

# Yemen: Fragile lives in hungry times

[www.oxfam.org](http://www.oxfam.org)



Sana'a market place. © Ashley Jonathan Clements/Oxfam

**Widespread hunger and chronic malnutrition have taken hold in Yemen. A protracted political stalemate over much of the past six months has left the government in paralysis, prompting a fuel crisis that has brought the economy to the verge of collapse. A recent study by Oxfam found many communities to be on the brink of disaster. In other parts of the country the United Nations has found that some vulnerable communities are now facing critical levels of malnutrition.**

**Donors remain deeply divided over their approaches to the region's poorest country, thus delaying responses and hindering funding. Hundreds of millions of dollars in assistance have been suspended. As the crisis builds, however, inaction is no longer an option. Interventions that address both immediate humanitarian needs and longer-term structural concerns must be urgently scaled up.**

# Summary

The promise of what came to be known as the Arab Spring, which dawned in North Africa, sweeping into the Arabian Gulf and up through the Middle East, has foundered in Yemen. Political turmoil has taken hold and reform has stalled, sparking renewed insecurity, devastating an already frail economy, and triggering a national fuel crisis that has in turn driven rising levels of hunger. Levels of child malnutrition in some regions are among the worst in the world.<sup>1</sup> While billions of dollars have been donated to Tunisia, Libya, and to a lesser extent Egypt to rebuild their economies, Yemenis are facing chronic hunger and have few resources at their disposal. While the eyes of the world are on other countries experiencing major upheaval, Yemen must not be forgotten. Leaving the country to simmer and collapse in slow motion will lead to far greater humanitarian and security concerns.

A recent Oxfam study in the western coastal governorate of al Hodeida found families to be coping – but only just. Many respondents faced unemployment or reduced working hours and lower pay. Families were close to breaking point. Nearly a fifth of those surveyed had put their children to work after withdrawing them from school, and nearly two-thirds were skipping meals. Other households were selling off items of value in order to buy food.

This is not just a short-term emergency. Well before the current crisis, a third of Yemenis – 7.5 million people – did not have enough to eat. Rising food prices, declining oil revenues, global financial instability, conflict, and one of the world's fastest-growing populations have all contributed to Yemen's worsening development indicators. The country is almost entirely reliant on imports to meet demand for staple goods and is consequently highly vulnerable to exchange rate fluctuations, food price shocks, and export bans. Compounding this are Yemen's high levels of poverty, mass unemployment, and social and gender inequalities.

The situation is only set to worsen in the coming years: oil, which accounts for two-thirds of government revenue, is fast running out – as is water. With no permanent rivers, and groundwater being used up at an unsustainable rate, Sana'a may become the modern world's first completely dry capital.

Funding shortfalls and capacity constraints have hampered aid operations, leading to underfunded programmes and breaks in the food pipeline supporting hundreds of thousands of people displaced by conflict. Over recent months some donors including the US, ECHO and UK, have commendably scaled up their humanitarian operations in response to the worsening situation. However, the current UN-administered emergency appeal for Yemen remains only half-funded. Increased investment in humanitarian aid is therefore urgently needed to enable agencies to scale up their life-saving programmes.

There are a myriad of reasons why donors have found it difficult to provide funds in this complex and fluid environment. Even the Friends of Yemen – a group of donors concerned for Yemen’s future, including the US and European and Gulf states – has not met since the current crisis began. Many donors remain divided over the right approach, citing insecurity in the country or the lack of a political settlement. A settlement has continued to prove elusive, but this does not excuse the lack of immediate action.

Undeniably, genuine obstacles hamper the operations of donors and NGOs alike, among them corruption, limited channels for absorbing funds, growing insecurity, and serious human rights violations. Such challenges have already led to a handful of donors, including the World Bank, withholding support for the country. Yet despite these frustrations, there are creative and practical ways of tackling Yemen’s problems. Some approaches may not yet have been adopted in the country, but have been tried and tested in other fragile and insecure contexts and could point the way to new and innovative approaches to the delivery of aid in Yemen.

Additionally, a national food strategy already exists and provides some of the groundwork for a unified response. However, more work is needed to adequately reflect the critical role of women in addressing hunger in Yemen, and to respond to the urgency of the hunger crisis facing the country. This strategy, which should form the cornerstone of Yemen’s food security approaches, has regrettably not been put into action in the current context of political instability.

New and improved programmes should be adopted in Yemen which build on traditional food distribution channels, in particular the use of cash and voucher programmes. Increasing support to small-scale farmers – particularly women – and investing in social protection will go some way towards addressing hunger in the country. Alongside these programmes, renewed efforts are needed to address Yemen’s chronic water scarcity. Food price monitoring systems should also be established. Given Yemen’s dependence on imported food, concrete commitments should also be made to tackle the causes of global food price volatility and reform the dysfunctional commodities markets.

Not only are new funds needed but donors should become more predictable with their funding and should trial new methods for delivering aid. No longer should politics and security be the drivers of aid strategies in Yemen. The time for the international community to act is now. It must tackle Yemen’s growing humanitarian needs and stem the tide that is sweeping the country towards calamity.

# Recommendations

## The Friends of Yemen should:

- **Urgently reconvene** to co-ordinate support for Yemen.
- Ensure that there is an **adequate and timely humanitarian response that meets the urgent needs of Yemeni women, men, and children**. The Friends of Yemen should address aid funding shortfalls, in particular in the UN-administered Humanitarian Response Plan and Emergency Response Fund, and in the World Food Programme (WFP)'s Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation and its Emergency Safety Net. New funds must also be rapidly made available to NGOs and UN agencies in support of longer-term food security, nutrition, and related interventions. These should be aligned with the National Food Security Strategy (NFSS), as far as possible.
- **Ensure that funding is flexible, predictable, impartial, and in accordance with humanitarian principles**. In keeping with commitments to Good Humanitarian Donorship, donors should provide flexible funding and be willing to transfer budgets between development and humanitarian streams, as conditions dictate. Those Friends who have already disengaged from Yemen should consider unfreezing their aid or re-channelling their support into humanitarian programmes; they should not turn their backs on Yemen in its time of need. Donors should also ensure that their strategies and aid programmes are driven by humanitarian concerns and not motivated or made conditional on regime change or narrow security goals.
- **Scale up technical and financial assistance to enable the continuation and expansion of existing social protection and welfare programmes**, such as the Social Welfare Fund (SWF) and the Social Fund for Development (SFD). In particular, donors should seek ways to strengthen the SWF's role in reducing hunger among vulnerable groups, for example by increasing support to the most vulnerable categories and by putting in place rigorous monitoring systems.

## The international community should:

- As an urgent priority, **take steps to address the inequalities that prejudice the global food system** against poor, small-scale producers and vulnerable families in Yemen and elsewhere. Concrete commitments should be made at the G20 and the Committee on World Food Security to ensure full transparency and appropriate regulation of physical and financial markets, including regulation of the ability of governments to impose export bans when prices go up. The international community should also support the establishment of well-managed strategic grain reserves to reduce Yemen's susceptibility to shocks.

## United Nations agencies and NGOs should:

- **Ensure that programmes are better informed, more aligned, and more integrated between agencies and sectors**, in order to both meet the food gap and address longer-term food security and nutrition. As is currently planned, a nationwide food security monitoring system should be established under the leadership of the WFP to better track hunger in Yemen, enabling better-informed and more appropriate programmes.
- **Adopt innovative approaches and trial methods that have worked elsewhere to complement or supplement food aid programmes**, through support for small-scale producers – particularly women – to enhance their productivity and profitability and their ability to cope with shocks such as food price fluctuations and climate events. Household and community-level stocks could be established as a buffer from such shocks, and subsidies and tax incentives could be used to strengthen production. New structures such as ‘consumer committees’ could be trialed in order to help monitor prices and inform food policy. The use of vouchers and cash programmes should be encouraged, where possible, to strengthen local markets. The private sector could also be seen as a means of delivering aid.

## Yemeni authorities should urgently commit to the following:

- **Immediately put into action the most critical aspects of the National Food Security Strategy**, undertaking further planning and a costing of the strategy. Prioritising critical sectors through consultations with civil society, donors, and humanitarian agencies. In particular, water sector reform, the establishment of strategic food reserves, and the specific needs of women as both consumers and producers should be better addressed.
- **Facilitate access by aid agencies to women and men in need, and refrain from military actions which are damaging or disrupting infrastructure and services** that are critical for food transport, health services, and water and sanitation.
- **Strengthen national social protection systems, particularly in highly food-insecure governorates**. Opportunities should be explored, with the support of donors and civil society, to improve the impact of the Social Welfare Fund on highly food-insecure households, for example through the provision of more substantial handouts during times of hunger or linking benefits to food prices.

# Notes

<sup>1</sup> IRIN (2011) 'Violence threatens children's health', 18 August 2011.

© Oxfam International September 2011

Oxfam acknowledges the assistance of many Oxfam staff in its production, particularly Fiona Smyth, Richard Stanforth, Shaheen Chughtai, Amel Alariqi, and Zahra Akkerhuys.

This publication is copyright but the text may be used free of charge for the purposes of advocacy, campaigning, education, and research, provided that the source is acknowledged in full. The copyright holder requests that all such use be registered with them for impact assessment purposes. For copying in any other circumstances, or for re-use in other publications, or for translation or adaptation, permission must be secured and a fee may be charged. E-mail [publish@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:publish@oxfam.org.uk).

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please e-mail [advocacy@oxfaminternational.org](mailto:advocacy@oxfaminternational.org).

The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under ISBN 978-1-84814-961-8 in September 2011. Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

## Oxfam

Oxfam is an international confederation of fifteen organizations working together in 98 countries to find lasting solutions to poverty and injustice:

Oxfam America ([www.oxfamamerica.org](http://www.oxfamamerica.org)),  
Oxfam Australia ([www.oxfam.org.au](http://www.oxfam.org.au)),  
Oxfam-in-Belgium ([www.oxfamsol.be](http://www.oxfamsol.be)),  
Oxfam Canada ([www.oxfam.ca](http://www.oxfam.ca)),  
Oxfam France ([www.oxfamfrance.org](http://www.oxfamfrance.org)),  
Oxfam Germany ([www.oxfam.de](http://www.oxfam.de)),  
Oxfam GB ([www.oxfam.org.uk](http://www.oxfam.org.uk)),  
Oxfam Hong Kong ([www.oxfam.org.hk](http://www.oxfam.org.hk)),  
Oxfam India ([www.oxfamindia.org](http://www.oxfamindia.org)),  
Intermón Oxfam ([www.intermonoxfam.org](http://www.intermonoxfam.org)),  
Oxfam Ireland ([www.oxfamireland.org](http://www.oxfamireland.org)),  
Oxfam Mexico ([www.oxfammexico.org](http://www.oxfammexico.org)),  
Oxfam New Zealand ([www.oxfam.org.nz](http://www.oxfam.org.nz)),  
Oxfam Novib ([www.oxfamnovib.nl](http://www.oxfamnovib.nl)),  
Oxfam Quebec ([www.oxfam.qc.ca](http://www.oxfam.qc.ca))

The following organizations are currently observer members of Oxfam, working towards full affiliation:

Oxfam Japan ([www.oxfam.jp](http://www.oxfam.jp))  
Oxfam Italy ([www.oxfamitalia.org](http://www.oxfamitalia.org))

Please write to any of the agencies for further information, or visit [www.oxfam.org](http://www.oxfam.org). Email: [advocacy@oxfaminternational.org](mailto:advocacy@oxfaminternational.org)

[www.oxfam.org](http://www.oxfam.org)

