



YEMEN'S SHATTERED FOOD ECONOMY

... and its desperate toll on women

Food security in Yemen is critically dependent on imports and incomes. Both have been knowingly undermined by parties to the conflict over many months, leading to the current high levels of suffering and starvation. For women, the impact of eating last and least is crippling, and coping mechanisms are becoming increasingly desperate. Displacement and high rates of physical, psychological and sexual violence are causing further suffering. An inclusive peace process is desperately needed to end this crisis.

The Geneva pledging conference must unlock financial and political commitments to meet the dire humanitarian needs, support the withering economy and pave the way for peace.

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Oxfam's programme in Yemen

Oxfam has a large programme in Yemen, working with our partners¹ in eight governorates: from Sa'ada and Amran in the north, and Hajjah and Hudaydah in the north-west, to Taiz, Aden, Abyan, Lhaj and Al-Dhalea in the south. From April to November 2018, the programme reached 1.5 million people. Our work includes:

- Food security and livelihoods – providing cash transfers for host and displaced communities affected by the conflict and helping to restore livelihoods through support to small businesses (such as livestock, sewing, small food shops, etc).
- Provision of water – through water trucking to IDP camps, installing solar pumps, rehabilitation of water supply schemes and provision of fuel subsidies for such schemes.
- Sanitation – construction and desludging of latrines, and solid waste management and cleaning campaigns.
- Hygiene promotion – particularly around cholera prevention and through the distribution of hygiene and dignity kits.

Huda (name changed), a mother of eight, is an IDP from Sa'ada who lost everything when her house was hit by airstrikes. Oxfam advised her on setting up a profitable business and she now earns an income selling women's clothes. 'Now I am able to buy food for my family. I have also bought school items and winter clothes for my children and, for the first time in a long time, I was able to pay my house rent.'

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org.

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Cover photo: 30-year old Mona Ahmed (name changed), in Shafar, Hajjah Governorate. Mona, who fled the frontlines three years ago, can give only bread and tea to her children, the youngest of whom is malnourished. Photo: Sami Jassar/Oxfam in Yemen.

AID, AND MUCH MORE, IS NEEDED

2019 is the fourth year of a protracted and devastating conflict that continues to ruin the lives of most of the Yemeni population. Continued violence brings new suffering and civilian damage on a daily basis, triggering movements of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and constraining the humanitarian response. A shattered economy, high unemployment and the non-payment of many public sector salaries have destroyed incomes, pushed people into debt and left millions of families with nothing to live on.

The continuous deterioration is pushing people beyond their limits. They have no choice but to resort to desperate and harmful coping mechanisms to avert hunger or the looming threat of it. This problem is country-wide – even with humanitarian assistance, eight governorates have populations who are experiencing catastrophic food gaps, and are on the verge of famine, with Hajjah, Amran, Taiz, Al Mahwit, Sa'ada and Hudaydah the worst-affected.² Malnutrition can be clearly seen in the faces of children, men and women in and outside IDP camps across several areas of the country. This is not a future threat – children are dying now.³

Hostilities continue across the country, including in Hudaydah Governorate, from where over one million people have been displaced in the last six months.⁴ Many of those who flee do not find safety; on 26 January 2019, a collective centre for IDPs in Haradh District, Hajjah Governorate, was shelled, killing eight people and wounding 30 others.⁵ Events like these mean that people are scared to settle in camps and often move from place to place, making it difficult for them to receive assistance.

The international humanitarian response is saving lives but is taking place in a hugely challenging environment. Security constraints include the closure of roads, the presence of landmines, air strikes, and armed clashes, as well as attacks on facilities and personnel, kidnaps, arrests and even the killing of humanitarian workers. There are also bureaucratic and intentional constraints, including interference, long delays and/or denial of visas and permits to allow the movement of international and national humanitarian teams.

All recent assessments and reports confirm that humanitarian needs remain vast, and largely unmet. What is needed is a ceasefire – aid is not the real solution to the crisis in Yemen – but donors should not expect peace while still fuelling the war with arms and not holding their partners to account for their actions. Achieving progress on the Stockholm agreements is crucial for beginning a wider comprehensive peace process and putting an end to this inhumane war. The pledging conference and upcoming peace negotiations are key opportunities for humanitarian actors and parties to the conflict to achieve change.

'We left everything behind and ran away with just a T-shirt and a maqtub [traditional Yemeni piece of cloth]. We lost everything – our jobs, our palms, our sheep, everything we had is gone. We have no jobs, no hopes and no life here.'

A family displaced by the fighting in Al-jah

SHATTERED FOOD ECONOMY

Very little food is grown in Yemen, so food security is critically dependent on *imports* and their distribution around the country, and *incomes* for household access. Both have been knowingly undermined by parties to the conflict over many months, leading to the current high levels of suffering and starvation.

Actions that have obstructed food availability and accessibility, and undermined an already-weak economy include:

- The Saudi-led coalition has disrupted food and other supplies coming into Hudaydah and Salif ports through blockades, inspection processes, delaying of vessels or diversion. While imports of bulk foods (wheat, rice, sugar) and fuel are currently under way, containers are blocked, preventing the offloading of supplies of milk powder, cooking oil, medicines and other goods.
- In response, containerized shipments – commercial and humanitarian – of food and other goods now go for offloading to Aden port, but there have been major backlogs as a result of the coalition's lengthy and uncertain inspection process and the port's limited capacity. Oxfam has been told of a six-month delay for importers and has seen long queues of trucks at Aden waiting to collect supplies. This obviously increases prices, as does double taxation (with tax imposed by both government and Houthi authorities).
- The Central Bank in Aden and Saudi Arabia have severely limited letters of credit⁶ to food and fuel importers. Several major wheat, corn and rice importers told Oxfam this is severely constraining their operations.
- Fighting and delays in reconstruction have largely prevented the export of dwindling oil and gas, thereby dramatically reducing the funds available to the Central Bank to import food and fuel and to make social welfare payments to 1.5 million households.
- The movement in September 2016 of the Central Bank from Sana'a to Aden to stop the Houthis accessing revenues, without effective remedies for the consequences, destroyed Yemen's banking system and made international transfers even more difficult. Remittances and donor payments were initially blocked, as was the payment of 1.25 million public sector salaries on which, the UN argues, a quarter of the population rely. Remittances are still restricted and salaries have been paid erratically at best.
- Coalition airstrikes, fighting and the planting of landmines by the Houthis have destroyed farms and factories, leaving millions of Yemenis without jobs and livelihoods. For example, Houthi forces recently attacked and ransacked Hudaydah's industrial zone, stopping 15 food factories belonging to the Thabet Group from operating and leaving 6,000 people out of work.⁷
- Insecurity, bureaucratic impediments and diversion have affected the distribution of aid. The World Food Programme (WFP) has recently accused the Houthis of significant aid diversion and since September

'Usually, I buy food using credit, but when my grocery debt reached 25,000 Rial, the shop's owner refused to give me anything anymore.'

Ghazi Saaed, father of two, Taiz

2018, WFP has not been able to access its wheat stocks at Red Sea Mills. The silos have recently been hit by mortars and suffered fire damage.⁸

- Fighting and financial constraints have been the primary cause of the closure of around 35% of businesses and the shrinkage of over 51% of surviving firms.⁹

The shrinking economy, divided banking system, crisis of cash liquidity¹¹ and international restrictions on the Yemeni financial system are among the major factors that have led to a crash and continuing volatility in the value of the Yemeni Rial (YR) – pre-war rates were around 215 YR to the dollar, compared to 515 in late 2018 and peaks of 800 YR in 2018 and 577 YR as of 3 February 2019.

Since 2015, the economy has halved, very few Yemenis have any source of income and more than 80% now live below the poverty line.¹² Food prices have soared. In October 2018, retail prices of food commodities were 73–178% higher than in the pre-crisis period, and fuel prices had risen at an even higher rate.¹³ The collapse of incomes and increase in prices has pushed food beyond many people's reach.

In sum, actions by both parties have resulted in the sustained undermining of food imports and availability, incomes and the ability of humanitarian actors to respond – with clear and unequivocal humanitarian consequences.

In this context, it is worth restating that international humanitarian law – underscored by UN Security Council Resolution 2417 – requires all parties to conflicts to ensure that they do not target civilians and objects necessary for food production and distribution, or objects that are indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, including crops, livestock and water sources. Conflict actors must also enable humanitarian actors to reach civilians in need in a safe and timely manner.¹⁴

HUNGER'S TOLL ON WOMEN

Today in Yemen, 3.25 million women and girls of childbearing age (15 to 49 years) need support. Escalating food shortages have left an estimated 1.1 million pregnant and lactating women malnourished, and threaten the lives of 75,000 women who are likely to develop complications during childbirth, including the stunted growth of newborns.¹⁵

Even with humanitarian assistance, women eat last and least, giving priority to children and other family members, or using money for other household needs. Several women targeted with cash assistance reported that they used the money to pay for medicines, not food.¹⁶ And it is clear that female-headed households are really struggling – an assessment after one Oxfam distribution found that 14% of respondents from female-headed households still had a poor food consumption score,¹⁷ compared to 6% of male-headed households.¹⁸

'We live on the few pieces of bread my husband brings in the evening when he gets back from his work cutting wood. We eat the bread with tea only, and sleep. This is a daily norm, and the same happens for lunch.'

Afra Saeed, 38-year-old mother, Taiz.¹⁰

Hunger is rife even hundreds of miles from the front line – for example, the currency crisis is having a devastating impact in a village in Al-Dhalea in the south. Villagers unanimously told Oxfam that they are eating just bread and tea, without milk, two or three times a day. This is barely keeping them alive. Everyone agrees on the cause of their suffering – it is a direct result of the war. But they say that the last six months have been the worst. Prices have spiralled out of control. Taking a child from a remote village to the hospital in Al-Dhalea city costs close to \$150.¹⁹ If we had this much money, they say, we would buy food for the children. Still the hospital has seen the number of cases of severely malnourished children rise from around 20 to 50 a day.

In al-Safia IDP camp, on the outskirts of Taiz city, none of the 55 displaced families are sending their children, many of whom are girls, to school. The families explain that they need their meagre resources to buy food, and are totally unable to pay for books, schoolbags and school uniforms, let alone school fees and daily expenses such as transport costs. More importantly, it is hard to provide breakfast before school every day. One mother said, 'Children have to wait here in the tent for their parents to bring food from the market [or] by begging meals from restaurants and houses.'²⁰

Coping mechanisms have become more and more desperate. Families eat less preferred and less expensive food, borrow food or get help from relatives and friends, limit portion size and number of meals, send household members to beg, and sell assets in order to purchase food.²¹ And now, families are being forced into even more devastating and desperate coping mechanisms (see box).

Child marriage²³

There is anecdotal evidence of an alarming rise in child marriage in Yemen.²⁴ Families marry off their daughters earlier to get money to pay for basic food items and at the same time reduce the daily cost of feeding the family. A local NGO working on child protection finds that there have been hundreds of cases of child marriage across the country, with numbers increasing over the years of conflict.²⁵

Hadeel Ali, a 14-year-old girl from urban Yemen, lived with her six brothers, her mother, who is a cleaner, and father, who is a labourer. High food prices forced her father to borrow money and get into debt. Unable to work, under pressure to repay his debts and fearing legal action against him, he had no option but to marry off his daughter to the moneylender.

Fifteen-year-old Alia Saad lived with her mother and four brothers in one room. As her father had died, Alia's mother was responsible for feeding the family, and Alia had to give up her education to clean and cook. With no education, her mother resorted to working as a cookie vendor to get a minimal income for the family's daily needs. Economic conditions deteriorated due to the conflict, and food costs spiralled beyond the mother's income; she had used up all her assets. These harsh conditions forced Alia's mother to marry her off at 15, just to have some income for living.

'What is most painful about this is that families are aware of the dangers of marrying their child daughters at early ages and they do not want to do it, but they have no other option – it is a matter of survival.'

Humanitarian monitor and researcher in child protection²²

INSECURITY'S TOLL ON WOMEN

Under conditions of conflict characterized by displacement, loss of personal security, family instability and lack of access to rights, Yemeni women and girls are more vulnerable and further exposed to risks, including forms of gender-based violence (GBV) in and outside IDP camps.

For example, in al-Safia camp, outside Taiz, the host community fired a gun at women to prevent them collecting firewood. The IDP women were very frightened and returned home with no wood for cooking lunch, the main meal of the day. One woman said that she had to burn her wedding gown to be able to make bread for her children.

A protection survey of IDPs and host communities was undertaken in November 2018 by Wajood Foundation for Human Security in six Yemeni governorates (Sana'a, Aden, Taiz, Hadhramout, Hudaydah and Lahj). This found that women experienced the highest levels of all forms of violence – psychological, physical and sexual – and that overall, girls were impacted more than boys by all forms of violence.²⁶ Victims of sexual violence in Yemen are highly stigmatized, and therefore there is likely to be vast underreporting of it. However, a significant percentage of female respondents in the study reported being victims of sexual violence (19%), as did a smaller but significant percentage of men and boys (11%), indicating that this is a problem that needs far more attention.

Yemen lacks national policies and legislation that guarantees people's protection from GBV; there is also an absence of official security institutions and a functioning judiciary. GBV violations are still underreported due to lack of monitoring and difficulty in documenting, in addition to the lack of disaggregated data on the situation of IDP women and the risks they face within the camps.

UNLEASHING THE POWER OF WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS

While women are bearing the burden of this war, they are not passive victims. Women are leading efforts to increase the resilience of their communities, contributing to local peacebuilding²⁷ by resolving conflicts over resources such as water and land, and successfully campaigning to release detainees. Even though conservative gender norms are strong in Yemen, women are accepted as mediators in local conflicts among tribes and rural communities.²⁸

However, women are largely excluded from the formal peace processes. A traditional approach is limiting participation in the peace negotiations to two main parties to the conflict but this obscures the complexity of the conflict and, crucially, excludes key voices that could contribute to a more sustainable peace, such as those of women, youth and civil society.²⁹

Only one woman has participated in recent Geneva and Stockholm peace consultations in a recognized government delegation.

UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths has expressed a real interest in the engagement of women in Yemen's peace process, and there is a clear and legitimate space for this. For example:

- UNSC Resolution 2216 (2015) explicitly calls for an inclusive political transition that meets women's demands and aspirations.
- S/PRST/2017/7 'calls upon the parties to ensure at least 30% representation of women in peace negotiations'.
- UNSC Resolution 2451, agreed in December 2018, 'underlines the importance of the full participation of women and the meaningful engagement of youth in the political process'.

Yet, generally, women's groups have described their inclusion in the formal peace process as disappointing, representing a missed opportunity for sustainable peace.³⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS

Swift, adequate funding. All international and regional donors should ensure:

- Provision of full, timely and effective funding for the Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan to meet basic needs and prevent humanitarian collapse.
- The specific needs of women and girls are prioritized and addressed, including access to adequate sustainable food, clean water, hygiene, protection and livelihood support.

Food availability and accessibility. International actors should exert pressure to:

- Ensure safe, secure and unimpeded access to humanitarian and commercial supplies (especially food, fuel, water, medicine and aid) to all those in need across the country – including through:
 - Ensuring the full and smooth functioning of Aden, Hudaydah and Salif ports and other key land and air ports. This includes lifting restrictions and preventing any potential attacks that may halt, threaten to halt or limit operations of the major lifelines of Hudaydah and Aden ports.
 - Urging Coalition and Yemeni national authorities to halt all obstructions and restrictions on humanitarian and commercial imports to Yemen, and use all means possible to facilitate and accelerate the process of getting supplies into the country.
- Prioritize economic reform that will unify the country's financial system so it is capable of paying all public salaries, stabilize the currency and provide enough foreign cash liquidity. This includes through:

- Lifting restrictions on Yemeni banks abroad so they can open credits for importers, and removing constraints on inter-government cash transfers to increase the speed of money circulation.
- Pushing warring parties to lift restrictions on the Yemeni private sector so it can play its role in strengthening the economy and ensuring food availability.
- Consider the initiation of monitoring and investigation by relevant investigatory bodies on Yemen to evaluate warring parties' commitment to their obligations with respect to the use of food as a weapon of war against civilians.

Inclusive and effective peacebuilding. All actors should:

- Increase pressure on parties to the conflict to immediately return to inclusive peace talks, end violence and ensure protection of civilians.
- Press for full commitment of warring parties and their backers to a ceasefire in Hudaydah, and support full implementation of Stockholm agreements as pillars for moving the peace process forward.
- Halt any political or logistical support to any parties of the conflict, including arms supplies, that prolong the war and sustain the suffering of Yemeni civilians.
- Support the Special Envoy's efforts to establish a genuinely inclusive peace process that engages Yemeni women, youth and civil society, and reflects the international community's commitments to women, peace and security.

NOTES

- 1 **Sana'a**: AWAM Foundation for Development and Culture, Youth Leadership Development Foundation, Yemeni Women's Union; **Amran**: National Foundation for Development and Humanitarian Response, Baader Foundation for Development; **Sada'a**: National Foundation for Development and Humanitarian Response, Al Zahraa Foundation; **Hajjah**: Abs Development for Women & Children, All Girls Foundation; **Hudaydah**: Baader Foundation for Development, All Girls Foundation, Yemeni Women's Union, Al Mustakbal Association; **Taiz**: Generations Without Qat, Coalition of Humanitarian Relief in Taiz; **Aden**: Wdyan Association, To Be Foundation, Al Aidross Association, Wajood Foundation for Human Security, Ability for Human Investment, Creative People Solution Foundation.
- 2 FAO, WFP (2019) *Monitoring food security in countries with conflict situations: A joint FAO/WFP update for the UNSC, January 2019*. <http://www.fao.org/emergencies/resources/documents/resources-detail/en/c/1178141/>
- 3 As one example, in Al-Azariq District, Al-Dhalea Governorate up to 19 October 2018, six children died of malnutrition. Al-Jazeera (30 September 2018) *Hunger harvests lives of children in Yemeni Al-Dhalea*, and verified through interview with coordinator and leader of a Save Al-Azariq children's campaign, 25 October 2018. Al-Jazeera 's report (in Arabic) is available at: <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2018/9/30/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%88%D8%B9-%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%B5%D8%AF-%D8%A3%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B7%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B6%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9>
- 4 OCHA Yemen Humanitarian Update (Covering 13 December 2018–15 January 2019, Issue 1). <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Yemen%20Humanitarian%20Update%2035.pdf>
- 5 Office of the Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen (Sana'a, 27 January 2019). *At least eight civilians are killed and 30 wounded in an IDP centre in Haradh*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/least-eight-civilians-are-killed-and-30-wounded-idp-centre-haradh-enar>
- 6 These are essentially bank guarantees of payment, and are crucial to enable importers to bring goods into Yemen.
- 7 Private sector sources.
- 8 *The New York Times* (26 January 2019) *Fire Damages Vital Wheat Silos in Yemen's Hodeidah: U.N.* By Reuters. <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2019/01/26/world/middleeast/26reuters-yemen-security.html>
- 9 Sofan, S. (3 January 2019) *Yemen's private sector teaming up to support humanitarian and recovery efforts*. Views & Voices: Middle East and North Africa blog, World Bank. <http://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/yemen-s-private-sector-teaming-support-humanitarian-and-recovery-efforts>
- 10 Interview with Oxfam staff member, 28 December 2019, southern Taiz city. Name changed for protection purposes.
- 11 One of the reasons for the crash in the value of the Yemeni Rial is that food importers are selling high quantities of Rial to buy dollars on Yemen's black market, because they no longer have exchange rate guarantees and letters of credit from the Central Bank.
- 12 OCHA (12 November 2018) *Dispatch from Yemen – Tackling the world's largest humanitarian crisis*. <https://www.unocha.org/story/dispatch-yemen-tackling-world%E2%80%99s-largest-humanitarian-crisis>
- 13 FAO, WFP (2019) *Monitoring food security in countries with conflict situations*, op. cit.

- 14 For further reading, see United Nations Human Rights Council (28 August 2018) *Yemen: United Nations Experts point to possible war crimes by parties to the conflict*. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=23479&LangID=E>
- 15 UNFPA: Country Experiences, Yemen (22 January 2019). *When the Reproductive Health Supply Chain is a Lifeline*. <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/yemen-when-reproductive-health-supply-chain-lifeline>
- 16 From interviews and several post-distribution assessment reports.
- 17 The food consumption score is an index developed by WFP. It is a proxy for household caloric availability.
- 18 Survey undertaken in November 2018. 75 interviewed respondents from 265 targeted beneficiaries who received the first instalment of a livelihood cash grant in Al-Dhalea and Qatabah districts of Al-Dhalea Governorate, southern Yemen.
- 19 From focus group discussions with villagers.
- 20 Oxfam interviews with several women in the IDP camp, 26 December 2018.
- 21 Oxfam's post-distribution monitoring report, cash grants, Al-Dhalea and Qatabah districts of Al-Dhalea Governorate, southern Yemen, September 2018.
- 22 Said Naseem Abdu, a humanitarian monitor and researcher in child protection, interviewed 12 January 2019 in Sana'a (name changed for protection purposes).
- 23 Names have been changed and specific locations omitted from the two case studies for protection purposes.
- 24 Focus group discussion held by Oxfam's partner in Yemen in April 2018, in addition to field interviews in December 2018.
- 25 Oxfam interview and discussion with local NGO in Yemen, January 2019.
- 26 Unpublished field study conducted in November 2018 by Wajood Foundation for Human Security, Aden, southern Yemen. The study used surveys, interviews and case studies to collect the research, surveying 180 people: 50% were males of different ages and 50% were females, with 30 respondents from each governorate. Topline results: 32.2% of women have experienced psychological violence, compared to 21.7% of men. 27.8% of women have experienced physical violence, compared to 17.2% of men. And 18.3% of women have been subjected to sexual violence, compared to 11.1% of men.
- 27 Saferworld, CAPRO and Yemen Polling Centre (2017) *Women's role in peace and security in Yemen*. <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/downloads/womens-role-in-peace-and-security-in-yemen---executive-summary.pdf>
- 28 K. Anderson (2017) *Now is the Time: Research on Gender Justice, Conflict and Fragility in the Middle East and North Africa*. Oxfam, International Alert. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/now-is-the-time-research-on-gender-justice-conflict-and-fragility-in-the-middle-620274>
- 29 Jarhum, R. (2019, forthcoming) *Inclusion of women in the peace process in Yemen*. Peace Track Initiative and Oxfam.
- 30 Jarhum, R. (2019, forthcoming) op. cit.

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