has hindered the ability of CSO workers to travel from Marib to the STC-controlled interim capital Aden. And the conflict has not only affected freedom of travel between governorates, but movement between districts, sub-districts and villages within a single governorate. High-risk areas in Marib have been inaccessible to local CSO workers out of fear for their safety, especially when carrying out field surveys, humanitarian services or assignments at IDP camps. Such obstacles derive from a lack of understanding of the nature of the operations executed by local organizations by the warring parties and the operators of military and security checkpoints. Despite the impartiality and neutrality of CSOs, parties to the war have alleged that organizations and their staff are implementing external agendas and fueling the conflict by gathering information or sharing intelligence with foreign countries.

Behavior of security authorities toward local CSOs between 2015-2020

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[33] Interview with the coordinator of a national human rights organization, December 2, 2020.

Good treatment and substantial facilitations

Over the past five years, CSOs in Yemen have faced numerous obstacles and restrictions on the nature, location and type of their projects and activities, imposed by all parties to the conflict, and in particular by the Houthi movement.[34] Local organizations working in Marib governorate said that they have enjoyed good treatment and flexibility from local authorities and security forces in terms of project coordination and facilitation. One CSO working in the field of protection and the rule of law reported that it was able to establish effective partnerships with a number of government offices, which hosted several of its activities and meetings.[35] Government offices facilitated visits to prisons, as well as meetings and interviews with civil and security leaders in the governorate. Authorities in Marib facilitated the movement of staff, materials and supplies for another organization by granting permits for field work.[36]

Local authorities have participated in the launch of projects and activities of organizations in Marib, and demonstrated their willingness to remove obstacles or difficulties that these may face while carrying out community work. Officials have facilitated the granting of work permits for new organizations or those that have relocated their headquarters to Marib, and the renewal of existing permits for organizations that were already operating in the governorate. They have also provided security protection to organizations implementing activities that may require it, such as those taking place during protests or celebrations or other public activities.

Restrictions and obstacles

Despite the assistance provided by local authorities and security services, the ongoing conflict and the military and security situation in the governorate have led officials to impose restrictions on the work and activities of CSOs. Among the time-consuming hurdles that impede their work is a requirement for non-resident partner organizations to open branches in the governorate and to obtain authorization from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor in Aden. Organizations are also expected to provide authorities

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[34] Aziz el Yaakoubi and Lisa Barrington, Yemen's Houthis and WFP dispute aid control as millions starve," Reuters, June 4, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/yemen-security-wfp-idINKCN1T51XR

[35] Interview with the head of a local human rights organization, November 4, 2020.

[36] Interview with an employee of a national relief and development organization, November 8, 2020.

with copies of the identification cards of all staff and workers on a given project. One CSO reported that the constraints it faced had delayed the implementation of activities that it planned to carry out in partnership with another local organization.[37]

One restriction recently imposed on local CSOs is a requirement for a security permit before getting approval to execute a field activity or rent a space or hall. Organizations are expected to provide security agencies with information on the project's goal, source of funding, their background and agenda and the targeted groups. Only after these requirements have been met and thoroughly examined do authorities decide whether to approve a project's implementation. Despite this procedure, organizations noted the ease with which these permits can be obtained.[38]

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[37] Interview with an employee of a local relief and development organization, November 30, 2020.

[38] Interview with an employee of a local human rights organization in Marib, December 13, 2020.

COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT OF THE WORK OF LOCAL CSOS IN MARIB BETWEEN 2015-2020

Positive impact

To assess the impact of the conflict on the quality and sustainability of projects and services provided by local CSOs in Marib, an online survey was conducted with the participation of 49 members of the city's local and IDP communities - 43 percent of whom were women and 57 percent men.

According to the survey, the majority of respondents view CSOs in a positive light. Around 77 percent reported seeking, to varying degrees, local organizations for services and support they do not receive from local authorities. Eighty-six percent said they have dealt with local CSOs before. Most of the respondents in the survey agreed, to varying degrees, that local CSOs play an essential role in regional development and humanitarian support. They noted an increase in the number of organizations and projects in the field of relief and humanitarian response. These provide assistance to citizens, especially IDPs, and address their needs amid salary reductions and deteriorating living and economic conditions, and create job opportunities for young people in the governorate.

The respondents listed the following positive outcomes related to the work of CSOs:

- Local CSOs' proximity to the community increased their familiarity with the living conditions and circumstances of its members, allowing them to help improve the standard of living and alleviate suffering by providing humanitarian assistance and implementing development and awareness projects.

- Local CSOs create job opportunities for dozens of young men and women, in addition to implementing training courses and programs that contribute to skills development, economic empowerment and improving living standards.

- CSOs are able to reach IDPs in various areas, camps and agglomerations, and provide those affected by the conflict or floods with humanitarian support, including food, shelter and medical aid. They also provide cash assistance and cash-for-work projects to a number of poor and needy families.

- CSOs assist local authorities in improving and developing a number of public projects and basic services for the local community.

- Local CSOs contribute to conflict resolution and the promotion of local peace-building efforts, in addition to raising awareness among locals and IDPs about personal hygiene practices and how to cope with COVID-19, epidemics and common diseases.

- CSOs contribute to the defensce of human rights by providing legal aid and monitoring and documenting human rights violations in the governorate.

Negative impact

Other survey respondents stressed that there are shortcomings in the performance of many local CSOs, saying that most of their activities and projects do not respond to the needs of society and the hardships caused by war. They noted that the activities of many of the organizations working in the fields of relief and humanitarian response do not conform to the Sphere Standards, a widely recognized set of principles and minimum standards for humanitarian action. They also assessed that the ability ofCSOs' to assess vulnerable groups in need of their services was poor.

Some of the main negative outcomes cited by respondents:

- Relief and humanitarian projects turn locals and IDPs into non-productive and dependent community members, who count on aid and services to sustain their livelihoods.

- Corruption in the activities and interventions of local CSOs is visible in the poor quality of services they provide, and the suffering of IDPs is exploited to access funding and secure profit.

- Projects are poorly planned, leading to many arbitrary initiatives, especially by newly established organizations, due to their lack of knowledge on the needs of the local community.

- Projects are focused on specific areas, such as Marib city, but other districts are neglected.

- Local workers feel marginalized in favor of staff brought in from outside targeted areas.

- CSOs discriminate in the distribution of aid by targeting IDPs in camps and other agglomerations, while sidelining host communities and IDPs living in private or rented homes.

- The provision of projects and services is intermittent, rather than periodic. CSOs fail to design and implement sustainable, entrepreneurial projects that enable community members to access job opportunities and small income-generating projects. The few that do exist have limited impact.

DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED BY CSOS

Local CSOs listed a number of challenges to their work and performance in Marib governorate:

- The weak institutional set-up of some local CSOs and the lack of qualified personnel to professionally manage the work and projects of the organizations.

- Poor planning and design of projects that do not address the actual needs of the community.

- Lack of awareness among community members of the work of CSOs, particularly when collecting data or conducting field surveys.

- A sense of insecurity due to the continued expansion of the conflict and its proximity to the areas and districts where projects are implemented.

- The difficulty of coordinating with multiple governmental and local authorities, offices and other bodies, and the lack of a clear mechanism regulating coordination.

- Hindered mobility in cases that require a rapid response due to delays in obtaining the necessary permits from authorities.

- Some areas and communities are located far from an organization's project sites, and there is a fear that workers and volunteers may be endangered due to the targeting of the city and its residential areas.

- The high cost of rent and the lack of funding sources puts CSOs at risk of suspension or office closures, and an inability to pay rental obligations, operating expenses and the wages of their staff.

- Discrimination and racism by those in charge of some organizations during recruitment, or toward groups targeted by their activities and projects.

- Societal misconceptions about women working for CSOs.

- Arbitrary detention of workers without justification or clarification about the reasons for their arrest. Sometimes CSO workers are released without explanation or apology. This practice has already affected humanitarian work in the governorate, and will have further impact in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Civil society organizations in Marib governorate have made strides in the years since the war started, and the need for their services will persist long after it ends. Despite the positive impact they have had on local and IDP communities, a number of steps are required to address the internal and external challenges that obstruct their work and may limit future growth. To that end, local authorities, CSOs, international organizations and donors should take into consideration the following recommendations:

To the local authorities and their executive offices in Marib governorate:

- Unify the coordination mechanism between local and international organizations and government offices, agencies and bodies, such as the Office of the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, the Office of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor and the Executive Unit responsible for managing IDP camps in Marib, through the formulation and approval of a manual that clarifies the functions and competencies of each party.

- Create an environment that encourages local CSOs to operate freely, without imposing restrictions on their activities, and tighten controls on performance and quality of services in accordance with the law.

- Strengthen coordination and cooperation between local and international organizations operating in the governorate by inviting them to attend monthly or quarterly meetings to discuss and share reports on individual achievements and initiatives.

- To the Executive Unit for managing IDP camps in Marib: Prepare and provide local organizations working in relief and humanitarian response with a clear mechanism for the assessment and oversight of their performance and the quality of their work, to ensure their commitment to good governance and its application in all of their projects and activities.

- To the Office of Social Affairs and Labor in Marib: Regulate the mechanism for issuing or renewing work permits for local CSOs and suspend the renewal of licenses of ineffective organizations that do not carry out projects or do not submit annual financial and technical reports.

To local organizations in Marib governorate:

• Organize ongoing, regular training programs for workers and volunteers in planning, drafting and managing projects and obtaining funding. Training and education should also take place on the concepts and conduct of humanitarian work and how to deal with beneficiaries.

• Conduct ongoing work assessments, particularly of humanitarian projects, in order to ensure adequate access to all IDPs living in camps and rented houses. Apply the required performance and quality standards across activities and projects by verifying the credibility of the work and inspecting target locations and following up before, during and after the implementation process.

• Adhere to the Sphere Standards of humanitarian action. Apply the principle of transparency to all procedures and projects and share their technical and financial reports with the community.

• Eschew political and party affiliations, favoritism and nepotism, and attempt to reach as many beneficiaries as possible.

• Local organizations should focus on designing and implementing sustainable development and economic empowerment projects for youth and those most in need. They should contribute to the assessment and identification of the needs of communities, and expand their work and projects to other districts, villages and sub-districts in Marib governorate.

To international organizations and donors:

• Allocate funding to designing and implementing training programs related to the institutional set-up of local CSOs and the capacity building of their workers and volunteers, in order to ensure a strong civil society that performs efficiently and provides quality services with professionalism.

• Promote greater opportunities for cooperation and partnership with local CSOs and provide the financial support needed to implement projects.

• Simplify the procedures, criteria and conditions imposed on local CSOs as prerequisites for obtaining funding, and support and empower local organizations to improve their performance and expand their activities.

• Ensure sufficient monitoring and evaluation of all funded activities and projects implemented by local organizations to ensure the quality of their performance and the services provided to the community.
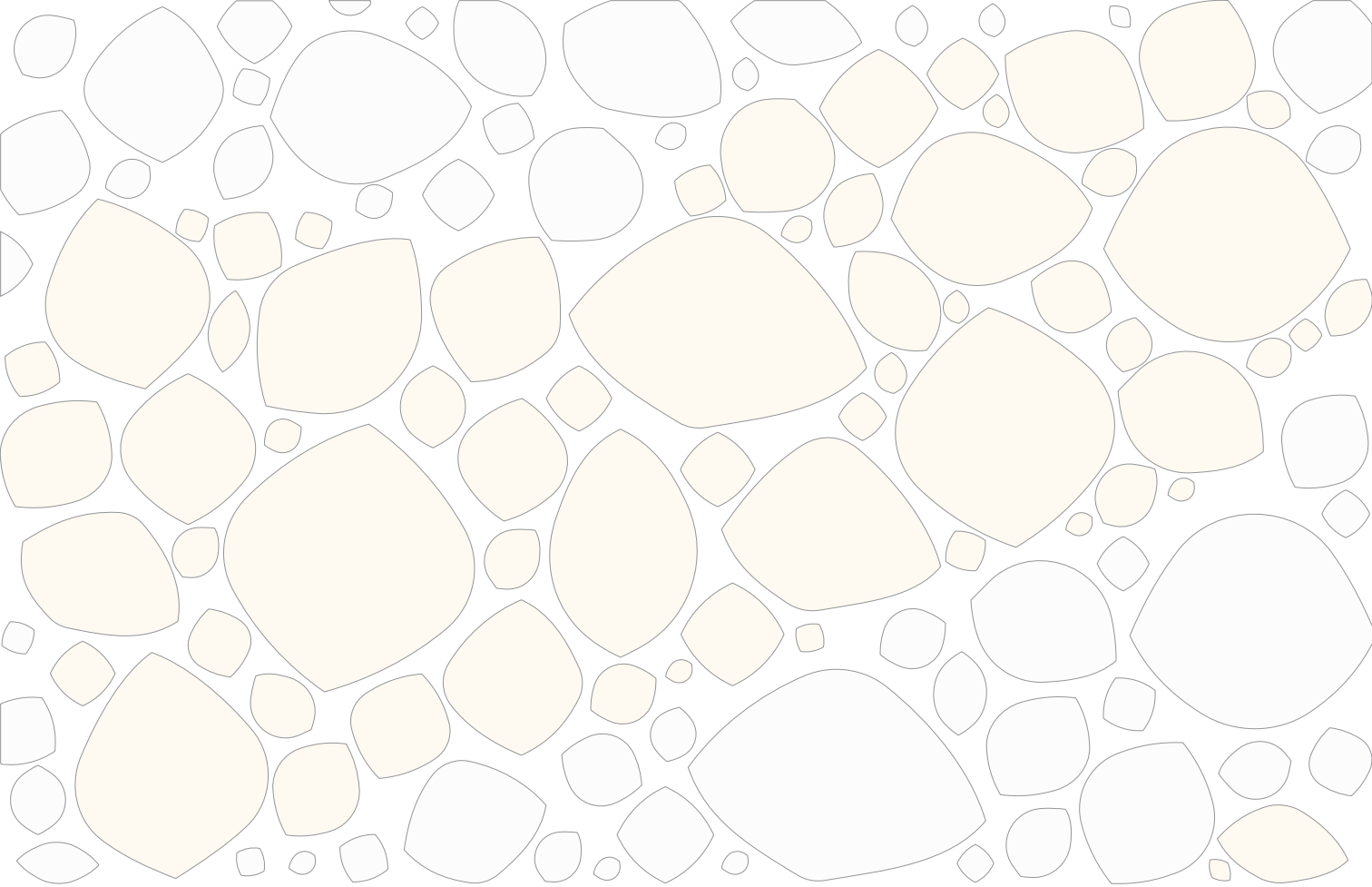
• Support a project to draw up a comprehensive list of displaced families and poor families in Marib governorate, and include it into a consolidated electronic database, which would be continuously updated. This would facilitate the delivery of assistance, relief and humanitarian projects to the neediest groups. It would also ensure that certain groups and regions are not targeted with the same projects or aid at the expense of other groups and areas.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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